

Deer are an intrinsic part of our countryside, two species are present, neither of which are native to England, although fallow deer do have an historic parkland interest. Roe and red deer although native to the UK are not currently present locally although their populations may establish in the future, particularly roe deer as their range is expanding across the East of England.

Deer can be a valuable part of our landscape, and in low numbers cause little significant impact, and can be a benefit. As the number of deer and species has increased the impact that they are causing to the landscape has increased.

Deer impacts to woodland are high, and in areas locally high impacts are also occurring to arable crops.

Fallow populations are high in this area, with herds of 250 + found on non-management areas only 3 miles to the north and semi resident more local populations living on the estate and surrounding arable and woodland areas.

Muntjac numbers are moderate, but likely to increase with an increase in scrub areas.

Control within the area is mixed, with control levels varying depending upon the landowner and deer stalker objectives. Sightings of deer in the local area and reports locally indicate that buck heavy culling occurs, and that proportionally few antlered bucks are reported in the area. At this estate although deer control does occur the way the land is interspersed with adjoining land makes effective control of fallow deer in particular almost impossible, muntjac control is more likely to be successful, although this would and will need to be very much on-going across the estate woodland areas, and on land adjoining neighbouring woodland off the estate.

Fully cooperating landscape management could help to reduce the impacts and deer population in this area, but this is unlikely to reduce populations in this area within the first few years of this scheme, which would impact heavily on the objectives and probably reduce the environmental value of this project. It is also likely that full cooperation from all landowners and deer stalkers within the deer range would not occur.

Impacts are through browsing and grazing of regenerating tree seedlings and of floral growth. This browsing will change the structural composition and diversity of the woodland, reducing the amount of scrub layer and regenerating seedlings that would have produced the next generation of mature trees. Floral interests also suffer and browsing causes reduction in nectar and seeding potential of many flowering plants

With the reduction in structural diversity, reductions in associated fauna are also occurring, research from the British Trust for Ornithology and University of East Anglia has demonstrated that bird numbers and range of species has declined in woodlands that have deer present.

With the impacts caused by browsing across most of the region currently at moderate to high levels few woodlands are reaching their full potential. To establish woodlands / trees / scrub in the future areas must be protected from deer browsing, this should be through a combined approach of physical barriers and lethal control.

Deer are generally browsers, often feeding selectively on ground flora and tree/woody shrub regeneration within the sward, woodland floor, or shrub layer. Bramble, for example, is a dietary component for all deer but there are a wide range of sub species and some of these are significantly more palatable than others.

Preferential browsing of plants and seedlings occurs at all levels of deer population and plant abundance but if food availability is reduced e.g. during winter, deer will necessarily feed more on non-preferential food and on adjacent crops.

Consumption rates vary depending on species and the quality of food found, but for example, a fallow deer will eat around 5kg of plant material per day, or 0.5 tonnes for every 100 fallow. Through the winter period 100 fallow can consume around 90 tonnes of vegetation. Muntjac are very selective browsers, always selecting the most succulent vegetation, flora or regeneration.

The 2019 State of Nature Report <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf> states that increasing deer numbers (both native species such as Roe and non-natives such as Muntjac), have a heightened impact on woodland and its dependent wildlife as they reduce natural regeneration and alter woodland structure through increased grazing and browsing.

With or without deer browsing, habitats vary widely according to other variables such as climate, soil type, aspect, canopy cover, presence of other plant eaters, and past management practice. These effects should be considered when interpreting impact survey results and when seeking to implement habitat change.

The most important time when establishing new woodlands is reducing impacts during the first few years of establishment, and where deer browsing, even at moderate levels, there is significant risk of losing delicate flora, seedling regeneration and the fauna that may live on this flora and regeneration. Woodland thinning will be occurring and with the local deer population present significant losses are likely from heavy browsing, grassland being established, and scrub cover being required will also likely be affected.

Often it is the 'what we don't see' as being lost that is also important, often we know what we expect to see and we can identify this if this is missing, often what we are unaware of, we do not realise we have lost.

Deer Fencing

Deer fencing is essential in the first five years of the project to allow the initial flush of vegetation to establish. Beyond 5 years deer should be monitored and if needed controlled by a combination of fencing and lethal control.

Within the fence there will be an on-going requirement to undertake lethal control of muntjac and any fallow deer that do get inside the fence.

Badgers are likely to create holes in the fence lines and access points for these should be made at the time of fence erection.

There are varying specifications for deer fencing, and these should take into consideration the need to exclude fallow deer, but probably tolerate some passage of muntjac, as this is inevitable with badgers present and an interest in allowing hares passage through as well. Therefore, a fence specification that meets these criteria is essential and guidance on Countryside Stewardship fencing requirements should be consulted to ensure this is allowable.



A group of 20 fallow deer near Roe Wood (12.3.2020). Sorry about the poor quality..



Well worn deer paths heading from Roe Wood south.



A group of 250 + fallow deer at Therfield (12.3.2020)