

## The Fallow Deer of Wyre Forest

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The fallow deer is native to Asia Minor but was probably introduced to Britain by the Normans in the 11th century. The present herd of Fallow in Wyre Forest owe their existence in a feral state, to a mass escape from Mawley Hall Park near Cleobury Mortimer in circa 1880. Numbers increased steadily during the 20th century, despite much poaching during the war years when fresh meat was in short supply. Forestry plantations provided ideal cover, and by the 1960's the Forestry Commission had employed a Wildlife Ranger to keep their numbers in check by selective culling.

The population reached a peak in the 1980's, with a summer herd in the region of 700 to 800 head. This was considered far too many by most landowners, mainly due to their preference for oak coppice and other natural regeneration, but also for agricultural crops. Since then regular culling, under the auspices of the Wyre Forest Deer Management Society, has seen the population continue to fall. The winter herd, in March 2006, numbered some 300 head.

The busy roads, which dissect the Forest, also account for 40 or 50 deer each year, and others are badly

injured. Some deer are also trapped in stock fencing and suffer a horrible death, while bucks regularly get their antlers entangled in electric fences. Poaching and illegal night shooting has also been a major problem in recent years.

Fallow deer come in a wide variety of colours, ranging from white (not albinos) through to black, although the majority are common coloured. These are chestnut with prominent spots along their flanks during the summer months, but much darker when their winter coat grows through in November. There are also a few very pretty menil deer, heavily spotted both in winter and summer.

The male of the species is known as a buck, and the female a doe. The mating season or rut occurs in October, and usually single fawns are born in the following June or July. Only the male deer grows antlers, and these bony structures are deciduous, being shed each year in the spring (you may be lucky enough to find one) and a larger more elaborate set grown in velvet each summer. A specific vocabulary has arisen, in use for many centuries, to describe the antler development of



Fallow Deer bucks fighting October 2006

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Fallow bucks. Thus a yearling with simple spike antlers is known as a Pricket, and thereafter in each successive year as a Sorel, Sore, Bare Buck, Buck, and Great Buck. With old age the antlers start to deteriorate both in size and form, known as "Going Back", usually from 10 to 12 years of age. If unmolested by Man, they can live for up to 15 years, but in Wyre Forest very few male deer ever reach maturity, most perishing in their first two years.

Apart from Fallow, three other deer species have been recorded in Wyre Forest. Since 1975 several different Roe bucks have been seen, but only one doe, and a breeding population has therefore never been established. The Reeves Muntjac, a diminutive alien native to China, has been much more successful, and as Fallow numbers have fallen, they have bred with great abandon, and are now a common sight in many parts of

the Forest. Due to their small size and habits they are not easy to control by traditional stalking methods.

In October 2005, a young Japanese Sika stag appeared in the middle of the Forest on one of the main Fallow rutting stands, although it was not able to interbreed with Fallow. It is believed to have escaped from a local wildlife park and it was shot a few weeks later on Wimperhill by a Forestry Commission Ranger.

Deer are shy and secretive creatures, nervous by nature, and with the absence of any natural predators, such as wolf, lynx or brown bear, their main enemy is of course Man, and in particular his dogs running loose. In recent years, due to widespread disturbance by the general public, deer in Wyre Forest have become increasingly nocturnal, and now favour the quieter private parts.



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