

Valuing White-tailed Deer on Stewart Island/Rakiura

2023 Hunter Survey Highlight Results

October 2023



Game Animal Council
NEW ZEALAND

Background

Introduced in 1905, the Stewart Island/Rakiura white-tailed deer herd attracts thousands of hunters and visitors to the island every year as it provides a unique hunting challenge and wilderness experience in a remote environment. Around the perimeter of the island there are 44 designated hunting blocks administered by the Department of Conservation (DOC) and the Rakiura Māori Lands Trust. An open area hunting permit covers most of the interior of the island. The Rakiura Hunter Camp Trust currently owns and maintains 18 huts for hunters under concession with DOC.

Anecdotal hunter and local resident observations of white-tailed deer population abundance in areas where hunting is permitted versus areas it is not suggest that hunting on the island is important for population management. Hunting is also recognised as important for food gathering, recreation and as an economic resource for the local community.

Context

Information provided to the Game Animal Council (GAC) by the Rakiura Hunter Camp Trust suggests interest in white-tailed deer hunting on Stewart Island/Rakiura is high:

- Over the five years until and including 2022 it is estimated that approximately 2500 hunters harvested just over 1000 white-tailed deer each year from the island's public conservation land (this excludes Rakiura Māori Land Trust blocks).
- In 2022, permits to hunting blocks administered by DOC were issued to 620 parties, more than double the average number issued per year during the 1970's.
- Rakiura Maori Lands Trust blocks attract at least another 100 parties per year, with a maximum of 12 hunters permitted per party.

Why the survey?

The GAC, with support from the Rakiura Hunter Camp Trust, is seeking to determine what white-tailed deer on Rakiura/Stewart Island mean to hunters. This not only helps inform our collective knowledge, but also helps those with decision-making responsibilities understand the value of the white-tailed deer hunting experience on Stewart Island/Rakiura to the New Zealand hunting community.

Method

The survey was undertaken in June 2023 using the SurveyMonkey platform and sent to a wide range of hunters and hunting stakeholders via an EDM, e-newsletter promotion and via social media.

The survey used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods were used to ascertain:

1. Whether a respondent had hunted on Stewart Island/Rakiura.
2. How many hunting trips had they made to Stewart Island/Rakiura.
3. Where hunters make their trips from.

Qualitative methods were used to understand:

4. What the white-tailed hunting experience on Stewart Island/Rakiura means to those that have hunted there.
5. Improvements that could be made to the Stewart Island/Rakiura hunting experience.

The individual comments presented in response to questions 4 and 5 are only a small selection of those received and are intended to represent the diversity of views on the questions asked. The views of the respondents do not represent the views of the GAC.

This report presents highlights of the results only. There is an opportunity to go deeper into the data to explore trends such as differences in feedback based on location, experience etc.

Limitations

Results of this survey should be treated as indicative only. The survey was not scientific, and no assessment was made of the proportion of hunters that hunt Stewart Island/Rakiura versus those who were reached by the survey. It is likely that this may differ between South Island-based, North Island-based and overseas-based hunters. It is also possible that those who hunt Stewart Island/Rakiura regularly may have been more motivated to respond to the survey than those who have hunted it only once or twice. For future research, access to permit holder contact details could provide a known sample population, thus enabling survey bias to be assessed and more representative conclusions to be drawn.

Regardless of these limitations, results from this survey serve to illustrate the popularity and value to the hunting community of white-tailed deer hunting on the island as well as some feedback on improvements that could be made to the experience.

