

Cannock Chase

deer management



Cannock Chase National Landscape

Cannock Chase lies in Staffordshire in the heart of the West Midlands. It is one of England's finest landscapes and has been protected as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) since 1958.

Created as a royal hunting forest for William the Conqueror almost a millennium ago, the Chase is rich in history, culture and wildlife. The Cannock Chase landscape today is a mixture of conifer forests, woodland and wood pasture, grassland and heaths, and rivers and wetlands, and is home to a number of rare and protected wildlife species. The lowland heathlands are recognised for their national importance as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and at the European level as a Special Area of Conservation.

With an area of just 26 square miles / 69 square kilometres, the Chase is a significant local and regional amenity and outdoor space, with an estimated 3 million visitors each year attracted by the opportunities for outdoor exercise and exploration on the extensive network of rides and paths.

It is also a lived-in and working landscape, on which many people depend for their livelihoods in farming, forestry and tourism.

The history of deer on Cannock Chase



Deer have been managed on the area we now know as Cannock Chase for at least 1,000 years. After the Norman conquest (1066) the area was designated a royal forest in which the rights to hunt game (as well as accessing other resources) were restricted. Cannock Chase was carved out of this royal forest and granted to the Bishops of Coventry and Lichfield in 1290 as an area of land for hunting for their personal use. A 'Chase' is the nobility equivalent of the royal hunting forest, bestowing the same hunting rights on the owner as the monarch had previously held.

Over the centuries the Chase was divided into a number of manors and deer parks - enclosed areas primarily for the purpose of keeping and hunting deer, usually fallow deer.

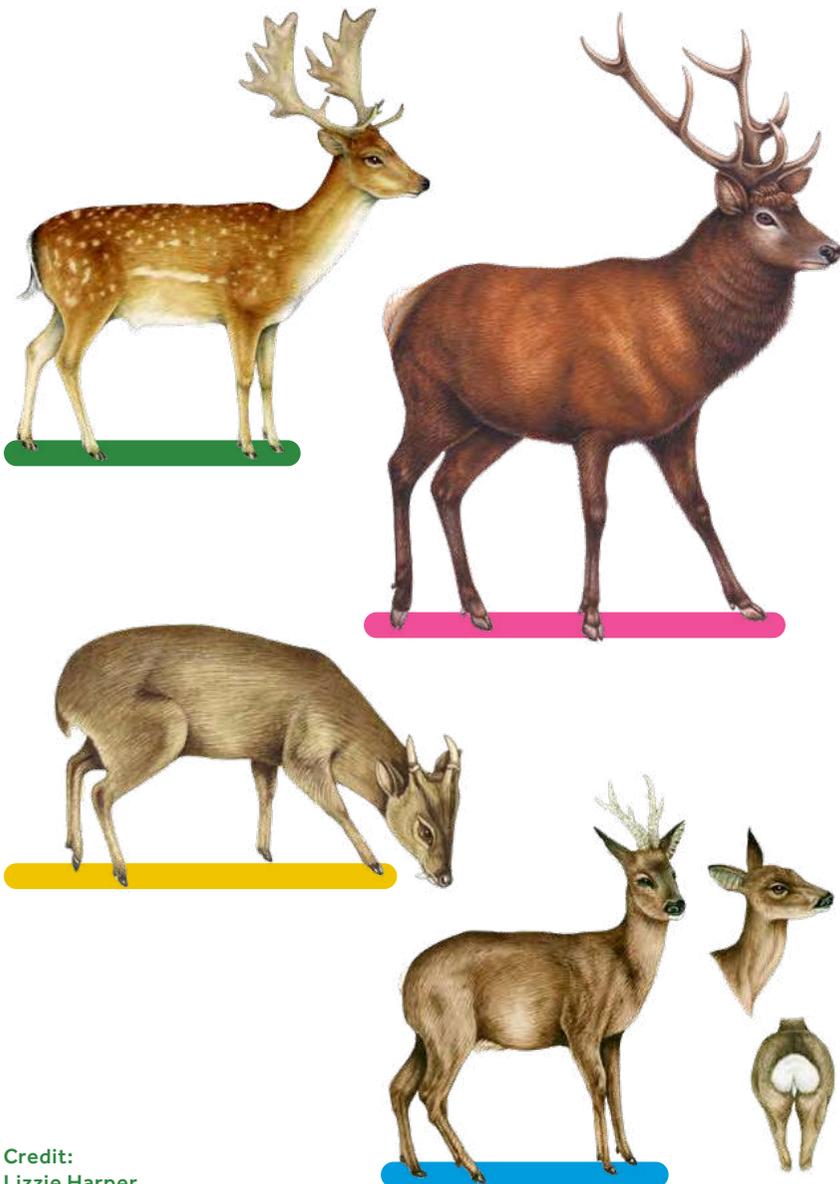
The hunting of deer had become less fashionable by the 19th century, and a number of the parks were converted to ornamental parks and gardens, and woodland copses when shooting of game birds became popular. Nevertheless, hunting deer still took place across the Chase right up until the mid-twentieth century using 'deer drives', a technique involving one group of hunters driving deer towards another group.

