

all about

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RED DEER

Cervus elaphus

Red deer are the largest deer living in Britain. The stags (males) measure up to 120cm at the shoulder and weigh anything from 60–130kg. The hinds (females) are smaller and lighter. Red deer get their name from their foxy red fur but in winter they grow a thicker grey brown coat for extra warmth. Only the stags have antlers. These fall off every year in spring but new ones grow again quickly. New antlers are covered with a furry coat called velvet. When the antlers stop growing the velvet begins to peel off. Antlers can be as long as 140cm and weigh 6kg each. Stags in good condition may have up to 12 branches in each antler.

Where do they live?

The largest number and biggest herds of red deer live on high, open moorland. In winter they move to lower ground, often

into woods and forests. Some red deer also live all year round in some woods and forests. These animals are often

larger than those living on the open hills. This is due to being in a more sheltered environment with better feeding.



Lifestyle

The stags and hinds live in separate herds for most of the year. In woodlands the groups are smaller and made up of related animals such as hinds with their calves and yearlings. Living

in a group provides more eyes, ears and noses to warn of danger. Young calves are sometimes killed by foxes or eagles but adult red deer have no predators apart from humans. The wolf, their natural predator, became extinct in Scotland over 200 years ago.

In the autumn the mature stags move to where the hinds live. They become very noisy, roaring and bellowing during the breeding season which is known as the rut. They spend a good deal of time sizing each other up. The weaker stags give up easily, walking away if they decide that their opponent looks too strong or roars too loudly. When fighting does take place the deer lock antlers and push against each other until one gives way. This test of strength makes sure that the strongest and fittest male will mate. The most successful stags mate with 15–20 hinds.

Calves are born in June. They can stand within half an hour of birth but for the first few days they are left hidden in the grass while their mother is away feeding. They have a spotted coat for the first few weeks which provides camouflage. Once they are 3 to 4 weeks old the calves are able to follow the adults. Young stags stay with the hind herds until they are 2 or 3. They then leave and join stag herds. In contrast young hinds usually have home ranges which overlap with those of their mothers.

Food and feeding

Red deer eat all kinds of plants including grasses, heather, berries, lichens and mosses. They will also eat tree seedlings and the bark of trees. In summer they feed mainly at dawn and dusk, resting during the day. During the winter most of the day is spent searching for food.

Red deer in Scotland

There have been red deer in Scotland since at least the end of the last ice age about 10,000 years ago. They were originally woodland and woodland edge animals living in the forests that once covered much of Scotland. However as these forests were destroyed by man for his own needs and to graze sheep, red deer numbers fell and they had to adapt to living on moorland. Red deer numbers started to rise again during the nineteenth century when deer stalking became popular and less money could be made from sheep farming. Deer were encouraged by providing food in winter and hinds were not culled to allow numbers to rise.

More recently numbers have increased dramatically from about 150,000 animals in the mid 1960s to around 300,000 today. This increase has caused concern due to the damage that too many grazing deer cause to the wild plants in the habitats on which they and other wildlife depend. For example damage can be caused to both young and mature trees and to farm crops. Naturally regenerating woodlands such as native pinewoods are threatened because by eating tree seedlings the deer prevent any new trees growing. When the old trees die, the forest gradually disappears. Where too many deer live in an area there may not be enough food for all the herd and this leads to poor health and even starvation, especially in late winter and early spring.

Controlling deer

Many forests are now designed and managed with the needs of red deer and other wildlife in mind. Deer fencing is often used to protect young trees although this can restrict access and unfortunately can kill woodland birds, especially capercaillie and black grouse which crash into it.

Fencing does not reduce deer numbers, but simply moves the deer onto other areas. More drastic measures are therefore sometimes needed. In order to restore a balance between deer and their environment humans have to take the role of predator and reduce deer numbers by killing some of them. This deliberate killing, known as culling, is most needed where there are real problems with deer damage. Sick, weak, old and any injured deer are the first to be culled which helps the rest of the herd to survive and be healthy.

Finding our more

Look for books about British mammals and Scottish wildlife. Your library may have:-

The Red Deer

Brian Staines. Blandford Publishers.
1980

Scottish Wildlife – Animals.

Ray Collier. Colin Baxter Photography Ltd. 1992

Wildlife of Scotland

Fred Halliday (ed). Macmillan. 1979

Contact: The British Deer Society
(Burgate Manor, Fordingbridge, Hants

SP6 1EF) and the Deer Commission for Scotland (Knowsley, 82 Fairfield Road, Inverness IV3 5LH).

How you can get involved

Contact groups in your area that are concerned with the future of Scotland's wildlife. Your local library should have information about these.

Scottish Wildlife WATCH, part of the Scottish Wildlife Trust, produces a magazine and Scottish newsletter which include information about environmental issues and give you the chance to help wildlife by taking part in projects and surveys.

Contact: Scottish Wildlife WATCH,
Cramond House, Cramond Glebe Road,
Edinburgh EH4 6NS

To find out more about visiting a forest, contact your local Forest Enterprise Office or local Countryside Ranger Service.

A poster of a red deer is available free of charge from either Scottish Natural Heritage or the Forestry Commission:
Scottish Natural Heritage, Publications Section, Battleby, Redgordon, Perth, PH1 3EW.

Forestry Commission, 231 Corstorphine Road, Edinburgh EH12 7AT

Glossary

Culling

Killing an animal from a herd to reduce or stabilise the herd size and/or to provide sport and a source of meat.

Deer stalking

Hunting of deer by approaching them unawares and shooting them.

Habitat

A place in which an animal or plant lives.

Natural regeneration

Trees growing from seeds spread by wind, birds or other natural means.

Yearling

A one year old deer.