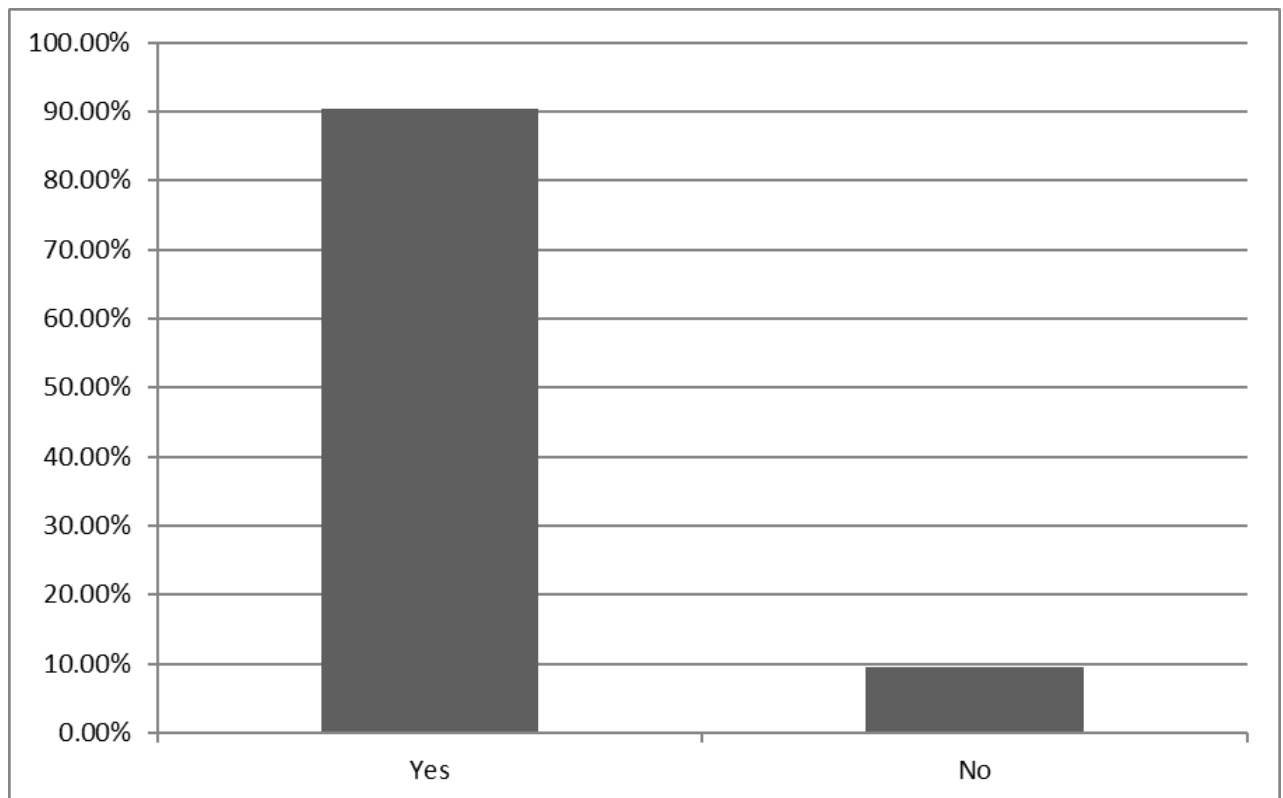
Hunter reports

The Rakiura Hunter Camp Trust runs a 'hunter report' facility via their website, however hunter participation in this is low. We ask that hunters who do visit Stewart Island/Rakiura for hunting undertake to fill out a report at the conclusion of their trip. The information provided in these reports helps the Trust improve campsites and huts, understand hunter contributions to predator control and advocate for appropriate management of the hunting resource. Hunter reports can be filled out at <https://www.rhct.org.nz/index.php/hunter-reports>.



