

Deer and their Management

The New Forest has always been renowned for its deer, particularly when royalty used it as a hunting ground. There are only two truly native species of deer within Britain, the roe (*Capreolus capreolus*) and red deer (*Cervus elaphus*). The other three species found within the New Forest, sika (*Cervus nippon*), fallow (*Dama dama*) and muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesii*) have all been introduced, released or escaped into the environment.

Fallow Deer

Fallow can be found throughout the New Forest and are the most numerous of the species found here, with approximately 1500 head. Although not a native species, they have been present since Norman times and have the longest continuous lineage of any of the deer species in the forest, indeed in the county. These are the descendants of the original animals introduced to William I's first royal forest – that is, the New forest. Hence, they are the reason the New forest exists at all. The current policy is to maintain a higher population of fallow than any other of the species. Fallow come in a variety of colours, the most commonly recognized are:

- White: A creamy off white colour, often mistaken as albino.
- Menil: Brightly spotted all year round.
- Melanistic: Very dark brown almost black.
- Common: Spotted in summer, fading to a dull grey-brown in winter

Red Deer

Red deer are kept at a level of around 150 head within the New Forest boundaries. As one of the two native species present in the New Forest, the maintenance of a viable population of red deer is of considerable importance. Stags tend to move off the forest onto outlying farmland and private estates after the rut has finished, at the end of October. The hinds usually remain in their highest concentrations around the central parts of the New Forest. Red deer are the largest of all the deer species found in Britain and have a rich chestnut pelage in the summer months fading to a duller grey in the winter, to match the vegetation. Calves are born with a spotted pelage which fades with maturity.

Sika Deer

The sub species found east of Brockenhurst is the Japanese sika, which originated from the escapees belonging to Lord Montagu of 1902. Originally, two escaped and were later joined by another pair, founding today's current herd, which are maintained at approximately 100 head. In contrast to other herds of sika found within Britain, the New Forest is considered to be of a clean blood line, with no intermixing of other subspecies, or hybridization with red deer. When sika hybridizes with red deer, they produce fertile offspring, which threatens the integrity of the red deers' bloodline. The deer management plan targets this issue by ensuring a boundary where the sika have a set area in which they are accepted.

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Roe Deer

Roe deer are classed as solitary in habit compared to the larger species of deer, although they can be seen within family groups or pairs on occasions. Roe deer rut in July, which is much earlier than the other species of deer found within Britain, although they have their young at the same time of year. The gestation period is not any longer than other species of deer, instead they have what is known as 'delayed implantation' where the fertilized embryo does not attach to the womb until a few months later. There are approximately 500 Roe Deer within the New Forest boundaries. Roe have not appeared to have thrived in any great number compared to other habitats in the surrounding areas.

Muntjac Deer

Occasionally spotted within the New Forest boundaries, the muntjac deer here is the Reeves/Chinese subspecies. There is a 'no tolerance' policy within the Deer Management Plan for a range of reasons. The main reason is the possible competition for habitat with the native roe deer. The muntjac has proved to be highly successful, with no set breeding season, breeding at a faster rate than other deer species.

Deer and the Ecosystem

Deer, especially the native species, are an important and valued component of the woodland ecosystem and are a valued part of our natural heritage. Whilst it is recognised that too many deer can have a damaging effect on certain sensitive habitats and can restrict tree establishment, on both restock sites and areas identified for natural regeneration, it is equally recognised that some habitats are improved and maintained by deer activity. With the general health of the deer an important consideration, management seeks to strike a balance whereby the environment can thrive together with a healthy deer population. As a result, population densities may vary from place to place in response to:

- anticipated environmental damage
- creating and maintaining a diversity of habitats
- providing a variety of opportunities for the public to view deer
- other management objectives

Managing the deer population

As a basis for managing deer, the most important requirement is knowledge of the population size. The technique of a direct visual census in the spring, combined with a calculated correction factor, where appropriate, is the prime method of assessing deer numbers on the Crown Lands.

Whilst annual cull targets are used as a tool to manage deer consistently, towards a target population, it is recognised that these targets are less important than the resultant condition of the habitat and the deer themselves. A range of information is taken into account when setting cull targets. These may include:

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- computer modelling of the population
- field observations
- stakeholder feedback
- damage assessments
- the health of the deer

The cull is undertaken by Forestry Commission keepers who use high velocity rifles from high seats. Each keeper is a marksman and trained with the firearm. For safety, our staff follow the guidance published in Forestry Commission Operational Guidance Booklets: 5.Deer Management and 14.Using Firearms. They also produce a risk assessment for the cull.

An important by-product of deer culling is the production of high quality venison. Deer are all partly processed (gralloched/disembowelled, head and feet taken off) at the Forestry Commission's modern automated larder. Deer carcasses then go to either a large game dealer or a local New Forest Marque dealer for final processing, to be made ready for the consumer.

For details of modern deer management practice, see the British Deer Society website: www.bds.org.uk