

FALLOW TRAVELLERS

HOLLY MARRIOTT WEBB asks whether England really has a deer problem.

Some would say my village has a deer problem. Like almost everywhere in the South, pint-sized muntjac have carved its back gardens and tastiest rose bushes into buck and doe territories, layering their own animal map of private property and rights-of-way over our human one, a map that rules the village lanes when darkness descends. That doesn't really bother this place, where the passion for gardening that can drive ordinary middle-class people into a homicidal war against nature is happily less prevalent than in some similar villages. People do have a lot of opinions about the massive herd of fallow deer, though.

This herd doesn't actually live in the village, but on the other side of a six-lane motorway. So until they decide to brave a motorway bridge, they're not getting any closer, and they seem to lack the taste for invasion that originally brought their kind to this spot.

A thousand years ago, Norman knights brought their pretty spotted fallow deer over to England alongside their legal systems and their aristocratic hunting traditions, and began fencing off woodland areas as deer parks.¹ Over the years, wars, protests, maintenance costs and the impressively vertiginous cervine jump took their collective toll on these enclosures, and the deer escaped to become established as thriving wild populations in the countryside.

Back in the present day, a family farm serves as the bewildered but kindly host of this new kind of deer park. Around 500 fallow deer have chosen to live here, in too magnificent and beautiful a throng for the farmers to countenance their violent removal. They roam those green fields like herds of wildebeest crossing the African savannah, like a pre-colonial bison migration, and no-one can quite decide if they are spectacular, worrying, or a bit of both.

Two Million Deer?

Some would say that the whole of England has a deer problem. (Scotland is a whole other kettle of wriggling historical and regulatory eels, for a future article). A wide array of interests seem to agree: there are too many deer, this is causing all sorts of problems, and something needs to be done about it. Various estimates of out-of-control deer populations circulate the journalistic ecosystem. In the 2010s, writers tended to go with one and a half million, while the 2020s have seen most plump for two million.² But where do these figures come from? And why is it a problem if there are, indeed, two million deer in England?

Disappointingly, it turns out that there isn't an animal accountancy wing of DEFRA or the Environment Agency that goes around England patiently making a census of deer each year. The figures usually featured in news articles

