

Species Fact Sheet: Sika Deer (*Cervus nippon*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: A medium-sized deer. Has a similar spotted coat to fallow deer in summer, but usually is rougher, thicker, dark grey-brown in winter. Tail is shorter than fallow deer, but with similar white “target” and black margins. Usually has a distinctive “furrowed brow” look, and if seen well, evident white spots on the limbs, marking the site of pedal glands. Males have rounded, not palmate, antlers, looking like a small version of a red deer stag’s antlers.

Size: 138-179 cm; Tail length: 14-21cm; Shoulder height 50-120 cm.

Weight: Males 40-63kg; females 31-44kg.

Life Span: Maximum recorded lifespan in captivity is 26 years; 16 in the wild.



Distribution & Habitat

Sika are native to SE China, including Taiwan, Korea and Japan. It was introduced to Powerscourt Park, Co Wicklow, Ireland, in 1860, and to London Zoo. Sika then spread to many other parks and escaped or were deliberately released; in some cases they were deliberately released into surrounding woodlands to be hunted on horseback. This resulted in feral populations S England (especially Dorset and the New Forest), in the Forest of Bowland and S Cumbria, and, especially, in Scotland. It is still spreading. Its preference for conifer plantations, especially the thick young stages, has been a big advantage to it. It can reach densities up to 45/km² in prime habitat.

General Ecology

Behaviour

They typically live in small herds of 6-7 animals, at least in more open habitats, but in dense cover may only live in small groups of 1-3 only. Numbers aggregate for the rut in October. Sika bucks produce a peculiar whistling sound, very unlike the deep roar of a red deer stag, or even the grunting of a fallow buck. Sika bucks may be territorial, marking the trunks of prominently positioned trees by scoring them with their antlers and thrashing the ground vegetation. However, in other circumstances they gather a harem of hinds and defend them.

Diet and Feeding

Sika feed on browse, both from coniferous and deciduous species, but especially on grasses and heather in summer. Browse is more important in winter.

Reproduction

Calves are born in May-June, after a gestation of 220 days. They are weaned by the time of the next rut, and the does usually first breed as yearlings. In expanding populations, bucks usually disperse well before does, and may move up to 50 km. In the absence of their own females, sika bucks may mate instead with young hinds of the closely related red deer. The consequence is an increasingly hybrid population, neither red nor sika. Sika bucks are too small to rival red stags, but the hybrids are able to breed in either direction.

Conservation & Pest Control

Sika can be a serious pest in commercial forestry. The damage they do in scoring tree trunks can let in disease, and browsing young trees can cause serious losses. However, the threat they pose to red deer, by hybridisation, is the major concern to zoologists.

It is now illegal to transfer sika or red deer (which might in fact be hybrids) to Hebridean islands that retain good populations of pure red deer. Populations in forestry can be culled by stalkers, in the conventional manner, and the venison sold. This is effective in southern Britain where it has limited the spread and increase of this deer.