

Sustainable Management & Conservation of Deer on the Quantocks



QUANTOCK DEER
Management & Conservation Group



**Quantock
Hills**
National
Landscape

Introduction

The wild deer of the Quantock Hills form an important part of its ecology and cultural history. The opportunities to observe red deer, which are far less common elsewhere in England, are valued highly by locals as well as visitors to the area.

Without careful management excessive deer numbers may build up and lead to detrimental impacts on biodiversity, farming, timber production, and on the health and body condition of deer themselves. The Quantock Deer Management and Conservation Group (QDM&CG) is committed to ensuring the long-term survival of a healthy and well-distributed population of deer in and around the Quantock Hills in balance with its environment and other land use.

This digital publication provides information on the history, behaviour and ecology of the differing deer species found in the area, and how we aim to achieve their sustainable management.

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Red Deer - Background

Red deer are the largest of six species of deer living wild in Britain. Weights of mature males (stags) range from 90 kg to 190 kg (14 to 30 stone), and adult females (hinds) from 60 kg to 110 kg (9.5 to 17 stone). They are a herding species, which on the Quantocks are often seen in groups of 10 - 25 animals, however sightings of herds of 60 or more are not uncommon.

Stags and hinds form separate groups for much of the year outside the mating season. The peak mating season or rut occurs around mid-October, when loud roaring of fully grown stags is heard echoing around the combes. At this time stags chivvy hinds to collect and defend a harem and may fight with other stags to re-affirm their place in the hierarchy.

During March and April stags shed their antlers, (which can weigh as much as 4kg each side), yet by the end of the summer re-growth of an entirely new splendid set will be complete.

Hinds mostly give birth to a single calf late May or early June. During the first two to three weeks of life the young hide up alone in bracken or other dense ground cover for much of the day until they are strong enough to keep up with the herd.



History of the red deer on the Quantocks

The recent history of red deer on the Quantocks is inextricably linked with 'hunting to hounds'. Very few deer were present on the Quantock Hills prior to 1862, when Fenwick Bissett, as master of the Devon & Somerset Staghounds, introduced red deer caught on nearby Exmoor. After several further releases of small numbers of red deer over the next 25 years, the Quantock Staghounds were first set up in 1901 only to be disbanded again a few years later. Around 30 red deer were present on the hills when, in 1917, Sir Dennis Boles was asked to revive the QSH by the Controller of Food in Lloyd George's wartime cabinet. The herd was supplemented with several stags brought in from Warnham Park in Sussex, and gradually built up to several hundred animals.

Although initially introduced for sport, hunting later developed its role to assist with deer control through culling and to help disperse large herds from farmland. Alongside rifle culls taken by individual stalkers, hunting has formed part of local deer management ever since. However, recent legislation introduced during 2005 no longer allows hunting as traditionally practised with a full pack of hounds. A more limited form of 'exempt hunting' remains legal to help flush deer from cover, and the QSH continue to provide a service to find and dispatch injured deer such as those struck by vehicles.

“ **Very few deer were present on the Quantock Hills prior to 1862** ”



Other Deer Species

At the end of the 19th Century red deer were the only deer species known to be resident on the Quantocks except for the occasional fallow deer escaped from nearby parks at St Audries, Nettlecombe and Dunster.

Roe deer are the only truly native deer to Britain aside from red deer. They are much smaller than red deer, no more than about 75 cm at the shoulder, with adults weighing 18-32 kg. Although common in England in medieval times roe became extinct by the 17th century except near the border with Scotland. Their distribution remained restricted to northern England, Norfolk and the Southeast until the 1920's, but helped by woodland planting schemes have since steadily re-colonised most English counties. On the Quantocks roe were rarely seen until the 1960s, but numbers have increased significantly with roe now present in most woodlands in and around the Quantock Hills.

Muntjac deer are another species starting to colonise the area. These Asian deer, initially introduced to Woburn Park in Hertfordshire, have spread through much of England, with numbers in the wild estimated at over 125,000 nationwide by 2018. They were first noted on the Quantocks in the 1980s, often as roadkill, and although direct sightings have increased over recent years, their numbers appear to remain low.