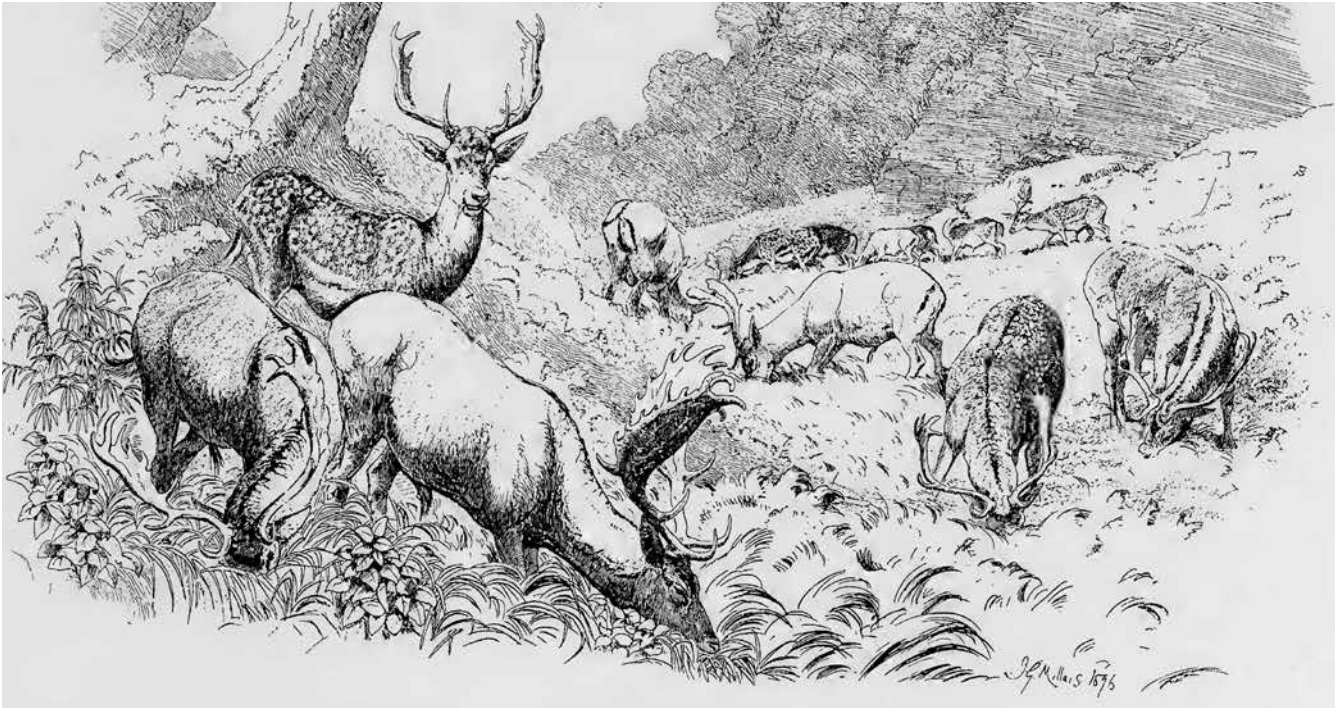


Muntjacs, as drawn by Gustav Mützel, c1869

about deer are estimates, and wild ones at that. They seem to originate from a four-page advisory 'POSTnote' issued in 2009 by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology to brief decision-makers on the state of scientific research.³ This claimed that there were over 350,000 red deer, over 800,000 roe deer, 150,000–200,000 fallow deer, over 150,000 muntjac, around 35,000 sika and round 10,000 Chinese water deer skipping about the UK in 2009. Adding those numbers gives a total of around 1.5 million. The report also suggests that all these populations were growing at between 0.3 and 8.2 percent per year, which probably explains why the total deer population figure given by journalists crept up to two million by about 2019.

These estimates are based on very little evidence, and a whole lot of supposition. The source the POSTnote gives for the population figures just reads 'Deer Initiative, personal communication'. Back in 2019, as a budding academic snooper trying to trace the origins of the 'two million deer' population estimate, I got in touch with the Deer Initiative – a partnership between state and private land management organisations set up to "ensure the delivery of a sustainable, well-managed wild deer population in England and Wales" – to ask where the figure came from.⁴ It appeared on their website, though with the disclaimer that 'accurate assessment of deer numbers is very difficult'.⁵ In response, they reminded me it was 'only an estimate' and promptly referred me back to the POSTnote. When I pointed out that the estimates in the POSTnote had come from them, and asked about the evidence on which they were based, answer came there none.⁶

The Deer Initiative was dissolved in 2021, so it's unlikely the smoking email will surface any time soon. It seems, however, that their estimates were essentially guesses. (This excludes the red deer figure, which seems to have been based on actual counts in Scotland, though still with wide confidence limits).⁷ The authors of the POSTnote did emphasise that the population and growth figures they gave were both 'approximate and contentious'. However, it might have been



better not to provide any figures at all, rather than to give ones without firm scientific foundation. This is the approach followed by the British Deer Society (BDS), which mentions no overall population figures on its website. Instead, it conducts ‘Deer Distribution Surveys’, using its members to report deer sightings which enable it to keep track of the range and distribution of the different species.⁸

Populations and Ranges

The population growth rates given in the POSTnote initially appear more solid than the population estimates, since these come from a published, peer-reviewed scientific paper written by population ecologist Alastair Ward.⁹ However, the POSTnote completely misrepresents the conclusions of the paper. It claims that the rates of increase given in the article for each deer species are ‘annual population growth rates’, when they are in fact rates of range expansion (based on BDS data). Now, rates of population growth and range expansion may well be correlated, but they are unlikely to be identical. There are other reasons why the range of a particular deer species might expand: escapes from deer parks and species reintroductions are two such reasons suggested by Ward.

Species-specific reasons for range expansion do not always correlate closely with population increase. Muntjac, for example, are solitary and territorial – each deer needs a good amount of space, which encourages range expansion after every successful breeding. This might be part of the explanation for their very high 8.2 percent annual rate of range increase between 1972 and 2002. If this figure is misinterpreted as an annual increase in population, it gives a totally different picture of what was happening with the muntjac population in these years. Fallow deer, meanwhile, are much happier bunching into large herds, as seen in my village. They are also capable of remaining healthy and relatively parasite-free in high densities, which is part of what made them such a good deer park species. The low rate of range expansion for fallow

given by the Ward paper – 1.8 percent – might thus mask a far higher rate of population growth for these deer.

