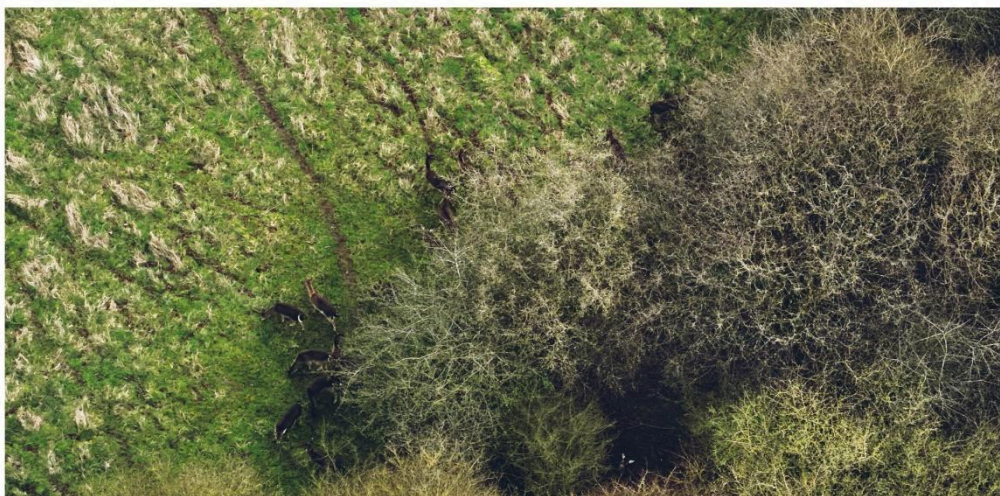




THE NORTH EAST COTSWOLD
FARMER CLUSTER CIC

Deer Management and Venison Project

On behalf of the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster



Summary

Deer are a cherished part of our natural heritage, yet, there has been a growing recognition that certain deer species in certain areas can have a harmful impact on agriculture, forestry, natural regeneration and at certain densities their own health. The North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster co-ordinated a landscape drone survey to further understand the distribution and density of deer across the landscape and completed a survey of deer managers to highlight both the opportunities and barriers to deer management and the onward supply of venison.

The findings will help initiate a broader discussion about landscape management, while leaving landowners to make their own individual management decisions. The recommendations are a series of proposals to ensure deer cull targets are met and the venison supply chain is more accommodating, and potentially localised and profitable.

Introduction

Deer are a cherished part of our natural heritage, and their presence contributes to the beauty and diversity of our landscapes. Recent estimates by the [British Trust for Ornithology mammal monitoring survey](#) has shown across the UK an increase in fallow, roe and muntjac by 255%, 124% and 254% respectively since 1995. Anecdotally these increases have been witnessed across the Cluster area.

Higher than sustainable densities of wild deer can cause significant agricultural damage, habitat degradation, as well as increasing the risk of traffic accidents, and disease transmission within and outside of the species. At these levels further consideration needs to be given for landowners creating new woodland and hedgerows, an objective for many within the farmer cluster.

Conversely, venison is an undervalued protein source with a disparate and under-developed supply chain. Venison is affordable and nutritious but remains broadly an underappreciated resource within the public's shopping habits. With an improved supply chain and additional marketing, venison should be able to realise its true value.

Several members of the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster proposed an initiative to better understand, manage and get value from the wild deer population. This was developed into a two-phase project. The first phase would be a landscape scale drone survey to gain a greater individual and landscape understanding of the deer populations. The second phase would be to review the current supply chain, through interviews with deer managers in and around the cluster.

The following report has been funded by a Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) grant and a landowner contribution from those within the drone survey.

Phase 1 - Drone Survey

The drone survey was undertaken across 186.7km² of the North East Cotswolds, taking in 31 separate landholdings. The survey took four days to complete, between 18th – 21st March 2024, utilising three drone operators from [BH Wildlife Consultancy](#).



The findings from the survey along with individual reports were circulated to the landholdings within the drone survey. Accounting for sensitivities, only the key landscape findings are detailed in this report.

Findings

In relation to deer densities, the North East Cotswolds landscape has a high but manageable population of deer at a density of 11.9/km². It is the decision of each landholding to determine what density is too high for their individual requirements, but looking at similar habitats across southern England, the survey findings are slightly below the average of many other landscapes.

Across the 18,670ha landscape there were 960 roe deer, 956 muntjac and 842 fallow deer counted by the drone operators, equalling a total of 2,758 deer. There is a high degree of confidence that deer were not double counted, therefore the data presented is the minimum present at the time across the project area.