Fallow deer are rarely seen on the Quantock Hills but are common in the Brendon Hills just a few miles to the west.



Roe doe with twin kids



Roe buck



Muntjac



Fallow deer

Habitats & Diets

Red deer are well adapted for grazing on pastures, herbs, tree mast and crops, but also able to utilise woody vegetation such as tree leaves, twigs and heather. Nowadays red deer are as likely to be seen feeding or lying up within grass leys and agricultural crops on the low-lying farms surrounding the Quantocks, as in the woods and heathland on the Hills.

Roe deer will also utilise a wide range of habitats but prefer areas offering some patches of dense cover. They are more selective feeders than red deer, browsing by choice on nutritious plant parts such as buds and leaves of brambles and roses, herbs, ivy, young shoots and leaves of both deciduous and conifer trees, cereals and grasses. **Muntjac** have similar habitat and food preferences to roe, but take an even more diverse diet of shrubs, herbs, nuts, fruits, coppice shoots and unfortunately, also bluebells, primroses, dog's mercury and many other native flora eaten less extensively by our native deer species.



Quantock Red deer on Spring Grass



Postive & Negative Impacts

Red deer are the largest terrestrial wild mammals remaining in Britain, and their continued presence on the Quantocks gives pleasure to many people. In addition to their aesthetic appeal, deer present a renewable resource of meat and provide recreational opportunities for those who hunt or shoot for sport. At moderate density deer activity can also help to maintain or improve some habitats for other wildlife.

Conversely, when present at high density deer have significant negative impacts. Damage to trees may occur from browsing of the leading shoots of planted and self-sown seedlings, as well as fraying of young saplings by antler rubbing, and stripping or scoring bark of older trees. Overgrazing by deer combined in some cases with that of domestic sheep, ponies and cattle on common land, can also affects the composition of semi-natural woods, as species such as willow, hazel and oak gradually become replaced by less palatable ones such as birch, alder, and sitka spruce.

Large herds of red deer on farmland are of concern to many Quantock farmers especially during early spring when fresh grazing is at a premium. Within agricultural crops, especially cereals, deer may cause damage through trampling and feeding on ripening corn, while regular passage of large deer herds across field boundaries incurs costly repairs to hedgerows, banks and fences. Large local aggregations of deer also increase the risk of disease transmission among the herd. Two current issues of concern are TB spreading to the deer population and deer-ticks leading to increased fatalities also among lambs. The increasing volume of traffic on our roads combined with high deer numbers also leads to numerous collisions of deer and vehicles around the Quantock Hills, often with very serious consequences.



Quantock Red deer by Miscanthus



Bark Stripping



Damaged maize crop



Road accident

Population Dynamics & Control

The rate of natural increase of deer populations is closely linked to their body condition and environment. The temperate climate, abundance of natural forage as well as ready access to pastures and farm crops have contributed to red deer on the Quantocks becoming one of the finest herds in the country. Under the more severe conditions of the Scottish Highlands many red hinds do not give birth to their first young until their third year and calve only every other year thereafter. A study in the late 1990s however, found close to 75% of red hinds on the Quantocks to conceive at 17-18 months old, and over 85% of older hinds to calve each year, while juvenile mortality is relatively low.

Even at the long-term average red deer population levels of around 600, close to 200 new red deer calves will have been born in and around the Quantocks most years, although this has almost doubled in recent years when spring counts have exceeded 1100 head.

Roe deer have the potential to increase at an even greater rate, as most does produce

twins. However, in areas (such as upland heathland) where they occur alongside high numbers of red deer and other large grazers, their productivity tends to be lower than where roe are the predominant deer species.