Inaccuracies in the parliamentary POSTnote advising decision-makers about wild deer matter not just because they are bad science, which is always irksome, but because they’ve contributed to an atmosphere where flourishing deer populations are always and everywhere seen as a problem requiring remedial action, rather than as something to be celebrated. Two million deer sounds like a lot – there’s a magic to millions, and large numbers scramble our senses. A pandemic-era Guardian headline is typical of this worried attitude: ‘Wild deer set to wreak havoc in UK woodlands as venison demand plunges’, it reads, as if a temporary lull in shooting for the restaurant trade was going to result in Armageddon.¹⁰ The second paragraph mentions that all-important “two-million-strong wild herd” to bolster this narrative. Even if growing deer populations do present some land management and conservation challenges, this doesn’t make them an out-of-control horde. Good policy is rarely made from a place of fear.

Deer, Roads, Snarge

Despite their healthy numbers, most people don’t often encounter deer. They tend to avoid human settlements in daytime, especially big cities, and their particular aversion to dogs keeps them far away from a good proportion of walkers, even in the countryside. Depressingly, perhaps the most frequent contact zone between deer and people in England today is the road network. Deer warning triangles line country lanes, and everyone has a story about the terrifying time they hit, or nearly hit, one.

Mine was when I was first learning to drive.¹¹ It was an early, misty winter morning and I was 17 years old, hands ten-til-two death-gripping the wheel, the responsibility of ferrying my little sister safely to school on time weighing heavily on my mind. Leaving one of the trickier villages and its narrow lanes

full of parked cars and daringly exposed wing-mirrors behind, I was accelerating up the hill to easier terrain when a deer dashed across the road in front of me. It was a safe distance ahead – maybe a hundred metres – so I carried on driving. My dad, already somewhat exasperated, let out a strangled bellow before managing to articulate that I should *'Slow down now, there's always more than one!*'. Sure enough, as I stabbed on the brakes, another deer followed the first, clearing the road in three graceful bounds. Heart racing, I crawled the rest of the way to top of the hill in second gear, desperately, painfully relieved that I hadn't hit that deer.

According to the ecologist Jochen Langbein, there are somewhere between 42,000 and 74,000 deer-vehicle collisions every year in the UK.¹² At the upper bounds, that's 197 a day, or one every seven or so minutes. That's a lot of deer killed or injured each year, and a fair few lightly traumatised 17-year-olds. Often this is then linked back to 'excess' deer populations, the suggestion being that fewer deer would mean fewer accidents. This is rather brutal way of reasoning about an animal welfare issue. Essentially, the proposal is to kill more of them in a nice way, with a rifle, so fewer of them die in a nasty way, off the bonnet of a Range Rover. While some might be happy with this moral reckoning, I think we might try for something a little better.¹³

There's another way to think about the problem of deer being killed on the roads, and it's pointed to in an essay by the historian Gary Kroll called, simply, 'Snarge'.¹⁴ Snarge is an American word coined by pilots to describe what comes out of plane engines after a bird strike. More generally, snarge is the mess of blood, bone, fur and feather created by the crunching of animal bodies through the transport networks of globalised capitalism.

The whole system is arranged in such a way as to trade off a certain number of human and animal lives for speed. We call them accidents, but they're an inevitable outcome of our need to be in different places fast. As Kroll puts it, roadkill

'rarely registers on our moral radar, probably because the agent of killing – mass acceleration – is structurally baked into almost everything modern humans do. This is a peculiar malady of the Anthropocene; by participating in an accelerated mode of life, we have involuntarily become thoughtless killers of wildlife.'

The acceptance of deer deaths on the road as just part of life is what makes people propose solutions like reducing their overall population, rather than think of ways to change the transport system to make it less dangerous to wildlife of all stripes. There are small adjustments that could be made. Kroll mentions several technological fixes that could be introduced to help animals cross roads safely. Really, though, the best solution might be to just slow down.



But that would require a kind of compromise with the natural world that we are ill-used to making – a compromise where we actually have to give something up, rather than scrabbling after the win-win. To put a lower speed limit on the roads would be to put a speed limit on life – to say no to the possibility of driving across the country in a day to see friends or family, to that last-minute extra dash to the supermarket, to the feasibility, for many, of living in the countryside when a suitable job always seems to be a forty-minute drive away.

Slowing down would be a big decision. Still, we owe it to the myriad humans and animals killed on the roads every year to give it some thought. Could we build a transport system that doesn't require blood sacrifice – one that doesn't come with a daily dose of snarge? It's a worthy question – a more inspiring one, anyway, than 'how many deer do we need to kill to make the problem go away?'