The equal findings of fallow, roe and muntjac reveals a higher density of roe and lower density of fallow than similar landscapes elsewhere in southern England. The 64:36 female:male ratio of fallow is representative of the wider population and highlights either a difference in habit between females and males meaning males are more easily managed or a preference to shooting males.



Figure 3 - An example of the survey results

Fallow deer were found throughout the site in a mixture of fields and crops, hedgerows, and woodland blocks. Their highest densities generally correlated with the larger woodland blocks which just happened to be in the south of the survey area. A number of large herds were detected (including herds totalling numbers of 69, 55, 51 and 49), some of these were outside the project area but could be detected at distance. The transient nature of fallow means that the location they were recorded on reflects where they were at the time of the survey and another survey at a different time may show different results.

Roe deer were detected throughout the entire project area and on almost every flight point of the survey. They were found in a mixture of woodland, fields and on the edges of thicker woodland blocks. The density was fairly consistent across the whole landscape with higher densities noted in the south east of the study site.

Muntjac were also found throughout the survey area, with the strongest correlation with woodland cover.

Further considerations from the deer survey

It is important to note that the deer density during March will generally be at its lowest point of the year following potential winter hardship and the female cull, and that there are known limitations to the muntjac count due to their habit of hiding in thick cover (possibly up to 30% undercount). As such the population will be higher than what the drone survey recorded and will increase even further over the spring into summer as the female population give birth. The high recruitment rate is a reminder that by undermanaging, even by one season, as was seen in places during the Covid pandemic, will leave the densities significantly higher and possible outward migration increased.

The landholdings that signed up to the drone survey are those that are more likely to be aware of the challenges caused by high deer densities and are therefore already undertaking management, this could lead to the density being higher away from the survey area.

Muntjac are also known to inhabit areas of higher disturbance, for example on the edges of towns and villages, however these areas had to be excluded from the survey for privacy reasons, meaning the species' density could be even higher.

The highest densities of deer were located around areas of greatest habitat availability. With the government and the farmer cluster's own regional targets of planting more trees and hedgerows, the deer's range of optimal habitat is only going to grow. Hence the importance of landscape scale surveys and a functioning venison supply chain.

Phase 2 - Deer Manager Survey

Introduction

This part of the project sought views from deer managers, further processors, gamedealers and end users across the project area. A total of 30 individuals and businesses were surveyed, with the focus being on the barriers to managing deer and the opportunities of creating a local market. Interviews took place in person or over the phone between January and June 2024.

Deer management arrangements

The survey included a broad mix of stalking arrangements from paid-for leases, syndicate, guided stalking, professional deer management operations with full or part time employment and recreational deer managers.

Those managing the land for deer all had an acute awareness of the issues caused by high densities, with many stating they were on top of those issues or in the process of getting on top of them. Few were seeing physical damage caused by high densities.

With larger landholdings more likely to have a deer manager under full or part time employment, there was more certainty that deer management was under control. For smaller land holdings, it was felt that deer were continually passing through the available habitat and it was an uphill struggle to get on top of them.

Training

There is a wide understanding of the training options for deer management, and many landowners are requiring a minimum of a Deer Stalking Certificate (DSC) Level 1.

All deer managers selling venison had Trained Hunter certification, and those further processing venison had the appropriate Food Hygiene certification.

Throughout conversations there was an interest for further training for those who did not hold all the certificates. There was also a large appetite for growing the overall standards of deer managers across the landscape, with it being cited as one of the main blockers for onward sale.

Individual species findings:

Fallow

Many landholdings held a shoot on sight policy for fallow, no matter of sex throughout the winter. There was no real appetite for fallow buck trophies, with the priority being to get the numbers down and move any larger herds away from the landholding. The transient nature of fallow meant culling was different to that of roe and muntjac, and the focus was about targeting them enough to ensure they moved on.

Muntjac

Like fallow, the majority of estates had a shoot on sight policy for muntjac, shooting year-round with no focus on sex or trophies. The muntjac were described as “endless”, and with certain landholdings as “vacuums” for the species.

Roe

Of all the species, the roe appeared to hold a special place for many deer managers and landowners. More so than with muntjac and fallow, certain deer managers stated they would hold back shooting certain bucks for years to come. This will be done either for themselves, the landowner or for paying guests. The interest here could be why the roe numbers are higher than what would be described as average across similar landscapes across southern England.

Ash Dieback

Many landholdings were in the process of clearing out diseased ash, as part of their woodland management plan. This could be changing density dynamics at a landscape scale with the thinning out of woods and restocking tending to favour muntjac with more of their preferred undergrowth. Likewise, there was a thought that the thinned woods are not favoured by fallow.