In former times the growth of deer populations was moderated to some extent by large predators such as lynx and wolves. Aside from foxes and stray dogs, however, which may occasionally take some newly born fawns, Britain now lacks significant natural predators. Some two to three percent of the Quantock herd do become casualties in traffic accidents, but locally natural mortality levels among the deer is thought to be below 10% among juveniles and lower than 3% among adult animals. Unless numbers are kept in check through culling, as is usual where large numbers occur, the population will increase rapidly, as will the extent of the damage to the environment and costs of crop protection using tree guards and fencing. The actual size of annual cull required depends on local objectives and the desired breakdown of the population by sex and age. Generally, to maintain a stable population 20 - 25%

of females present during autumn need to be removed annually. If herd numbers are significantly higher than sustainable, then a higher proportion, such as 30%, may need to be taken for a number of years until the population stabilises. To contain further increases among local roe populations culls required are also likely to lie between 25 - 30% of the autumn population.

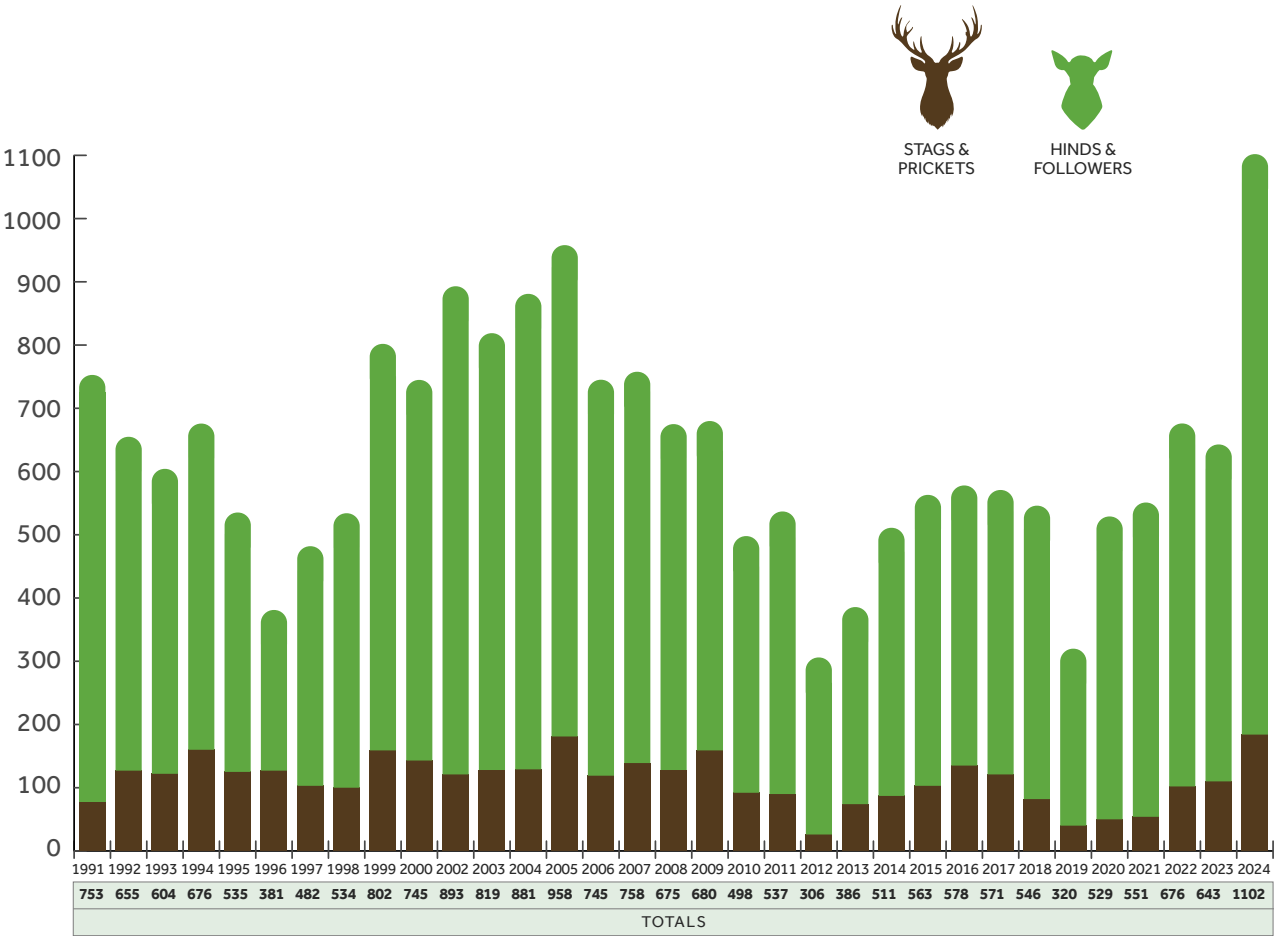


Population Size & Recent Trends