Trees, Farming, Carbon

Aside from the issue of deer-vehicle collisions, the problem most frequently associated with 'too many' deer is the impact they can have on forestry and agriculture. All those deer need to eat, and some of their tastes overlap with our own. They can damage crops by eating or trampling them, and they have a troublesome preference for the fresh green shoots of saplings. In an established forest, this generally isn't a problem – trees vastly overproduce seeds and saplings to account for herbivory, and deer play their part in the cycle of nutrients that feeds the forest floor. The odd sapling makes it past the stage at which a deer can damage it, and the forest continues. When trying to plant forested areas from scratch, however, a high resident deer population can make things difficult.

Since the late nineteenth century, the six-foot, wood-and-wire deer fence has wrought something of a compromise between the forestry industry and Britain's deer populations. Fences excluded them while saplings were at a delicate stage, and when the fences came down at the end of their roughly twenty-year lifespan, deer could enjoy the shelter and foraging opportunities provided by woodland. There were always drawbacks to fencing – expense over large areas, aesthetic impact, blocking of access to people and animals – but they worked for twentieth century environmental priorities.

Today, however, the forestry industry is on the move. It's no longer only interested in planting large stands of fast-growing species for paper products, but also about creating new areas of native broadleaf woodlands and sequestering carbon, and raking in government subsidies for doing so. Tree planting is a key part of the government's strategy for both nature recovery and achieving 'net zero', and in the push to speed the expansion of England's forests, deer fences appear to be losing favour as a management tool.

In 2022, spurred by the consultation on the government's England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024, DEFRA launched a consultation on the topic of reforming deer management in England to give greater protection to forestry. The questions it asked and the way it was framed suggest that England's deer might be in for a bit of a crackdown. Policies proposed included the introduction of 'targeted incentives' to encourage landowners to kill more deer in areas where they are preventing new trees from growing, and the removal of the close season for all male deer, so they can be shot at any time of year. There was also the suggestion to allow more night-shooting, and to financially support the development of the wild venison market to incentivise hunters to kill more deer.¹⁵

A clearer picture of how all this will affect deer should emerge when DEFRA publish the results of the consultation, and states what policies it intends to take forward. However, while there is some validity to the government trying to encourage and facilitate temporary reductions in deer numbers in areas where new trees are growing, there's a problem in the way the issue is framed. The consultation document starts off with the familiar claim that England has a 'too many deer' problem:

'We need to do more to sustainably manage deer. The UK deer population is estimated to have increased from 450,000 in the 1970s to two million today.'

With this supposedly established, it essentially states that it is a government priority to reduce the deer population to what it considers to be an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable level – one 'in balance' with its ecosystem. This rests on the idea that there actually is a right number of deer for the country, a 'sustainable' figure at which the population should be maintained.

But that's not really how ecosystems work. Animal populations fluctuate, and herbivores are particularly famous for their cycles of boom and bust. Deer numbers might be growing now, but that trajectory won't continue forever. Some areas will have more deer than others; some species will be more prolific than others. Trying to hold everything constant is like trying to stop rivers from flooding – you can dam and weir and concrete and channel, but really, you're probably best off letting the water have its cycle, and not building on the wetlands.

Too Many For What?

Lurking behind much of deer management discourse is the presumption that humans can regulate deer numbers better than nature. As shown above though, it's not even clear how many deer there are, let alone how many there 'should' be. Beyond participating in the ecosystem as predator, I'm not sure we should be attempting to tailor everything to our own

requirements. If deer numbers need to be reduced in a certain area in order to grow trees, so be it. But attempting to decide how many of every sort of animal or plant is allowed, like a latter-day Noah policing England's Ark, is madness.

In the end, every land management decision is a choice. There's no such thing as 'too many' deer, and there certainly isn't any scientific reason to suppose that two million is a problematic figure in and of itself, even if it were found to be accurate. Policymakers and land managers need to think more clearly, locally, and specifically about the problems deer can bring, to be ready to compromise on some human interests to allow them space, and to do all of this while bearing in mind that a flourishing wild deer population is actually something of which we can be proud. We can see it, eat it, appreciate its place in ecosystems, and marvel at its beauty.

Ultimately, we should be thinking creatively about how to live alongside abundant animal and bug life – about a world where the wild is always present in daily life, rather than confined to demarcated zones where we've decided it can rule. If conservation goals start to be actually achieved, there is going to be a preponderance of life buzzing, crawling, flapping, soaring, oozing and bounding over the land that hasn't been seen in living memory. We would do well to work out how to embrace it.

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12. More than a decade later, this process remains ongoing.
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15. Kroll, G. 2018 'Snarge' *Aeon*
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