

**Malvern Hills AONB Landowners and Managers Event – Deer and Grey Squirrel
Colwall Village Hall, 23/11/22**

These notes were taken at the time of the meeting and are not comprehensive or verbatim.

Context

Deer numbers are increasing. The national deer herd is around 2,000,000 currently. The two most numerous species are fallow deer and muntjac. There are no natural predators. Their range is increasing as well as the density. This summer a herd in Northamptonshire that was seen by drone was 1600 deer.

There are six species of deer currently in the UK these are roe, red, fallow, muntjac, sika and Chinese water deer. Red deer are native and a pure breed however Sika and red deer can hybridise which will cause a problem to native red deer. Our UK native breeds are Red deer and Roe deer, all the rest are classed as non-native. How have they got here? Introductions (Romans brought the fallow) or captive escapees/releases.

The government (Environment Secretary) currently has the national grey squirrel strategy on its desk and the deer strategy is also soon to be submitted. Recent reports such as State Of Nature, State Of The UK's Trees, the Deer Strategy all identify issues and recommendations and lots of proposals regarding deer management, but they all need sign off by the Environment Secretary, in the current political climate how soon will that happen?

What is the impact on woods and farmland?

There are objections to deer culling and these are recognised, but the national deer herd needs to be sustainable. An unchecked rise in the national deer numbers results in poor animal health as well as poor habitats. Numbers need to be reduced to allow natural regeneration within woodlands. Fallow deer strip out all understory. The result is an open habitat with no ground flora or shrub layer making it very draughty for game shoots and wildlife alike, and no natural regeneration, poor tree health and difficulty in planting new tree saplings.

There's plenty of evidence to demonstrate that removing deer grazing pressure is hugely beneficial. Exclusion plots which can be funded as part of Countryside Stewardship demonstrate the positive effect on regeneration. Fencing needs to be at least 1.6 metres high ordinarily.

Deer eat hedges much as sheep do and also crops and grassland. They prefer not to eat alder or birch and will browse through their favourites first, which is everything else. Roe deer particularly like herbage and so graze grass and combinable crops and all deer love young coppice.

The impact is not only on woodlands but also on crops. A fallow doe can eat 5 kilogrammes of fodder a day when lactating so imagine this effect on crops and grass. 100 fallow deer will eat 180 tonnes of fodder a year, further demonstrating the impact on agricultural land as well as woodland.

As yet there is no system for assessing deer impact on farmland. A system urgently needs to be designed (Research student studies?). Measures do exist for assessing impacts in woodlands.

What is the impact on the public?

Road traffic collisions - there are five human deaths a year related to deer road traffic accidents and the cost to the car industry through insurance is £15 million a year. The peak times are in the spring when the young disperse from their herds particularly the young bucks and then again in October/November.

Ticks can be a significant problem depending on the area. In the Midlands less so maybe, but further north a deer carcass can carry 100 ticks. This has the potential of spreading Lyme disease, increasing public risk with increased foot-fall in rural areas.

In Cannock Chase there are significant numbers of deer and they've been found to be carrying TB. There are estimated to be 51 deer per kilometre square. These have a much lower body weight than areas with lower deer pressure. The carcasses are 20% lighter. But the result is that stalkers, when selling on venison, have less to sell, (£/weight) and the meat maybe of a lower quality.

Deer management groups

A deer management group ideally needs to comprise neighbours working together and requires a respected and strong chairman and a good secretary to ensure good communication. The group needs to meet two or three times a year. The group needs to coordinate stalking days so that if deer move from 1 holding to another there is control otherwise the herd just moves around.

A local deer management group – the Wyre Forest

Wyre Forest deer management Society has been going for 46 years and is very successful. Ed Brown has been chairman for 30 years and took on the role as he was local and already well respected, living and working in the Wyre Forest. The Society was set up to control the fallow deer and to get landscape scale control and it's been successful because it has a good team, secretary and committee. The chairman needs to be respected to be able to get the buy in from the landowners.

The fallow deer population is under good control and is now stable, however muntjac are increasing. There were none 20 years ago. The cull is based on a census which is undertaken on two separate (repeated) days in March. About 30 volunteers are each given a form with a map of an area for them to survey, they all set off at dawn to their allocated location and when there over a set period of time record the species of deer the sex the colour the age where it is exactly and the direction of travel. All records are then scrutinised to ensure that there hasn't been double counting and from that the population estimated and from that the numbers to be culled are then defined. Each stalker/landowner is allocated a number to shoot. Records are submitted and monitored.