Numbers of wild deer are notoriously difficult to count accurately as many tend to hide in cover during daylight hours. Nevertheless, visual spring counts have been organised each year by the QDM&CG ever since 1990, and provide a guide to trends in the population over the years. The counts are organised with the help of the Quantock NL Service and 60 or so local volunteers. Each volunteer is allocated a mapped area within which to search and record all deer seen during the time of the count.

Comparison of the counts obtained over the past three decades show that total numbers of red deer seen has been between 500 to 600 in most years but reached in excess of 800 from 2002 to 2005 (following Foot and Mouth in 2001). Red deer numbers gradually returned to between 500 to 600 seen at the counts from 2010 to 2020. However, numbers have increased substantially since, for the first time ever reaching more than 1100 red deer seen at the ground-based visual count in early 2024; in addition, 200 roe were seen. Concerns about substantial numbers of deer being missed in high standing crops of Miscanthus and other concealing cover during the annual count led to a drone based (thermal) deer count being organised the same week (with support of the Quantock NL Farming in

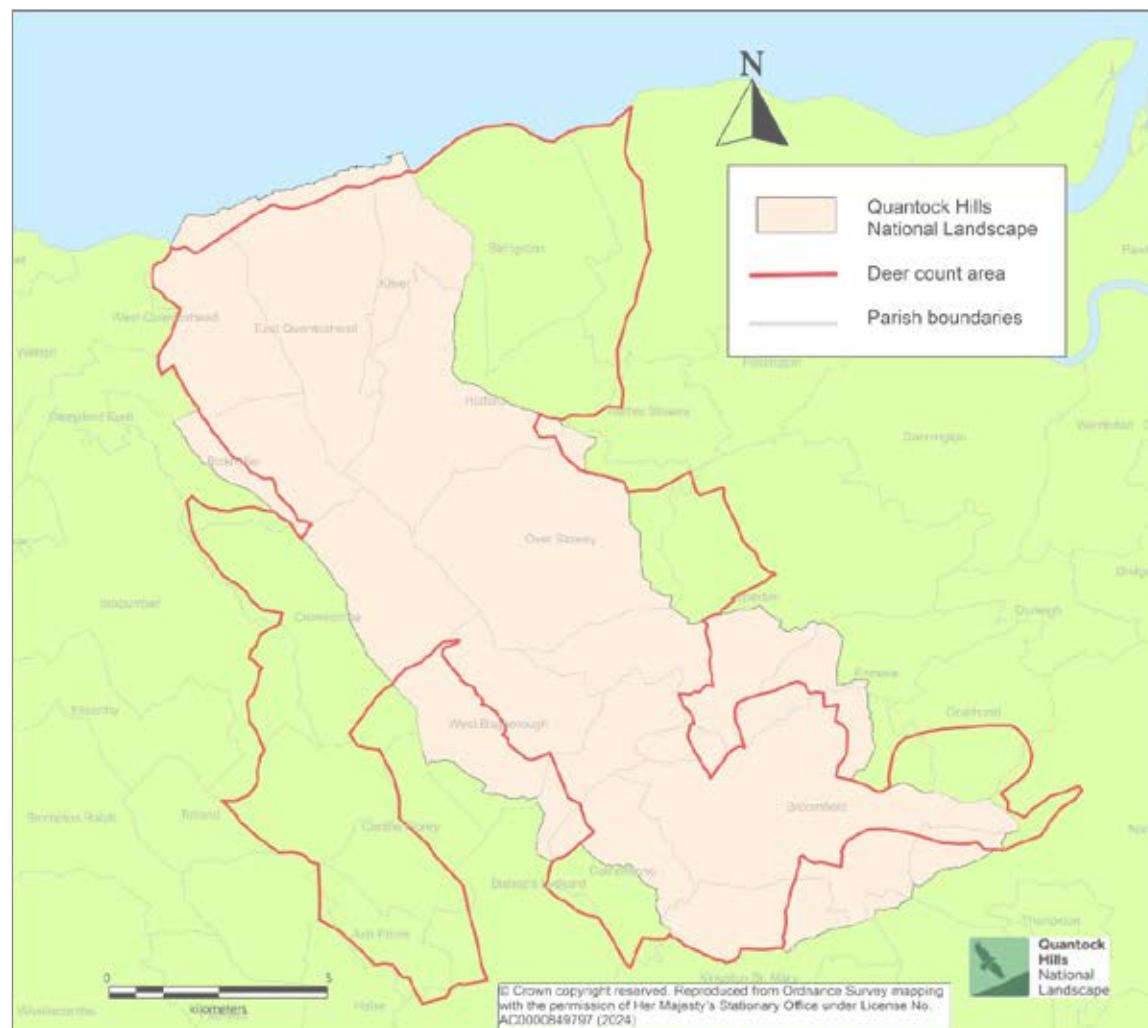
Annual ground-based Spring Counts of Red Deer 1991-2024
For more details of the latest counts visit [<Quantock Deer Counts>](#)



