



Wyre Forest Study Group

FALLOW BUCK MORTALITY WYRE FOREST 1999-2000

Chris Bradley

Annual mortality amongst male Fallow Deer is extremely high in most feral populations. This is due principally to the direct or indirect influence of Man. If left unimpeded by human intervention then the natural life span of a Fallow buck, largely determined by tooth wear, would be in the region of 12-15 years. In Wyre this rarely happens and most bucks will perish within their first 3 years of life. The main causes of mortality are the annual cull, road traffic accidents, poaching / illegal shooting, fence entanglements and legal shooting, in addition to the official cull.

The antlers of a Fallow buck are unique to that particular individual, even the left and right antler of the same buck are by no means identical. This makes it possible to identify individual bucks by virtue of their diverse antler formation. The first set of antlers grown by a Fallow buck at 12/14 months of age are most usually no more than simple spikes, varying in length from 1 to 10 inches, at this stage the buck is known as a pricket. Hereafter, in successive years, a male Fallow Deer is known as a sorel, sore, bare buck, buck, and upon reaching maturity at 6 years plus, a great buck. They are in their prime between 6 and 9 years. Strictly speaking this terminology refers to a stage of antler development rather than the age of the buck itself, thus it is possible for a prodigious 2 year old to produce antler growth normally associated with a older beast, ie, a sore or even bare buck.

In Wyre Forest 159 bucks were identified during the period July 1999 to April 2000, including animals who spent all or part of this time in outlying woods outside of the main forest block. These are classified according to antler development in Table 1 along with the corresponding figures for 2000 to 2001.

Table 1 Summer Buck Population Wyre Forest

	1999 to 2000	2000 to 2001
Pricket	63	60
Sorel	31	31
Sore	27	20
Bare buck	8	7
Buck	10	9
Great buck	20	15
Total	<u>159</u>	<u>142</u>

These figures illustrate high mortality rates especially in the younger age groups. In 1999/2000 63 prickets were seen, yet in the following year only 31 sorels were identified, a mortality rate near 51%. Similarly in 1999, 31 different sorels were identified, yet the following year only 20 of these had in fact survived to sore stage, a mortality rate

of 35.5%. In 1999, 27 sores were seen but 12 months later only 7 of these had survived to become bare bucks, a mortality rate of 74%. In October 2000 there should have been 30 great bucks but only 15 have been observed, a mortality rate over the previous year of 50%. These figures represent an overall mortality rate of 48.5%. At present more than half of the summer herd is lost each year.

Of 142 male deer identified in year 2000/2001, as shown in table 1, no less than 111 were under 4 years of age, ie, 78%. Of the 31 remaining bucks of 4 years and above, just 15, 10.5%, were mature animals. Thus some 90% had died before reaching full maturity. In 2000/2001 the annual input of 60 prickets into the buck herd was not sufficient to compensate for the annual mortality rate from all causes, resulting in a significant reduction in buck numbers.

Many of the bucks killed, especially indiscriminately in road accidents and by poachers, are necessarily prime beasts of enviable quality which should not be taken out during the annual cull; this, ideally, will concentrate on injured, aged and poor quality bucks. Table 2 shows known buck mortality from causes other than the annual cull.

Table 2 Known Buck Mortality Wyre Forest April 1999 to March 2000

Cull	14	36 bucks missing, unaccounted for.
Road accidents	18	
Fence casualties	3	
Poaching	1*	
Other	5	
Total	<u>41</u>	

Many bucks of course go missing each year and the cause of their demise remains unknown. Poaching incidents, in particular, are likely to be grossly underestimated in the* figures due to the lack of firm evidence relating to such deaths.

Buck numbers are particularly low on the western side of the Wyre Forest towards Cleobury Mortimer. During the autumn rutting season in year 2000 the author did not identify a single Fallow buck other than prickets and sorels. Bucks are always vulnerable targets, both because of the trophy value of their antlers and the high carcass weight, re venison, when compared to does. This, coupled with the rigours of the rutting season and their well-known habit of wandering outside of the Forest to feed on adjacent agricultural land, only increases their chances of meeting a premature end.