

Species Fact Sheet: Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Our largest deer species, males larger than females. Red-brown coat colour with no spots in adults. Antlers of males usually branched, not palmate. With up to 3 branches. Rump pattern creamy, not delineated by black lines. Footprint is oval, 5cm wide by 7cm long.

Size: Up to 1.37 metres at the shoulder, length nose to tail is 201cm in males.

Life Span: Up to 20 years, but few deer actually live longer than 16 years.



Distribution & Habitat

In Britain most red deer are found on the open moorlands of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, although scattered populations are found elsewhere such as north west England, East Anglia, Exmoor and Ireland. Range and numbers were greatly reduced in historic times, becoming extinct in much of England, Wales and the Scottish Lowlands by the end of the 18th century. There have been subsequent increases in numbers associated with the development of deer stalking as sport, under-culling of females, and colonisation of forestry plantations.

General Ecology

Behaviour

About 80% of the Scottish red deer population live in open-hill habitats year-round. These animals tend to be smaller and produce fewer young (one calf every other year) than those resident in woodland habitat. On open hill, males and females usually remain in separate groups for much of the year, the females (hinds) tending to monopolise the relatively grass-rich habitats in groups of up to 40 individuals. In contrast, males (stags) tend to utilise poorer heather-dominant feeding areas. In winter red deer usually concentrate on sheltered lower ground, moving to higher altitude feeding areas in the summer.

Hind groups consist of a dominant hind, her dependent offspring, and her mature daughters with their offspring, all sharing over-lapping ranges. In contrast, stag groups are less stable and comprise unrelated individuals. Group-size of red deer occupying woodland habitats tends to be smaller than those of the open hill.

Diet and Feeding

Grasses, sedges and rushes comprise the bulk of the summer diet, with dwarf-shrubs such as heather and blaeberry being more important in winter. Young trees are also browsed.

Reproduction

Mating takes place from the end of September to November. This time is known as "the rut", where mature stags, 5-6 years old, leave bachelor groups to seek out hinds at traditional rutting sites. Stags attempt to defend groups of 10-15 hinds (exceptionally up to 70) in an attempt to prevent mating by other stags, engaging in roaring "contests", which may escalate to include parallel walking and locking of antlers.

Following the rut, stags and hinds typically segregate again. Calves (usually one, very rarely twins) produced as a consequence of the autumn matings are born from mid-May, with a peak of births in the 1st or 2nd week of June. Calves are usually weaned by 8 months old, by which time they have moulted out of their spotted natal coat.

Conservation Status

Red deer are an important source of food (in the form of live prey or as carrion) for animals including golden eagle, buzzard, badger, pine marten and fox. Also, through browsing, red deer influence vegetation composition and structure. In some areas of Scotland, the density of red deer is such that regeneration of native woodland has been prevented and higher culling rates are required.

The culling of red deer for sport, meat, or management is a significant factor in red deer ecology, with c.70,000 animals being killed annually. In many parts of the Highlands, annual culling rates (of 6-12% of hinds and 10-17% of stags), have not prevented a population increase, with c.360,000 in Great Britain, and ~4000 in Ireland.

Hybridisation with introduced sika deer *Cervus nippon* is thought to pose a significant threat to the genetic integrity of native red deer. In the southern Lake District and Wicklow Mountains, populations are now composed almost entirely of red-sika hybrids. It has been suggested that in time, pure red deer may only survive on some of the Scottish islands.