The 'loner' Sambar

But MAF cautiously optimistic that breed can eventually be crossed with NZ Reds

by Frank Fyfe

THEY'RE big-bodied, big-eared, and have a bigger-than-big 'loner' complex — but it looks possible that Sambar deer might be able to be domesticated.

MAF scientist Paul Muir and Massey University postgraduate student Gono Semiadi, from Indonesia, are 12 months into a possible five-year behavioural study that will hopefully confer Sambar benefits to existing farmed deer.

"Our aim is to domesticate a small working herd of Sambar, and then to see if we can hybridise by crossing them through AI with New Zealand Reds," Muir says. "Genetically, this looks quite feasible."

But the biggest hurdle is the Sambar's anti-social nature — to TDF it seemed as though they may not like each other very much, and don't take kindly either to Reds or to people. It will be a little while yet before the researchers know these answers.

What Sambar do like is the night-time foraging in sandhill country that has kept the one known small New Zealand herd confined to coastal Horowhenua, Manawatu, Rangitikei and Wanganui for the past 115 years.

And during that time they've done pretty well on it, too, judging by the 20 or so animals currently in the Flock House study herd. Stags weigh in at 180-225 kg and hinds at approximately 150 kg.

Sambar are found in more tropical climates throughout what used to be known by the British as 'the Near and Far East' — from India and Nepal, through Malaysia and Indonesia to China. And according to Muir, Sambar are actually farmed in a small way in Taiwan.

"There is only one known liberation recorded in New Zealand," he says. "This was in 1875 when Lord Carnarvon set a Sri Lankan pair loose on his estate about 8 km south of Bulls."

The nocturnal and generally anti-social habits that caused the breed to maintain integrity while slowly increasing and spreading up and down the coast from Bulls have been under observation on the Flock House deer unit for the past 12 months.

A 'hide' has been constructed in the loft above the unit's deer shed, from where a largish louvred window overlooks the Sambar paddocks. A similarly numbered 'control' Red herd runs in an adjoining paddock.

The 20 or so Sambar spend most daylight hours amongst a pine shelter belt occupying the entire weatherward boundary of their paddock. They come out to graze mostly at night.

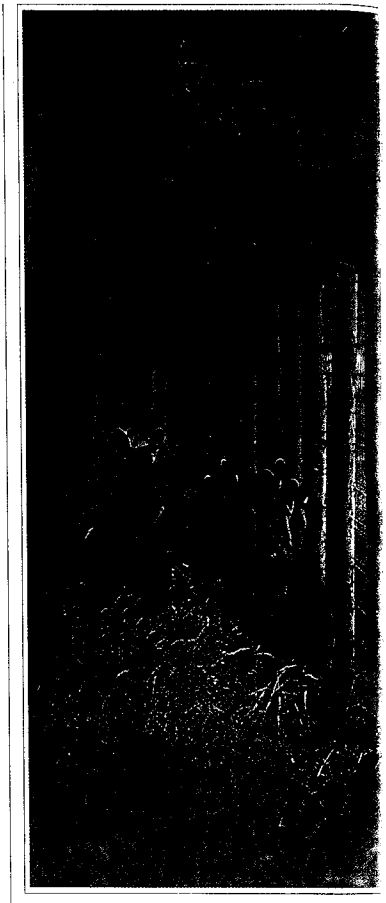
"Having the Red deer alongside gives our observer an immediate way of checking what both breeds are doing at the same time. By direct observation, we are thus able to compare grazing habits, mobbing and other behavioural characteristics," Muir says.

On the heavily overcast and very wet day TDF sat in the observer's seat, most of the herd had been out grazing before our approach. They immediately gave up eating and retreated to the farthest, most heavily treed corner of the shelter belt. And there they stayed, their big ears constantly pricked during the hour or so we watched.

One very noticeable difference between the Red and Sambar paddocks was the total absence in the latter of boundary fence hoof tracks. This would seem to be because the Sambar don't mob, spreading out to forage mostly after dark.

Muir pointed to similarly close areas in both paddocks. In the Reds' case the ground had pugged during recent wet weather and there was virtually no pasture — in the Sambar paddock, the pasture cover seemed almost entire.