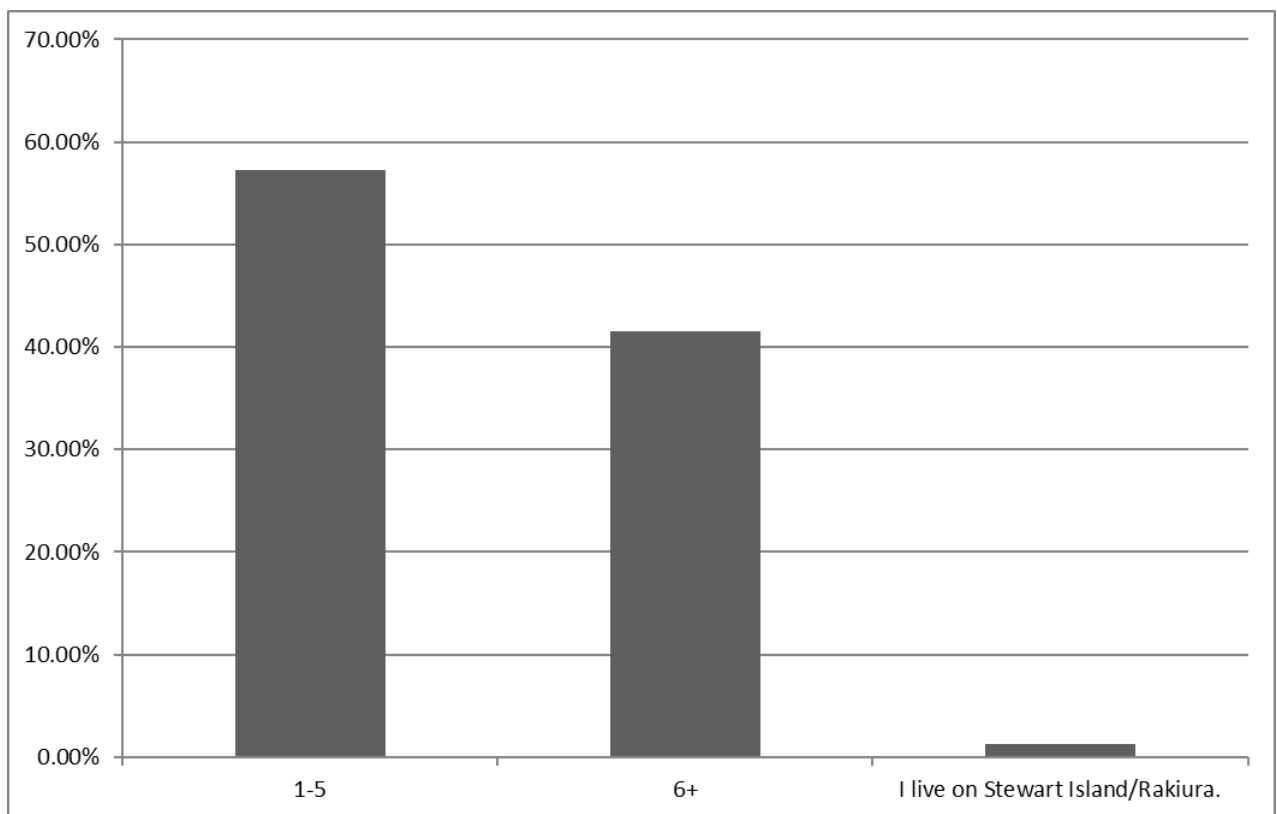
Question 1: Have you hunted on Stewart Island/Rakiura?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	90.47%	560
No	9.53%	59
	Answered	619
	Skipped	3



Question 2: How many hunting trips have you made to Stewart Island/Rakiura?

Answer Choices	Responses	
1-5	57.22%	321
6+	41.53%	233
I live on Stewart Island/Rakiura.	1.25%	7
	Answered	561
	Skipped	61