Protected Landscapes programme). Drone counts are also felt more suitable to provide a fuller picture of roe deer numbers and distribution. Results of the 2024 drone count showed a minimum of 1302 red deer and 452 roe deer to be present, despite a portion of the southern management area not being possible to cover fully due to fog.

During the annual ground-based count a much lower proportion of roe and muntjac are likely to be seen by observers than of the much larger red deer. Nevertheless, the number of roe seen have doubled by comparison to twenty years ago, with close to two hundred recorded by recent ground-based counts. The drone survey in spring 2024 confirmed actual presence of over 450 roe in total, the majority of which were seen on the low lying ground around the Quantock Hills. Muntjac counted remain very low, but their presence has been confirmed in several parts of the area.

Results of both the drone as well as ground-based counts in early 2024 revealed higher numbers of deer to be present in and around the Quantock Hills than recorded at any time during the last two centuries. In fact, prior to 1960, the red deer population was never reported to have exceeded 350 head. Numbers of red deer have not only risen significantly overall in the last five years, but that increase has been greatest among female deer. This has led to an even more female biased (unbalanced) population sex ratio and higher rate of annual increase than in the past.



Quantock Deer Management & Conservation Group (QDM&CG)



Deer, especially red deer, do not adhere to landownership boundaries. Hinds will commonly range over 250 to 500 hectares of land on a weekly if not daily basis, and stags tend to live in quite separate summer and winter ranges often located several miles apart. It is therefore important that landholders occupying sections of continuous deer range exchange information and co-operate to achieve sustainable management of the population. The QDM&CG was formed in 1991 to promote greater liaison on deer management matters between landholders, environmental organisations, the local hunt, deer stalkers and other interested parties concerned with the welfare and management of deer on the Quantocks.



Aims & Policies

- The Group is committed to ensuring the long-term survival of a healthy and well-distributed population of red deer in and around the Quantock Hills in balance with its environment and other land uses.
- The main red deer range and area of interest of QDM&CG now covers nearly 150 square km (see Map). The group aims to provide a forum for open discussion and overview throughout that area, and to promote a responsible and sensitive approach to the management of wild deer by experienced, trained personnel.
- The Group recognises that effective co-operation among all two hundred or so different landholdings within the whole management area is difficult to achieve, not least in view of local variation in land uses. The formation of localised sub-groups (under the umbrella of QDM&CG) is therefore encouraged to stimulate improved co-ordination of deer management efforts among neighbouring landholders where this is considered helpful. Such groups should liaise closely with QDM&CG to facilitate exchange of information between sub-groups and to avoid conflicts of interests; at least one representative from any sub-group should also attend meetings of QDM&CG.
- QDM&CG will continue to conduct an annual deer count throughout the region to monitor trends in numbers by species, and ratios of males to females and young across years; and will collate information on reported culls and other losses to allow assessment of the effectiveness of control measures taken.
- Decisions on what may be optimal population size towards which management should be geared requires regular reassessment based on the distribution of deer and observed impacts across the

management area. Based on findings over the past three decades, during those periods of years when red deer numbers at the spring count have been between 450-550, their impacts have raised only limited concerns. This level is widely agreed to represent a sustainable population size to be retained within the QDMCG area for the longer term, provided no more than two thirds of these are concentrated in the northern third of the Quantock Hills National Landscape.