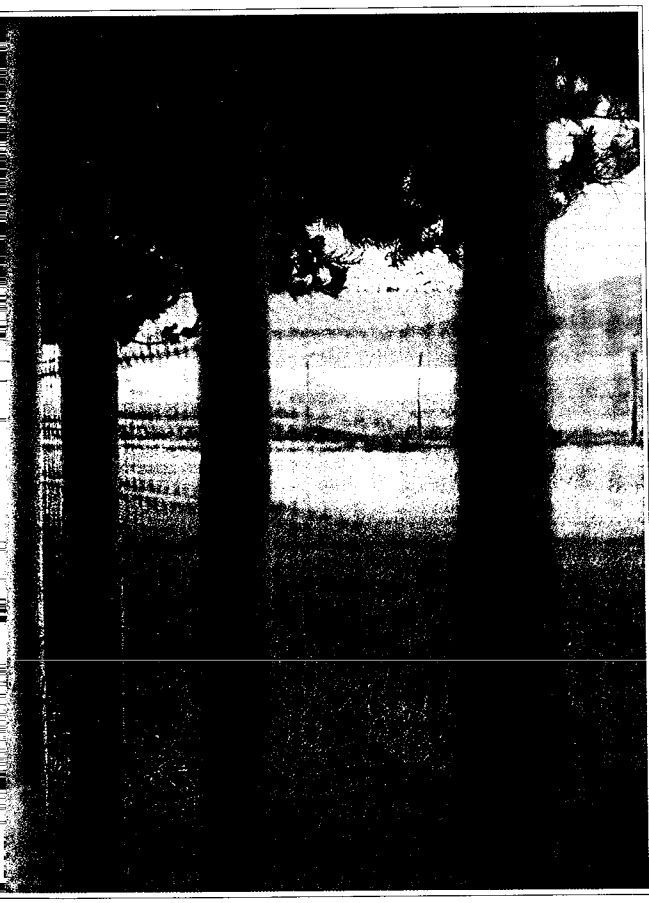
"We are not really far enough down the track to answer questions about their behaviour, but there are differences and we are learning about them all the time," he said.

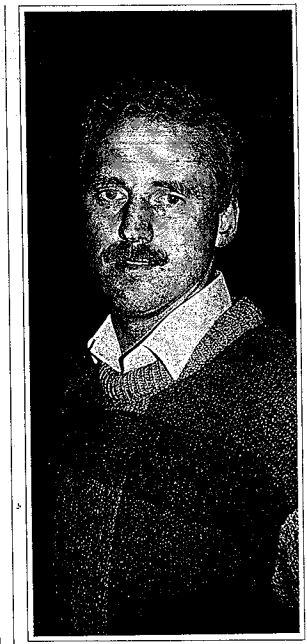


Later, in the company of Flock House's deer farm manager Peter Burke, we travelled to the herd's end of the shelter belt — from which, of course, they retreated as fast as we approached.

Burke, however, called out a large fawn — the first to be hand-reared in the programme. At just on four months old, it was big by any standards, and now seemed to be thriving on the herd's shirt-tails.

"She spends most of her time just a little bit apart from the herd, but they





Left: Flock House's 20-odd Sambar spend most of their days amongst this pine shelter belt, coming out to graze mostly at night

Their anti-social nature is the biggest hurdle to hybridisation with NZ Reds, MAF believes

Above: MAF's Paul Muir, the man in charge of the study

He sees hand-rearing of a couple of fawns so early in the study as 'a real bonus'

all seem to have accepted her," he said.

Two fawns have been hand-reared; the second, now about two months old, has yet to be weaned. And, despite an initial check when first brought into the hand-rearing programme, she seems to be gaining condition and to be quite comfortable around people — at least the better known ones.

TDF asked Muir is he satisfied with progress. "You have to remember that we are just starting out on what could be a 3-5 year programme. We are very pleased with the way things are going — nobody knew much about Sambar, and just assembling a database will be a significant achievement. The fact that, so early in the piece, we have successfully hand-reared a couple of fawns is a real bonus. We expect to make real headway from here on."

Benefits

And what are some of the benefits Sambar might be able to bring to currently farmed deer breeds?

"Well, we don't know for sure, but it seems that Sambar calve anywhere within about a six-month season — we'd hope that some of this could be passed on through hybridisation."

Then, of course, there is body size and growth rate. At the moment it looks like these could be at least as good as, say, imported German bloodlines.

Muir is fairly non-committal at this stage. "If we can capitalise on an existing, previously unrecognised, local animal resource to achieve these things as well as building up worldwide knowledge of the widespread Sambar — well, we will have made real progress."

"But," he adds, relapsing into characteristic understatement, "it's very early days. Why don't you come back and see us in 12 months?" □