

Case study: Deer in Sheffield

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Overview:

In terms of deer populations the Sheffield region has been in a state of dramatic flux since the later 1970s. Prior to this time the numbers were very low and restricted to park herds of red and fallow deer, and one major population of feral reds around the former medieval deer park at Wharnccliffe. The Chase was disparked during the Second World War and the animals released to go feral. Beyond this, since the demise of most deer parks in the region, perhaps in the 1500s or thereabouts, few deer remained in the area. To the south-east, around Sherwood and the Dukeries there were well-established herds of both fallow and red deer, and in the south-east Peak District and around Matlock, a population of black (melanistic) fallow. The latter originated from a medieval park herd at Stanton-in-the-Peak. Occasionally red deer escaped from the park herd at Chatsworth to turn up on nearby farmland or the moors, but they were invariably shot by the park staff or perhaps by local farmers. In Sheffield itself, there were no deer except for the feral reds from Wharnccliffe which wandered down the River Don at least as far as Kelham Island.

By the 1980s, this situation was changing as the feral reds grew in number and were joined by second population on the Eastern Moors. The area was purchased by the Peak National Park for public benefit and conservation and so the Chatsworth escapees were able to establish in what was now an area of sanctuary. The numbers were supplemented by deliberate releases from captive stock owned by a landowner in Dore Village.

At the same time, there were increasing records around the margins of the region, of roe deer, and occasionally, muntjac. Both these species occurred mostly to the east of the region. However, a process of major colonisation was underway and the feral red herds were expanding dramatically. There is a substantial literature associated with observations of these changes, and the *South Yorkshire Biodiversity Research Group* has a long-running 'citizen science' project to record and monitor the populations.

Current status:

The Sheffield situation of increases in the four main deer species and a tendency for growing urbanisation is following a wider national pattern. However, the Sheffield region is particularly interested as it is the extensive re-colonisation of an area without wild deer populations.

Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*): Red deer are now well-established to the west and south-west of Sheffield with a population centred on Big Moor but now ranging in all directions from there. In the west and north-west, the populations are joining with the long-standing feral herds around Wharnccliffe and Bitholmes with individuals now recorded from Rivelin and Strines. Most dramatically perhaps is the eastern movement of red deer downslope and along the well-wooded river valleys such as the Sheaf, and which began around 2010–2011 as a result of harsh winter weather. Recent culls of red deer on the Eastern Moors Estate seem to have 'spooked' the herds and triggered even more dispersal away from the core area. Other more urban record originated from captive stock escaping.

Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*): Roe deer has colonised Sheffield from the east and north-east originally, but now from the south-west too. By the 1980s, records were coming in from rural locations around the city, and one individual was captured on television as it ran across the outfield of what was then the county cricket ground at Abbeydale Sports Club. Early records of roe deer included animals which suffered severe persecution in eastern Sheffield. The population is now well-established into the heart of the urban catchment, with regular sightings for example in Crookes, Nether Edge, and Sharrow.

Reeve's Muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*): Muntjac was first recorded in Sheffield in the early 1990s with individuals holding territories in the Moss Valley fringe. Since then, there has been a progressive movement into the city with records now from urban areas like Woodseats, Heeley, Gleadless, Norton, Nether Edge, Sharrow, Parkwood Springs, and Queen's Road for example. Both muntjac and roe can be quite elusive and unless their barking calls are recognised, can remain relatively unnoticed.

Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*): Fallow deer have continued to expand around Darley Dale and Matlock, and in the Sherwood region. However, fallow is a slow coloniser and has yet to appear in Sheffield.

Sika (*Cervus nippon*): Records and rumours of sika deer have proved to be unfounded though future colonisation from the north-west Pennines populations remains a possibility.

Issues arising:

The re-colonisation of the Sheffield area by deer is a hugely interesting phenomenon. Furthermore, for most people a sighting with a deer is a very special and exciting moment. However, there are issues in relation to the increased numbers and wider distribution.

- 1) Increased human-deer contact including RTAs (road-traffic accidents) and recently a Ferrari was written off near Totley. Such accidents are presently under-recorded but clearly increasing. Red deer are the usual species involved but there are records too of young roe deer killed on roads near Holmesfield.
- 2) Persecution and poaching remain serious issues for all deer species.
- 3) There are animal welfare issues arising (such as 1 & 2 above) and due to the stresses of a rural animal colonising into an urban catchment. Additionally, if incidents such as RTAs occur in an urban area, the community and the agencies are often not aware of how to deal with a live but injured red deer for example.
- 4) As deer numbers increase, and with warmer weather due to climate change, it is likely that deer ticks and associated problems may increase too.
- 5) There are already issues around western Sheffield of damage to gardens particularly associated with red deer.
- 6) Increasing deer populations may have ecological consequences through browse damage and if numbers rise, through trampling too. Currently populations are below any threshold for significant damage to tree stocks, regeneration etc. As reassessment of the Eastern Moors situation indeed indicated that the suggested damage there was far less than the commissioned surveys had reported.

There is currently no fully up-to-date account of these species in the region as records continue to come in, but there is little support for research into the impacts and trends. Discussions with national Deer Initiative confirm that this is a problem across the UK with no support for monitoring or recording.

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More information and survey guidance:

<https://www.ukeconet.org/deer-identification.html>