



AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO...

RED DEER

This month we learn all about our largest land mammal, the red deer. Discover how this iconic symbol of Scotland likes to live...

SPECIES HISTORY, POPULATION AND DISTRIBUTION

The red deer is distributed throughout Europe, with a subspecies native to the UK. It is the largest of the UK deer species and of all wild UK land mammals. It is classed as a native species (present in the UK by natural means, as opposed to human introductions), having migrated to Britain from Europe some 11,000 years ago. During Mesolithic times, red deer provided an important source of food, clothing and tools for the

hunter-gatherer Mesolithic man. With the development of agriculture that came with Neolithic man, large swathes of forest were destroyed to make way for farming, and with them went the red deer's habitat. This resulted in the red deer population being significantly reduced and confined largely to the Scottish Highlands and south-west England. Throughout Norman times, red deer were protected in deer parks for royalty and nobility to hunt, and the cost of creating and maintaining a deer park

BELOW: Red deer can remain more solitary in woodland and will browse for food sources

meant they became a symbol of the aristocracy, as did the venison that was harvested from them. After the civil war in 1642 the parks gradually became less fashionable; their numbers declined as more profitable uses of estate land were favoured, and consequently the numbers of deer also declined as they became fair game for the masses. A combination of escapees from deer parks establishing new populations, natural spread, Victorian reintroductions, and an increase in woodland means red deer are now much more widely distributed and are expanding in range and number. Many of the Victorian reintroductions would have been 'improved' stock, i.e. cross-bred with larger related species, such as wapiti, and the result is that the majority of red deer in the UK today are not native in the truest sense – "Deer from native stocks are only confirmed in parts of Scotland and north-west England". (Lowe & Gardiner, 1974).

A study from 1995 estimates the UK population of red deer at around 360,000. High concentrations can be seen particularly in the Scottish Highlands, the major Scottish islands, and the south west of Scotland. There are also concentrations in the north west and south west of England, as well as in East Anglia. Several other more scattered populations are present throughout England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The red deer has a conservation status 'of the least concern'.

APPEARANCE, ANTLER FORMATION AND BEHAVIOUR

Red deer are the largest of all UK land mammals, with stags standing 107-137cm at the shoulder and weighing 90-190kg, and hinds (females) »



PICTURE: LAURIE CAMPBELL

« OPEN SEASONS FOR RED DEER

Sex of red deer	Open season in England, Wales and Northern Ireland	Open season in Scotland
Stags	1 August – 30 April	1 July – 20 October
Hinds	1 November – 31 March	21 October – 15 February

reaching a height of 107-122cm and weighing 63-120kg. (Highland deer can often be of smaller stature than lowland deer.) Their reddish-brown summer coat turns to a darker brown or grey during the winter months, and they sport a paler rump patch. The calves show a spotted coat for the first few months to aid camouflage. Only stags grow antlers, and they are the red deer's most distinguishing feature.

Growing to 31-34" in length with 27-34" of spread, red stag antlers are large and impressive. They develop more points, or tines, as they grow older, and these are sometimes used to categorize the trophies: a Royal stag has 12 tines; an Imperial stag has 14 tines; and a Monarch has 16 tines. Young red deer begin growing their antlers in the spring from the age of about 10 months, shedding them when testosterone levels fall in mid March or April; their first set will be short and unbranched. They will become longer, wider, and develop more tines with each successive year that they are shed and re-grown up until the age of about 10 years when they will begin to decrease in size. The antlers are covered in velvet while in the growing phase, and in July when they have stopped growing, this dries out and is rubbed off on trees and posts. The tines on red deer antlers have special names. Working upwards from the pedicle they are as follows: brow; bez; trez; sur-royal; and crown, which may have a number of tines at the top. Two tines on a crown are referred to as a fork; three or more are referred to as a palm or cup.

Like most other species, red deer can exist on a varied diet that is largely dependent on available food sources. On open ground they will graze grasses and dwarf shrubs such as heather, and in woodland they will browse for tree shoots and leaves.

Red deer are herding animals, but the size of herd may vary greatly depending on habitat, disturbance and food sources, and they sometimes remain solitary or in mother-calf groups when in woodland habitats. On open ground, much larger single-sex groups occur. Stag groups will tend to have a linear dominance (every member is recognised as either dominant or submissive relative to every other member, creating

linear distribution of rank), while the hinds often have a matriarchal system (herd led by one dominant female). They tend to prefer woodland cover close to open ground, and will adopt 'sanctuaries' where they can lay up undisturbed. Hind herds generally do not range too far, but stags will cover more ground, sometimes up to 40km over the course of the year. Daily movements between lying-up areas and feeding areas are observed in both sex groups. The single-sex groups will come together to mate for the rut.

THE RUT AND REPRODUCTION

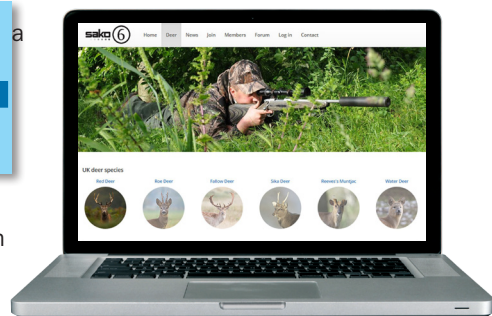
The red stag rut occurs around September to October; embryo development begins immediately, meaning pregnancy can be confirmed in culled hinds by November, with calving occurring from May to June. Dominant stags will break away from the herd during the rut and claim groups of hinds as they come into oestrus, but roaming stags will try to mate opportunistically if they can. As with other species of deer, the rut is accompanied by displays of dominance such as roaring and pawing, with fights to establish territories often ending in serious injury or even death. Rutting stags will often fail to eat, which can leave them in poor condition for winter.

Though sexually mature before their second year, stags tend not to mate until they are over five years old. Hinds are polyoestrous (come into season repeatedly if they fail to conceive) which

BELOW: Red deer in the rut



PICTURE: PAUL HOBSON



sako 6 CLUB

Top rifle brand Sako has teamed up with Rifle Shooter to create the Sako 6 Club – an exclusive club for stalkers who have managed to shoot one of each of the six UK wild deer species.

The club aims to promote the wide diversity and proper management of deer in the UK, and set a stalking benchmark that stalkers can strive to achieve. The website provides a hub where stalkers can share tips and achievements with each other via the forum.

Upon completion of the challenge, you will become a member of the Sako 6 Club and receive Sako 6 gifts and an exclusive memento to recognise the achievement.

To register, visit www.sako6.co.uk

can result in late births. The pregnant female will temporarily leave their herd to calve, returning when the calf is strong enough to run with the herd. Hinds over one year old will usually give birth to a single calf between May and June; puberty can be delayed in hill hinds and infant mortality can be much higher due to the harsher environment and winter temperatures, and hill hinds may only give birth every two to three years. 