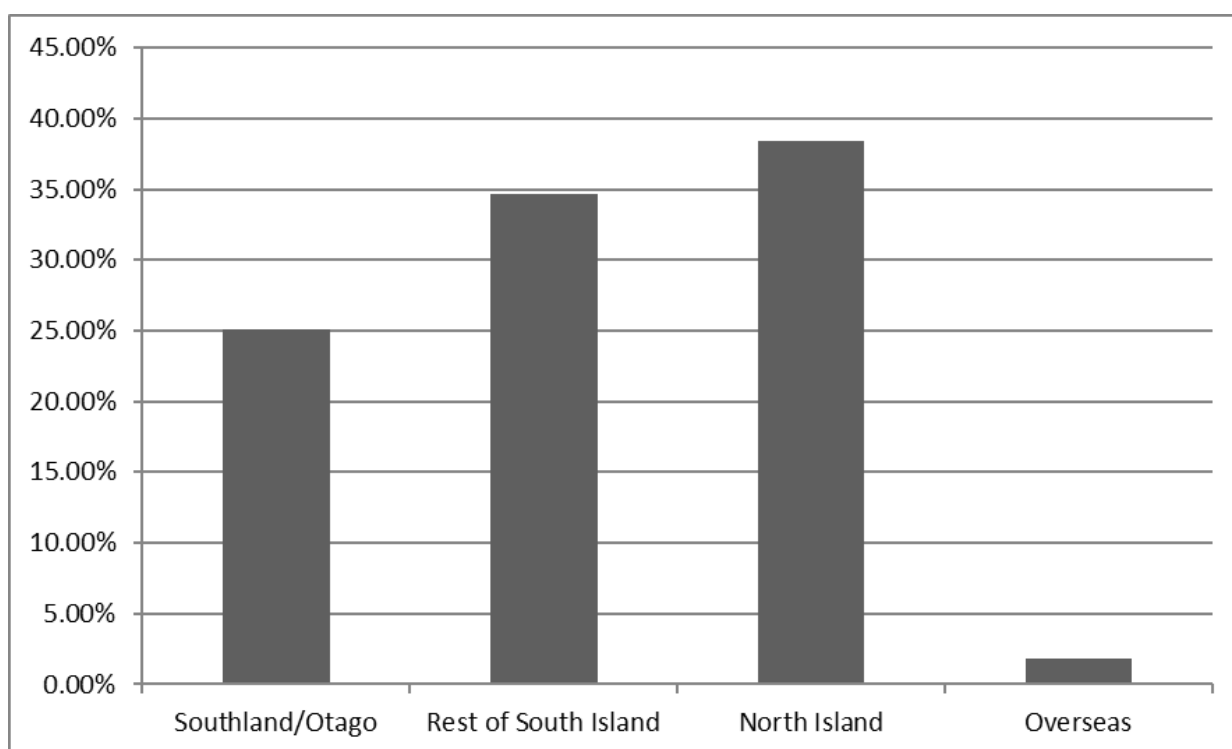


Commentary

A very high proportion of responders (41.53%) indicated they had hunted on Stewart Island/Rakiura six or more times. This supports previous anecdotal commentary from hunters that for many Stewart Island/Rakiura is a regular, if not annual, hunting pilgrimage.

Question 3: Where do you live (i.e. where do you travel from to go hunting on Stewart Island/Rakiura)?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Southland/Otago	25.09%	139
Rest of South Island	34.66%	192
North Island	38.45%	213
Overseas	1.81%	10
	Answered	554
	Skipped	68



Commentary

While it was not unexpected that the majority of respondents who hunt on Stewart Island/Rakiura live in the South Island (almost 60%), the high proportion of respondents who travelled from the North Island or overseas (over 40%), is noteworthy. This indicates that the Stewart Island/Rakiura white-tailed hunting experience is of national (and some international) significance. Overseas hunters were not specifically targeted as part of this survey.

Question 4: What does the white-tailed hunting experience on Stewart Island/Rakiura mean to you?

Answered	540
Skipped	82

Method

This was an open-ended question that required responders to provide a short, written comment. The comments were analysed and coded using 21 identified categories. The top categories are listed below.