There are small areas in the Wyre forest where there is an imbalance of deer numbers (in the ratio of does and bucks) and this is because of non-subscribers to the group, however it isn't a problem and is accounted for.

About 120 - 150 fallow deer and about 100 muntjac are culled each year.

Each holding has its own deer management plan and Ed often writes these for individual holdings, but then these collectively inform a management plan for the whole forest.

Assessing damage and the scope of the problem

An easy assessment is looking at the browse line of a hedgerow or in a woodland or if young planted woodland is being browsed off as it comes out of the protection tubes. [The Deer Initiative](#) website has best practice guidance. Deer impact assessments can be undertaken (Worcestershire Wildlife Trust has done this in the north of the AONB). It is also possible to commission drone based surveys using infra-red cameras, which give good information about deer numbers.

Deer management plans

These need to consider all aspects of deer management meaning numbers, species, territories. They also need to consider extraction of carcasses (speedy extraction needed for the human food chain). There is a template for deer management plans available from the Defra CS pages relating to the Deer Management supplement WD1 [HERE](#) (scroll down the page to 'Requirements').

Best practise events are held regularly and these cover carcass handling, shooting safety, royal forestry Society woodland management, deer plans etc. A one-day event is taking place in Worcestershire in April 2023, contact Alastair for more information: alastair.boston@forestrycommission.gov.uk

Stalking

For stalkers, thermal imaging on scopes improves the cull percentages massively and trail cameras help landowners find out what's going on. Evidence and information is key to the whole process.

High-seats - vantage point, shooting to the ground, very useful because deer rarely look up. Doe boxes – like a hide? Shooting on a level – safe shots is a key consideration. Others prefer foot stalking.

Quad bikes very useful for speedy extraction.

Comments that stalkers prefer smaller deer such as roe, as these are easier to extract than the larger deer. Each species tastes different and say there are preferences within the market.

Tree protection

Tree tubes need to be a minimum of 1.4 metres high, roe deer will lift up tubes to get at the saplings and they will also eat the cable ties to loosen the tube from the stake. Spiral guards are useless for deer. Deer fencing is very high cost due to the increase in price of materials and often as a shortage of contractors skilled enough to put the deer fencing up. Fencing needs to be checked regularly and frequently, a falling tree can let deer in which will then become trapped inside your new woodland. The bottom of the fence needs to be secured firmly as muntjac and roe will squeeze underneath at any point they can.

Public perception

Comment from Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. Culling is undertaken where an ecological need is identified. Coppice blocks and clear felling are fenced but sometimes evidence demonstrates the need for control. Not all members support this control until presented with the evidence of the benefits to biodiversity, woodland birds et cetera.

Q&A

There was a good range of questions and comments around the subject. The over-arching message was that there is good interest in **damage assessments** being made in woodlands in the Malvern Hills AONB and that it would have been ideal if consensus could be agreed at the meeting for FC/AONB to go ahead and start now. Sadly funding structures don't allow that flexibility for immediate action. However there is potential for **funding for undertaking surveys in 2023** if Malvern Hills AONB gets sign up from member holdings very soon. This would enable a collective application to the Farming in Protected Landscape Programme (the application managed by Sash so little action and probably no £ needed from members). If you are interested, please **let Sash Warden know. No sign-up – no surveys.**

Comment on the value of venison to the stalker was heard. Comparisons between sheep/lamb meat prices and deer. The costs to a stalker, without time (often only 1 out of 3 trips successful), is extracting and managing the carcass to a standard and quality that a butcher/restaurant would want, disposing of the waste, cartridges/bullets, infrastructure (high seats/hides) etc.

and the stalker is lucky to get £100 for a large carcass. The costs for shooting and handling a small deer are the same and price achieved much lower. Demand is low as it is perceived and sold as a high end (£££) meat in a niche market, whereas it could be a good value, high quality, sustainable and 'healthy' (low fat, high omegas) meat. The result is that the larger breeds are favoured. Muntjac (small) are not, and yet are growing massively in numbers.

There needs to be a culture change around buying meat – venison needs to be in the main meat aisles of the popular supermarkets at a corresponding price to pork, beef and lamb. Effective marketing of the product required and standardised method of supplying to the butcher.

Charlotte Vincent

02/12/2022