

Fallow Bucks Battle for Dominance

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In early October 2006 a spectacular fight between two black bucks on the bottom of Wimperhill was witnessed by the Forestry Commission's Wildlife Ranger Phil Rudlin, and Forest Craftsman Stewart Carter who obtained some superb photographs as seen in this Review. Although not rare during the autumn rutting season, one is indeed privileged to observe such events, one of nature's true spectacles. It is largely a case of being in the right place at the right time. The familiar clash of antlers is often heard reverberating through the autumn woods, the size of the buck readily identifiable even from a distance by the experienced ear, due to the nature of the sound. Generally however, the encounter will last for only a few minutes, and all is over by the time one arrives on the scene, also of course one must take great care not to disturb other deer, particularly does, in the vicinity. Fortunately this fight was of monumental proportions and lasted for some 40 minutes or so. All too frequently a fight is the direct result of human interference, one master buck being disturbed from his rutting stand by Man or his dogs, and into the path or territory of a rival animal. Indeed only a few years ago; this is exactly what happened in the New Forest, when the unwelcome attentions of a well known photographer was observed by a friend of mine, the encounter which resulted in the premature death of one master buck with a broken neck! This was also a possible scenario in this fight on Wimperhill. The one protagonist a 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ year old beast, called Droopy Treys, was in fact the master buck on New Parks in 2006, while his opponent, the Kingswood Coppice Buck, a 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ year old animal with malformed antlers, had been the master buck on New Parks in 2005, but in 2006 held the main rutting stand on Wimperhill. Droopy Treys would not have vacated his rutting stand on New Parks without good reason.

Antlers are not designed principally as weapons to injure opponents, fights are largely shoving matches where body weight and stamina are the vital factors in determining the outcome. In fact in the many fights that I have observed over the years, rarely has the buck with the best head been the victor. There is much ritualised behaviour and confrontation is usually avoided if possible. However, by their very nature antlers can still inflict serious injury, and many bucks sustain damage to a leg or an eye in rutting fights. In the excellent photographs by Stewart one can just discern a bare patch on the back of the Kingswood Coppice Buck, presumably inflicted by his opponent. Droopy Treys eventually won this fiercely contested encounter, and having chased off his adversary, soon returned to rut on New Parks. On 11th October the Kingswood Coppice Buck was observed lying down in a meadow at Lower Kingswood Farm, seemingly licking his wounds. Nothing more was seen of this buck until he was found at Manor Holding, part of his winter range, a few days later close to death. It appears his wounds had become badly infected and in conjunction with the demands of the rutting season had resulted in his demise. Droopy Treys was seen at regular intervals up until October 24th, when obviously exhausted and emaciated, he simply disappeared without trace. He did not return again to his winter quarters at Longdon Wood, and in all probability succumbed soon after. One can thus appreciate why mortality is so high amongst mature bucks, and with cowboy stalkers accounting for many prime bucks each year, the future in Wyre Forest is fairly bleak. Indeed by October 2007, only one fully mature fallow buck, Narrow Spread, remained to court the does.



Fallow Deer bucks fighting October 2006

Stewart Carter