Top individual categories	Responses	
Stewart Island as a unique destination for hunting	31%	167
Valuing the opportunity to hunt a species that is rare in New Zealand	25%	135
Expresses pleasure toward the experience without providing reason	19%	104
Valuing the opportunity to spend time with family and friends	17%	93
Appreciating the challenge of the hunting	16%	88
Enjoying the flora and fauna of Stewart Island	15%	82
Enjoying other activities like fishing and diving	15%	80

Highlights

Categories that overlapped were amalgamated to achieve the following highlights:

- **59% of respondents identified elements of the hunting as a key aspect of what the experience means to them.**
- **32% of respondents identified elements of the environment and nature as a key aspect of what the experience means to them.**
- **16.5% of respondents identified spending time with family/friends, getting away and improving mental wellbeing as a key aspect of what the experience means to them.**

Individual comments

A sample of the individual comments received for question 4:

Overall experience

Outstanding, absolutely loved my trips to the island, can't really put into words but incredible!

It is totally a fantastic experience, the scenic drive down, the crossing, then interacting with the locals at the local, hearing the kiwi calling after dark on the walk back to the back packers, then up against "the grey ghost" in his territory, sampling the kai moana, relaxing away from the other world, with a group of mates. Can't get this white tail experience anywhere else.

There's nothing else like it. Great environment, hunting, fishing and diving. Unlikely to have gone if it was not for the opportunity to hunt white tail deer.

To me successfully hunting a white tail buck with a bow on Stewart Island was a trip of a lifetime. I traveled from Australia to do the hunt. New Zealand is doing things right. No opportunity like this in Australia unfortunately.

For me a hunting trip to Stewart Island is a MUST DO for all NZ hunters.

Stewart Island is amazing and the deer just make it more so.

Hunting and the white-tailed deer

It's a unique environment I wouldn't visit if the whitetail deer weren't there.

It is the pinnacle of bush hunting. Amazing place to experience overall but the hunting and the whitetail deer are a very special highlight of a visit to the island. I would never have gone there if there wasn't whitetail.

Whitetail hunting is probably the most cherished hunting I do. I have recently completed my 17th trip to the island and I am still just as addicted to chasing the grey ghost as ever.

I have lived on Rakiura since 1943. Whitetail Deer are part of my life. They are part of our meat supply here for our Whanau. They should not be classed as a pest.

The hunting experience was quite different from hunting on the mainland due to a couple of factors, the remoteness of the island and terrain, as well as the different species of deer. Hunting White tailed deer is now something I treasure and endeavour to do again every couple of years.

Environment/remoteness

It was one of the best hunting experiences of my 35 years hunting. The setting, flora, fauna and remoteness made for an unforgettable experience.

It would have to be my most enjoyable destination, have now clocked up 25 trips and hope to have many more. It's the natural beauty and ability to hunt these fantastic little deer. Next trip organized and can't wait.

It's an amazing and relatively unspoiled place to hunt deer. Being basically the only realistic whitetail deer herd to hunt in Australasia makes it special.

Experience with family and friends

It's a unique opportunity to come to the island with friends and family and hunt for a week or so. If they {the deer} weren't there I would have no reason to go there.

Taken my daughter down the last 2 trips. She shot a couple of whitetail, great experience that makes you keep on coming back.

The whole Stewart Island experience is something I have been able to share with others including my son and my next trip I am able to have a grandson join us. Hunting White tail deer isn't easy but very rewarding and the bonus of the beautiful scenery, bird life, fishing and diving make our bi-annual trips eagerly looked forward to.

Love it. Time away doing what we love together. We try to go every year.



Question 5: Is there anything that could improve the Stewart Island/Rakiura hunting experience?

Answered	494
Skipped	128

Method

This was an open-ended question that required responders to provide a short, written comment. The comments were analysed and coded using 36 identified categories. The top categories are listed below.

