

Deer

Animal pests

Deer were first introduced into New Zealand over 150 years ago to establish hunting as a sport. By the late 1940s red deer had established themselves throughout 44% of the New Zealand mainland. Other species such as wapiti, sika, fallow, sambar, white-tailed and rusa deer formed established herds in localised parts of the country. Deer are the subject of passionate debate: Hunters value them as game animals for recreation, but from a nature conservation viewpoint they are a destructive pest.

Introducing . . .

- Red deer (*Cervus elaphus scoticus*) have colonised most New Zealand habitats, from high mountain areas and steep hill country to river flats and coastal lowlands. They are the basis of the deer farming industry.
- Wapiti or Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*), the largest round-antlered deer in the world, are related closely to red deer. The main population is in Fiordland, all descended from a single release of 18 animals at the head of George Sound in 1905.
- The elusive sika deer (*Cervus nippon*) originated in East Asia. Sika live mainly in the central North Island's Kaimanawa, Kaweka and Ahimanawa ranges. Many deer species bark to warn others of a hunter's presence. Sika will even stalk and follow a hunter through the bush, staying just out of sight and barking shrilly.
- The large-bodied Asian sambar deer (*Cervus unicolor unicolor*) has populations south-east of Rotorua and in coastal Manawatu from Levin to Harakeke.

Red deer R. Morris





White-tailed deer

- Rusa deer (*Cervus timorensis*) are like a small version of sambar. Most live in an area south-west of Rotorua.
- The small Eurasian fallow deer (*Dama dama*) lives in many regions of both the North and South Islands. After red deer, it is the most widespread deer species in New Zealand.
- The white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus borealis*) live mostly within a few hundred metres of the coast on Stewart Island/Rakiura and in a small area at the head of Lake Wakatipu. Their diet on Rakiura includes washed up seaweed.

A wild moose chase

In 1910 four male and six female moose (*Alces alces andersoni*) were liberated in Dusky Sound, Fiordland. They established a small population that never flourished and the last confirmed sighting was in 1952. Some people are convinced that moose still exist in Fiordland. In 2000, moose hunters sent snagged hairs found in Dusky Sound to Canada for mitochondrial DNA analysis. The result? Moose hair.

Why are deer a problem?

New Zealand's native plants evolved for 80 million years without browsing mammals. This makes them particularly vulnerable to deer, which thrive on New Zealand's temperate climate, lush evergreen vegetation and lack of predators or competitors.

The impact of uncontrolled wild deer populations on New Zealand's native forest and alpine grassland is well documented: Deer selectively remove palatable species, leaving the forest floor and alpine tussock and herb-fields bare. If left for too long without new recruits, the forest canopy can break down. Deer find some plants particularly attractive. By targeting these, deer even in low numbers can change the composition of native plant communities.

Deer culling – part of New Zealand folklore

*So oil up your boots my boys, and check your pack and gun
The deer are far too numerous, there's culling to be done.*

Alarmed that deer had built up into huge herds, the Department of Internal Affairs employed government shooters or 'deer cullers' during the 1950s to reduce deer numbers and slow their spread into new areas. This colourful era has been the subject of many books, for example 'A Good Keen Man' by Barry Crump. Many of the old back-country huts and tiny metal-skinned 'bivs' used by trampers were first built for deer-cullers to stay in. Hunters soon found a market for deer skins and venison, packing them out by horseback, 4-wheel drive and later by fixed-wing aircraft from improvised air-strips.

Kerosene cowboys and deer farm pioneers

In the 1960s entrepreneurs developed a helicopter-based venison export industry: Pilots and deer shooters would fly into remote areas, shoot deer from a helicopter, strap them underneath and ferry them out to waiting trucks. This developed into live capture, where operators using tranquilizer guns and nets recovered deer for the fledgling deer-farm industry. Helicopter-based shooters, dubbed 'kerosene cowboys', would leap from the skids of their hovering machines to bring down a partly tranquilized deer. There were numerous accidents, fatalities and bitter conflicts over poaching. The industry declined with a drop in prices paid for wild deer. New Zealand now has over 5000 deer farms, the largest and most sophisticated deer farming industry in the world.

How are wild deer managed today?

- The legislative framework for managing deer impacts is provided by the Wild Animal Control Act 1977.
- The Department of Conservation (DOC) issues hunting permits to recreational hunters, who have open access to almost all public conservation lands with few restrictions. This helps to keep deer numbers down in more accessible areas.
- After extensive public consultation, DOC issued a 'Policy Statement on Deer Control', which sets out the priorities for managing deer.
- DOC works with deer farmers to develop regulations and fencing standards that reduce the risk of farmed deer escaping to form new wild populations.

How can you help?

If you hunt deer you will contribute to forest health as well as have a great outdoor adventure. Please make sure you have a hunting permit, a firearms licence and ALWAYS POSITIVELY IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET.

For more information

Contact your local DOC office or visit the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz

Further reading

Bennett, Mike 1979. *The Venison Hunters*, Halcyon Press.

King, Carolyn M (ed) 2005. *Handbook of NZ Mammals*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press.