Environmental Land Management schemes

Unsurprisingly there is a greater uptake of deer control and management option under Higher Countryside Stewardship (CS) by larger landholdings which tend to hold more woodland. Many in the scheme have taken up the CS grants for high seats, and there is interest for more take up.

Those who are not within the scheme have been told about it and will be notified when the options open again.

A number of landholdings have recently planted up new areas of woodland, there was a wide understanding that deer (and squirrels) need to be managed more closely if the trees are to be successful.

Concerns were raised that in some cases the CS payments may go into wider estate overheads and not specifically the deer manager, who was the one being tasked to increase their record keeping and in some instances culls.

Current facilities

The larger landholdings were more likely to have chiller facilities, although there were some smaller 'coke fridge' chillers being utilised by recreational deer managers. Many chillers were used for both small and large game, with some being particularly for deer. An adjoining butchery unit was a rarer occurrence.

There were some chillers that would welcome a community led concepts, with indication from:

- Ditchley – willing to take additional carcasses at a cost of £1/day
- Dunthorp – willing to take additional carcasses from trained individuals
- Bruen – open to discussion

Onward sale of venison

Much like the mix of stalking arrangements on landholdings, the onward sale or use of the venison is hugely varied. There were landholdings dealing with the deer themselves for both public and private use, there were the larger landholdings selling on to a range of gamedealers, with some gamedealers collecting and others only accepting deliveries.

Some landholdings kept the profits of the venison sales or the venison 'in-house', others allowed the deer manager to keep the profit.

The onward sale of venison was complicated by those landholdings who also shot small game, with gamedealers picking up the game and deer at the same time under one agreement. It was also complicated for those deer managers who stalked over two or more landholdings but only used one chiller.

Gamedealers

Gamedealers being used by the landholdings/deer managers included:

- Roger's Natural Foods, Lechlade
- Vicar's Game, Newbury
- Wild Venison and Game, Islip

Gamedealers mentioned the supply and demand constraints in venison, with the biggest demand for venison in the lead up to Christmas but the biggest supply coming in the months after Christmas (February and March). One gamedealer said the price changes by 30% between the two dates.

When speaking to gamedealers they offered a range of prices from around £1/kg for muntjac, to £1.80-2.50/kg for fallow and roe.

Some deer managers cited the lower price being paid for venison by game dealers, others were happy just to have a route to market, but all agreed the wild venison food chain was weak and liable to break, as has been seen in the past.

Further Processing

There are some landholdings/deer managers that are further processing the venison to sell on to either retail or the public:

- Ditchley venison – word of mouth
- Cornbury venison - <https://www.cornburypark.co.uk/venison-sales/>
- Little Rollright venison – word of mouth
- Chad Wild venison - <https://www.chadwildvenison.co.uk/>
- Bruen Farm venison - <https://bruernfarms.co.uk/>

Those who were further processing described strong demand for venison in their various outlets, but further expansion was held back because of:

- Time and costs
- Upgrading to the next level and commitment to more than one day a week
- It was not their primary job

Cutting facilities

There were a couple of businesses offering specialised cutting and packing facilities

- Chadlington Quality Foods, Chadlington
- Wild Venison and Game, Islip

Muntjac

Nearly all those who responded to the survey noted that the onward chain for muntjac, be it to a gamedealer or through further processing, was an uphill battle. Gamedealers/further processors did not particularly want to take them, with their lack of profitability and difficulty in skinning noted. Where they were taken there was an increasing preference to head/neck shot, to avoid meat damage.

Deer managers were still managing the muntjac but the low price being offered by gamedealer was certainly seen as a stumbling block for some. One response said they were “fed up of being given crap money for good meat”. As such some deer managers keep the muntjac for themselves, butchering and processing the meat for family and friends.

With the majority of responses, the fallow deer were identified as the number one problem deer, muntjac were thought of as a secondary issue.

Positively, there were a couple of processors who were trying to create an individual market for muntjac through dedicated marketing and muntjac boxes.

