

Whitchurch Nature Notes (6)

Our local Deer

Sarah Dixon writes: -

One of the joys of living in a semi-rural village like Whitchurch is sharing our gardens with wild creatures. It is astonishing that in such a crowded island there is still room for large populations of animals living their lives completely independent from Man.

There are three sorts of deer we might see in South Oxfordshire – Muntjac, Roe and Fallow. How can we tell them apart?

Muntjac are the ones we most often see, as they are active at any time of the day. They are small, about 50cm at the shoulder, and have a humped appearance. Russet brown for most of the year, their coat turns grey in winter. They have a wide flat tail, and when fleeing will lift the tail to show its white underside. The males have short unbranched antlers, and the females have a black patch on top of their head (pictured here). They are usually solitary, sometimes in pairs.



We often hear their loud regular barks at night. The barks are always single, and repeated at regular intervals, unlike dogs. If they have been in your garden you may find their slots, or hoofprints, which are really small at 2.5cm long.

Muntjacs are Chinese in origin, and were brought to Woburn in the early C20th, from whence they escaped and rapidly spread.



Roe deer are larger, about 75cm at the shoulder. Colour varies throughout the year, but in summer it is red. They have no tail, and white rumps. They are very beautiful animals, with large shapely ears, liquid black eyes, and black nose and mouth surrounded with white (clearly shown in the photo of a Roe doe on right).

The males (on left) have small antlers with up to three points. They are solitary, but may form small groups in winter. They are most active at dawn and dusk and much quieter

than Muntjac, although they may bark if alarmed. Their slots are 4cm long, much larger than those of the Muntjac. Unlike Muntjac, Roe are a truly native species.



Fallow deer are larger again, and may reach 95cm at the shoulder. The most common colour is tan with white spots, but various other colours can be seen. They have white rumps surrounded with a black horseshoe, and long tails (pictured right).

The antlers of the males are “palmate” meaning that they have a flat part like a hand with fingers, as shown below. They are unlike Muntjac and Roe which have antlers that are like branches.



Fallow are usually found in groups, and peak activity is at dawn and dusk. If they visit your garden, they will leave large deep slots, which are 6cm long and quite narrow. They will bark when alarmed, and in the rutting season the males make a really loud groaning noise.

Fallow are not a native species. They were first introduced by the Romans, but became extinct after the fall of the Roman empire. They were reintroduced from the Eastern Mediterranean in C11th and kept in deer parks as novelties. They escaped, of course, and by C15th they were established over much of the UK and are now regarded as a naturalised species.

Fallow deer have only appeared at Chalkhills (Sandra Parkinson's farm, north of Hardwick Road) since the early 2000's, at the same time as they were first seen on Hardwick Estate. It is thought that up until then, they just did not have the daring to cross the A4074.

It is worth noting that **Red Deer**, **Chinese Water Deer** and **Sika** have not found their way into South Oxfordshire – yet.

Deer damage in the garden

There is no getting away from it, deer do an annoying amount of damage to our gardens. Young trees may have the bark rubbed off them, and left hanging in tatters. The males may repeatedly knock their antlers against shrubs and low branches, damaging them in the process. But the most common damage is browsing. Deer have no top incisors, so if they browse on leaves the cut edge is ragged; whereas rabbits leave a smooth clean edge.



Deer seem to prefer the choicest flowers and the most expensive plants. Very typical damage would be to find the flowers have been bitten off, but the stems left. I have found this a lot with roses, sweet peas and perennial geraniums. So annoying! The photo on the left shows all the leading shoots eaten off an everlasting sweet pea.

How can we prevent deer damage? There are a lot of old wives' tales about how to keep the deer away, but according to the British Deer Society none of them work. If you really want to keep them out, you will need to fence your garden with correct deer-proof fencing - 1.5m high (for Muntjac and Roe) or 1.8m (for Fallow). Fortunately, there are quite a lot of decorative garden plants that deer don't like to eat, mostly

because they are poisonous or have a strong smell; you can find out more on the RHS website. However, when times are hard, they will have a go at anything. Perhaps the most interesting approach is to provide natural food alternatives; have a “wild corner” for the deer where you allow brambles, rosebay willowherb, dandelions, campion, yarrow and other native flora to flourish. This will attract insects and birds too.

When I find a precious rose bush decimated, I do feel a surge of annoyance – but the sight of a female deer with a fawn, noiselessly passing through the garden at dusk, is such a gift that I can forgive them anything.

and Sandra Parkinson writes: -

Deer damage on the farm

Deer actually like to spend time in the grass fields grazing just like domestic livestock. It is only their fear of people that drives them into woodland. Here at Chalkhills they are visible at any time of day, lunchtime is favourite. Often, I have only realised there was a herd of Fallow lying in a long crop of grass when one of them gets up or I see a set of ears wagging. I have seen as many as two dozen Fallow in my highest field in the winter.

If they had been around when the vineyard was here, the grapevines would have been seriously damaged, and the grape crop decimated. So, I am very glad I removed the vines when I did. My developing Hazel Plat was once completely cleared overnight of baby hazelnuts (which only had tiny unripe nuts inside) - evidently by many deer as the grass between the bushes was completely trampled. As a result, I was forced to deer fence the Plat to keep them out. Now I ‘only’ have to deal with squirrels and badgers!

Browsing is often very casual. They annoyingly just nip the tops off a tall plant, or nibble a few leaves as they pass by. The deer damage here is considerable, especially in the woods.

They do also eat some of the wildflowers, and later the seeds that I collect for sale to a wholesale wildflower seed merchant. This picture shows the result of deer eating agrimony. This really annoys me as this is one of the important wildflower seeds I collect on the farm. Deer sometimes go through a whole field selectively seeking out their seed heads. In the dry late summer of 2018, I lost almost all my crop of Agrimony.



The UK is experiencing a deer population explosion. It is estimated that there are already 2 million deer in the country. This is the highest figure ever recorded in a thousand years and this is just far too many. They ruin ground flora (muntjac dig up bluebell bulbs, quite apart from eating the leaves and flower buds), fray and bark trees, and causing serious damage to forestry.

The only good things about deer are that they are very beautiful (well, not muntjacs), are good to eat, and keep my sycamore thinnings under control. If more people asked their butcher for **wild** venison their numbers could be kept under control, and we would be eating very healthy red meat without feeling guilty about climate change.

Photographs by Dave Olinski, Sarah Dixon, Sandra Parkinson & Sally Woolhouse