

New Forest Biodiversity Forum

New Forest Deer and their management

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I have been overseeing management of the New Forest deer population for 25 years. Tracking the fortunes of the five species of deer present, writing deer management plans, collating census data, and setting cull targets, while considering the conflicting interests of foresters, farmers and deer enthusiasts who study and photograph the Forests deer.

I have tried to understand the factors behind the ever-increasing population of Fallow Deer despite continually increasing culls, and the arrival of the Muntjac and the difficulties of managing them.

Our native Roe are outcompeted when the numbers of our herding species such as Red, Fallow or Sika are too abundant, but Reds are native too, so how do you try and strike a balance?

Deer do not acknowledge boundaries, and concerted and cooperative effort with our neighbours is required to achieve effective management while accepting that not everyone likes to see deer killed.

Understanding the ecological impact of too many deer and the differences between deer and stock impact is the cause for much debate, but by hands-on work over many years my team and I have seen what it takes for woodland change to occur.

The issue of native versus non-native species of deer and how we view them with regard the culture and history of the Forest is another topic sure to split many, while dealing with the practical problems of road traffic accidents involving deer or those caught in fencing around pony paddocks and the number chased or killed by pet dogs each year tends to polarise the views of various sectors of the Forest community.

Direction and management of the nine current New Forest keepers who undertake the deer management and the health and safety and training involved with culling 2000 deer annually in a heavily visited National Park with unrestricted open access is not without its challenges.

The resulting deer carcasses are prepared for sale in a purpose-built larder with automated record keeping and strict hygiene standards. Staff are also trained to undertake health checks on all animals culled before going into the food chain.

All methods and techniques for censusing deer in the landscape will at best only identify trends, and a knowledge of woodland ecology and the ability to recognise

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those tree and shrub species that are absent because of the presence of too many deer are key skills.

Here in the New Forest, despite continued targeted action to reduce Fallow numbers they are still high in many areas. We are managing to maintain a viable but acceptable number of Red and Sika Deer at around 150 head and 80 head, respectively, which is in line with our plans. Roe Deer numbers are steadily increasing as the habitat improves with our increased efforts to reduce the Fallow Deer, but Muntjac numbers are increasing year on year despite our best efforts.

Much of our deer management is to enable native woodland regeneration in line with longer term objectives following the removal of conifer. This would benefit a range of woodland invertebrates and certain butterfly species which are in steep decline but potentially conflicts with the vision for many of a mixed grazed landscape with few fences to restrict the movement of commoning animals.

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It has been argued that if ponies and cattle are deemed “important architects of the Forest” worthy of subsidy and favourable management, why not the deer who have grazed alongside them for centuries for free?