Barriers for deer managers hitting cull targets

Issues mentioned that restricted deer management included;

- time restrictions and lack of onward market, from recreational deer managers particularly
- lack of holding and processing facilities, from recreational deer managers particularly

- distance to gamedealer
- game shooting interests meaning deer are not prioritised throughout the majority of the female season
- increased public footfall on and off rights of ways
- neighbouring landowners who do not manage deer
- lack of financial benefit for culling muntjac
- poor weather conditions
- paid-for-stalking on neighbouring land keeping the population artificially high
- flat ground and road networks proving deer management difficult
- difficulty of receiving a night licence from Defra

Barriers to the production of a local market by deer managers

Topics mentioned:

- Happy with the status quo, no interest in further processing
- Lack of profit from sales
- Venison being secondary to other jobs
- Lack of time and resources
- Lack of coordinated marketing efforts of venison
- Lack of a local gamedealer
- Below par standards of deer managers

Opportunities for the creation of a local market

- Better price paid per kilo
- Less distance travelled
- Known provenance and high quality of end product
- Opportunity to sell some and keep some while being processed

Recommendations

Potential proposals to hitting cull targets

Collect landscape cull data

Coordinate annual records, to be collated and publicised between landholdings, so there is an open and frank discussion about deer management. The key will be connectivity between landholdings and a willingness to collaborate. The reporting can be made through cull/km² so the landscape can change size without impeding the data.

Target the female population

The 64:36 breakdown between female and male fallow is not as bad as seen in other landscapes but it does allow for an increased annual recruitment level that is higher than preferable. If landholdings are wanting to reduce fallow populations at a landscape scale they should be focusing on the female population.

Promote an early female cull

Coordination and promotion of culling the female population of fallow and roe early in their season can reward deer managers with as much as a 30% price uplift at the game dealers.

Increase coordination and communication between landholdings

Coordination and communication at a landscape scale can help tackle larger fallow herds and when deer are using passages or safe areas to hide out in the day before entering a different landholding at night.

Promote Countryside Stewardship schemes

The Woodland Management and Deer Management and Control Countryside Stewardship schemes and capital grants for high seats should be promoted across the landscape when they reopen for applications.

Organise cull days with a particular focus

Cull days, particularly those across multiple landholdings, can have a big impact. Any cull day should begin with a known outlet for all the carcasses, be organised and have specific boundaries and targets. They are known to be beneficial particularly during the female cull or when targeting muntjac.

Open up easier routes to market

It was noted that recreational deer managers in particular would be more likely to shoot one deer in an outing and then pass up further opportunities because of a lack of facilities, time and onward market. If there were open and accessible routes to market then this barrier is easily overcome.

Creating an incentive for deer managers to hit their targets

One of the criticisms of the Deer Management and Control option in Countryside Stewardship is that the money goes to the landowner and not to the deer manager, who is the one having to work through more administration and potentially increase their cull.

Create a centralised game dealer/further processor/collection point

The nearest game dealer to the centre of the landscape survey is around 40 minutes away. Dropping off carcasses will mean nearly a two-hour trip and will only become economically viable when carrying several carcasses. A centralised game dealer, further processor or collection point could unlock many of the main barriers to management, particularly for those recreational deer managers shooting fewer deer, where travelling to the game dealer is uneconomical.

This wouldn't increase the profit on the carcass sale, but would ensure an easy route to market, which can often be the barrier to effective management, and bolster the local market.

Potential proposals to improve the local market

Increased communication

An open dialogue between deer managers, further processors and game dealers could have its benefits. While competition might leave certain sections not willing to open up, tackling the deer population at a landscape scale should require landscape solutions. Increasing communication could mean that when one landholding has an excess of carcasses, they know who to reach out to, and when a further processor or game dealer is in need of more carcasses they can respond.

Increased training for both deer managers and food hygiene

Helping upskill and sustain the quality of deer managers and further processors will ultimately increase the value of the end product, it will raise standards across the landscape and increase the potential growth in a local market.

Providing a grant for upgrading processing facilities

A stumbling block for those further processing venison to sell on to the market was the cost of starting a business and then moving to the next level. It is essential that any venison sales are done to a high standard and grants offering new machinery or resources to further processors would benefit the local market.

Utilisation of the cutting facilities

There is an opportunity, time-dependent, for deer managers to utilise a local cutting facility and then sell the venison on at a greater margin at farmers market or by word of mouth. This takes the pressure of further processing off of the deer manager but could help turn a profit, albeit reduced from undertaking the whole process. This method would follow the same technique of many smallholders who send their livestock away for slaughter and cutting and then are provided with boxes which they then sell on or use themselves.

To illustrate the potential gains, a 15kg roe would cost £35-40 to be cut up into primal joints (the cost would be more if you were wanting sausages and burgers). However, once broken down and packaged, that roe could be sold on for £70+, with the loins, rolled haunches, shoulders on the bone, shanks and mince from the offcuts.

Focused effort on a local market

Dedicated funds and project management to promote venison in the local area, pubs, restaurants, hotels would undoubtedly assist the local market.

The recommendations to improve the venison supply chain are integrated into the '[RED MEAT SUPPLY CHAIN RESILIENCE REPORT](#)' completed in November 2024, which expands on many of the common challenges and opportunities in the supply chain outlined by this venison report.