



LIVING WITH... DEER

It is estimated that there are over two million deer found throughout England, Wales and Scotland.

Despite their iconic status as a paragon of the British countryside, only two of the six species present in the UK - the red and roe deer - are actually native species (see box below). Deer have traditionally lived in forests, moors and parkland. Recently however they have been seen in more urban environments, particularly in gardens, golf courses, roads and railway lines. All deer are herbivores ('plant eaters') and feed on grasses, leaves and similar plant matter.

The male and female of red and sika deer are called stag and hind respectively. For all other species the male and female are called buck and doe. Similarly, the young of red and sika deer are called calves, the young of fallow and Chinese water deer are called fawns, and the young of muntjac and roe deer are called kids.

There is a great difference in size between deer species; for example, the red deer is the largest land mammal in Britain and can grow to over four feet high at the shoulder. By comparison the muntjac is tiny, averaging less than two feet high at the shoulder.

The breeding season, known as the rut or the rutting season, varies with species and can occur from mid-July to December. Unlike other species of deer found in Britain, the muntjac has no rutting season and can breed throughout the year.

In the pre-rut period, male deer will start sparring using their antlers in shows of strength. However, during the rut this behaviour escalates into elaborate displays for dominance over breeding rights. These competitive bouts vary between species but will commonly involve roaring, grunting, parallel walks and if all else fails, fighting. During the fights many males suffer serious injuries, inflicted by their opponents' antlers, and fatal wounds are not uncommon. Following the rut, antlers are usually shed and re-grown before the next rut.



Female roe deer

As deer become more common in suburban and urban areas, so do road collisions involving deer. Research indicates that over 74,000 deer vehicle collisions occur every year, the majority resulting in the deer's death. The RSPCA is the largest contributor of data to the **National Deer-Vehicle Collisions Project** (www.deercollisions.co.uk); a project that aims to improve driver awareness of deer and reduce deer-related collisions.

What is the difference between native and non-native deer?

The two native species of deer in Britain, the **roe** and **red deer**, have occurred naturally in Britain since the last ice age. Other species have established themselves through deliberate introductions, or by escaping from private collections. **Fallow deer** were introduced from Europe by the Normans in the 11th Century. **Sika deer** (or Japanese sika) were introduced in 1860, having been imported from the Far East and becoming established through both deliberate release and escape. **Chinese water deer**, the least common and most easily identified (by their 'tusks') of deer species in Britain, became established following escapes from Whipsnade Zoo in 1929. The smallest species of deer found in Britain, the **muntjac deer**, was brought from China in the early 20th century and introduced to the southern English countryside, where they flourished and quickly established feral populations.

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How can I deter deer from using my garden?

The RSPCA would like people to enjoy living in an area with deer, however in situations where deer can cause a problem there are measures that can be taken to deter them.

PHYSICAL BARRIERS:

Fences and tree or plant guards are, when properly erected and maintained, the only truly effective barrier against deer. A fence no less than 1.8m high, with a mesh of no less than 75 x 75mm should keep out all British deer species. Fence posts should always be staked/partially buried to avoid getting knocked over and a jump or self-closing gate should be included to allow deer that have got in to escape. Tree or plant-guards take the form of either plastic tubes (for use on broadleaf trees) or netted guards (for conifers and shrubs) designed to prevent deer damage. These must always be at least 1.5m high and anchored/staked to the ground.



Juvenile roe deer

I am walking my dog in an area with deer, is this safe?

If you are walking your dog in an area known to support deer and particularly in a deer park, ensure your dog is on a lead. Between early May and late June newborn deer are especially vulnerable and many are killed or injured by dogs.

CHEMICAL REPELLENTS:

Chemical repellents are regulated in the UK by the **Control of Pesticides (Amendment) Regulations 1997** and fall under two categories:

- **Barrier repellents** provide a 'chemical fence' intended for application around the border of the garden, deterring deer from entering. Unfortunately the majority of field-testing has been conducted on plantation forests, leaving the effectiveness of this method for gardeners somewhat unknown.
- **Feeding repellents** are applied to any plant the deer are likely to feed upon, making them unpalatable. Whilst there are feeding repellent products available, these are marketed for commercial use and are very expensive, particularly given the need for regular application. Many are also toxic and not suitable for gardens.

VISUAL AND SONIC REPELLENTS:

Evidence suggests these kinds of deterrents do not really work. Deer are highly adaptable animals that rapidly become accustomed to sirens, streamers, flashing units, scarecrows etc.

ECO-FRIENDLY DETERRENTS:

Many have suggested growing plants that deer find unpalatable, though this idea has been criticised due to the low number of such plants and the opinion that they are not 'desirable' garden plants. Similarly it has been suggested that the growing of natural alternative browse (**brambles, rosebay, willowherb, rowan, dandelion etc**) can help. These kinds of plants are preferred by deer and will be eaten in the place of other garden plants.

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Are deer protected?

Wild deer are protected under the **Deer Act 1991**. This allows landowners and those with landowner's permission to kill or take deer at certain times of the year (outside the breeding season) except under licences granted by Natural England or Natural Resources Wales. The Act also prohibits the use of certain methods to kill or take deer. The intentional pursuit of wild deer with dogs is an offence under the **Hunting Act 2004**, unless the activity meets the conditions relating to exempt hunting set out in Schedule 1 of the Act.

Once captive, deer are also protected under the **Animal Welfare Act 2006** and the release of any non-native deer species into the wild is an offence under the **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981** (as amended).

There are deer in my neighbourhood and I am concerned about them, can the RSPCA relocate them?

No, the RSPCA cannot relocate healthy deer. Catching deer is not advocated as they are very susceptible to stress and may result in animals dying due to what is known as "capture myopathy". If, however, the deer is in an unsuitable or dangerous environment, find your local deer liaison officer by calling **0845 872 4956** or at www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk.

I have found an injured, dead or orphaned deer, what should I do?

Young deer are normally left alone from an early age for long periods of time but mother will return to feed them. Do not disturb them and watch from a distance to see if mum returns.

If the mother does not return, or you know for a fact the young deer is orphaned, please ring the RSPCA on the number below. If the deer is blocking the road, do not attempt to move it but call the Police (or Highways Agency if you are on a motorway) for assistance and stay with the animal until help arrives.



Male fallow deer

If you find a dead deer you know to be a road casualty, contact the Police and the National Deer-Vehicle Collisions Project (www.deercollisions.co.uk).

For more information see the RSPCA's "Road traffic accidents involving deer" factsheet.

To report an injured or sick deer to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line on **0300 1234 999**