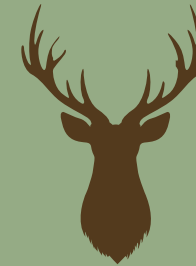
- In addition the Group has agreed that if consecutive annual counts should ever indicate that numbers are likely to have fallen to below about 300 head the QDM&CG will call on its members and others to introduce minimal or no-cull policies, until such a point that numbers and age/sex breakdown are considered to have recovered to a satisfactory level. Such a minimum figure is intended merely as a 'safety' net, so that action can be initiated in good time should the conservation of the red deer population ever become threatened.
- The presence of good numbers of mature red stags in the population is desirable to maintain genetic diversity, as well as for aesthetic reasons. A deer population with a sex ratio heavily skewed in favour of females is also harder to control due to the associated higher rate of increase. The QDM&CG will therefore aim to maintain a well balanced population with an adult sex ratio no greater than 2 : 1 (Hinds over 1 year old : Stags & Prickets).
- The annual off-take required in order to maintain healthy red and roe deer populations on the Quantocks also forms a sustainable resource that can help off-set part of the costs of deer damage, control and preventative measures. The group will explore how best to assist landholders with marketing venison, including guidance on adherence to best practice at all stages of deer management.

Law & Close Seasons

Anyone involved in deer control should ensure they are familiar with all of the detailed provisions regarding permitted weapons and ammunitions as laid down in the Deer Act (1991) and amendments via The Regulatory Reform (Deer) (England and Wales) Order 2007. In particular it should be noted that unless special exemptions apply, it is considered an offence if any person takes or intentionally kills any deer during the prescribed close season or at night.



In England the relevant Close Seasons are currently as follows:



MALES

RED & FALLOW & SIKA

1 May - 31 July

ROE BUCKS

1 Nov - 31 March



FEMALES

RED & FALLOW & SIKA

1 April - 31 Oct

ROE DOES

1 April - 31 Oct

There is no close season for Muntjac at present as they do not have a specific season when most young are born.

Note: close seasons and some other provisions of the Deer Act are currently being reviewed by DEFRA.

Getting involved

Part of the present exercise is to encourage co-operation and sharing of knowledge, and to make use of the extensive range of expertise which is available to assist with differing aspects of deer management.

The present membership of the Group is made up of individual landholders, as well as representatives of British Association for Shooting & Conservation, British Deer Society, Forestry England, Forestry Commission, Friends of the Quantocks, National Trust, Natural England and the Quantock Hills National Landscape Team. Anyone interested in becoming more closely involved with the QDM&CG, or formation of a local sub-group, or has suggestions or comments regarding the content of this leaflet please contact us at the address below.

Further Information & Contacts

**To contact the QDM&CG
please write to:**

The Chairman,
QDM&CG ,
c/o Quantock Hills NL office,
Fyne Court, Broomfield,
Somerset TA5 2EQ

**The Quantock Hills National
Landscapes Team can also
be contacted at the above**

Tel. 01823 451884

email quantockhills@somerset.gov.uk

**The Quantock Staghounds injured
live-deer casualty service can be
contacted on: Tel.** 01823 432269

Further information on deer legislation
and their management is also available at:
**Deer Legislation (England and
Wales Best Practice Guides)**
[www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/uploads/
guides/89.pdf](http://www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/uploads/guides/89.pdf)

**The British Deer Society,
Fordingbridge, Hampshire, SP6 1EF
Tel.** 01425 655434 www.bds.org.uk



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