Top individual categories	Responses	
No. Overall satisfied with the current experience and suggesting no changes	33%	158
Increased efforts to control pests such as rats, possums, feral cats and wasps	10%	47
Increased ability and incentive for hunters to contribute to pest control	6%	30
Don't know – review (of each individual response) required	6%	28
Calling for more management of the white-tailed deer population	5%	25
A fairer block allocation process, such as balloting for popular blocks	4%	21

Highlights

Categories that overlapped were amalgamated to achieve the following highlights:

- **16% of respondents identified better predator control or provisions for predator control, including empowering hunters to assist with this, as a potential improvement.**
- **13% of respondents identified improvements needed to the management of huts, blocks and access.**
- **11% of respondents identified aspects of the booking system (including provision of information) as an area for improvement.**
- **11% of respondents identified issues relating to deer management as requiring improvement.**
 - **This includes those who want more management as well as those who want less hunting pressure and easier hunting.**

Individual comments

A sample of the individual comments received for question 5:

Deer and hunting management

Knowing that the whitetail can legally and legitimately exist in the national park in acceptable numbers for hunting, wildlife management aims, and for flora and fauna outcomes.

Ensure the whitetail deer are not subjected to poisoning or other methods that clearly have the goal of extermination, or reducing to such low numbers that recreational hunting is unlikely to be successful.

It is being heavily hunted; some blocks are hunted almost every day all year round looking at the bookings. The herd needs to be managed not wiped out as DOC would like. Go back to closing random blocks for a few months of the year.

As with anything a species management plan like the Fiordland wapiti plan, with a concerted effort to remove more red deer, to improve the sustainability of the whitetail herd and so they don't have to compete with reds for the same habitat.

Value the whitetail for what they are and acknowledge the fact that they have been present for a long time and are a treasured resource and should be treated as such.

More hunters providing the kill returns to RHCT so that informed management decisions can be made.

Better management of deer ie through hunter returns and getting people to shoot more does etc. This should be encouraged in a similar fashion with the development of an app akin the the FWF or Tahr foundation one and a requirement to return hunter returns for future block bookings.

Predator/pest control

Get rid of the cats.

Predator control could be improved. Particularly wild cat management.

Possums and Cats - they are everywhere, and all resources need to be poured into getting rid of them. It's very sad when on our recent trip we noticed much less birdlife compared with earlier trips. We saw upwards of 25 possums and 3 cats and killed 12. It's a bloody plague.

Allow the use of .22 rifles for pest control.

Leave it as it is. No 1080. All hunters must shoot feral cats.

I would like to see a lot more predator control options at the huts. We take extra traps etc each time but would love to maintain traps or bait stations during our stays.

DOC and the trusts

The rhetoric from DoC that white-tailed deer are as bad for the island as rats, cats and possums really does leave a bad taste in an otherwise enjoyable annual pilgrimage.

I think DOC and the Trust do an awesome job.

I find that it is well organized by the trust and DOC and won't like to see it change much. Such a magical place.

Stop DOC from wanting to kill every introduced game animal.

The one thing I think really would help the most is DOC readjusting its perceived siege mentality when it comes to hunting. Be up front, timely and honest in dealings with the general public. Then work with the hunting fraternity to achieve the best outcomes for both sets of parties. For example, I am sick of hearing from DOC hierarchy that the island is being overrun with deer. Unless Masons is an oddity in the 45 years, I have been going there I have witnessed it turn from a farmed enterprise to a well recovered native environment.

An improved online booking system with a good cancellation function would ensure that blocks don't go un hunted and the opportunity is reallocated. Balloting for more popular blocks (lords) may be a fairer way to go in future. The huts are good and have over the years lead to less rubbish being left behind.

The DOC booking system used for the hunting blocks needs to be changed to a ballot during the rut period. It is very competitive.

Huts/tracks etc

I think that an amazing job has been done to create facilities for us to use. I think a key to this moving forward is maintenance. Also, we always try and do our part with a bit of pest control of feral cats and possums while we are visiting.

The huts have been the best thing done and stopped all the makeshift camping sites with the associated materials left behind by each hunting group.

Local businesses

Take deer off the pest list. They are a resource of my hunting charter boat business here on Rakiura and many other locals also rely on them for their business to operate.