The free-roaming populations of red, fallow and muntjac deer we see on the Chase today are, at least in part, a result of escapes of captive deer over the course of its history.

Image Credit: Ian Jones



Types of deer



There are three types of deer living on Cannock Chase - fallow, red and muntjac, with the occasional roe deer passing through. Red and roe deer are our only native species of deer. Fallow deer were originally brought to Britain by the Romans. They were then reintroduced shortly before the Norman Conquest and are now considered naturalised. Muntjac are non-native and classed as invasive.

- Fallow deer are medium-sized, with a variable coat colour ranging from tan with white spots on their back and upper flanks, to almost black or white. They are the most numerous type of deer on the Chase and often congregate in large herds. The males are recognised by their distinctive broad and flattened palmate antlers, although these are shed each year in April through to May.
- The larger red deer are a rusty red colour turning brown in winter. The stags have large, branched pointed antlers which are shed March to April. Red deer also form herds and prefer wetter clay ground conditions where they can create wallows during the rut and summertime to keep cool. They are mainly found in the south of the Chase.
- Muntjac are small and stocky, often described as having a characteristic 'hunched' appearance, with a reddish-brown coat turning grey brown in winter. The males have small and straight antlers which are shed in May. Males also have distinctive long canine teeth and a 'V' shaped facial marking. Muntjacs are solitary or exist in male/female pairs, or with their young, and will never be seen in herds.
- Roe deer are rare on Cannock Chase so you will be very lucky to see one. They are medium-sized with a bright rusty red coat turning dull slate grey in winter. Only the males have antlers, which are small with typically three points on each antler when fully formed.

Credit:
Lizzie Harper

The impacts of deer on the Chase



Our local deer herds are an attractive and characteristic feature of the Cannock Chase landscape. At low population levels, they can bring a number of benefits. For example, they provide browsing, creating habitat structure and maintain open habitats for biodiversity.

They are much loved by visitors, providing opportunities for people to interact with the natural world and engage in activities such as wildlife photography. They also boost the local economy through tourism, as well as supporting local businesses through wild venison markets.

Unfortunately, large deer populations can conflict with conservation objectives, and have impacts on farming, forestry and motorists.

In woodland, deer browsing can hinder natural regeneration and the growth of planted saplings. At high intensities, browsing can reduce the understorey and ground vegetation layers, leading to declines in woodland birds, invertebrates and small mammals. On heathlands high levels of browsing can suppress the growth of plants such as bilberry and heather, eventually leading to their loss and replacement with grassy swards.



▲
Group of Fallow showing browse line and bark stripping, with very limited understorey.

Image Credit: Alan Barrell



▶
Bilberry on the Chase's heathland grazed by deer.

Image Credit: Alan Barrell

The impacts of deer on the Chase continued

Deer can pose a high risk of collision when crossing roads on Cannock Chase. Collisions are traumatic and can sometimes be fatal to both deer and driver.

Deer also have an economic impact. They can affect timber production and can decimate crops, costing farmers thousands of pounds. Measures to reduce the impacts of deer, such as deer fencing, tree protection and road deterrents are expensive.



Deer road casualty

Image Credit:
Graham Barratt

Herd of Fallow on
pasture land

Image Credit:
Alan Barrell



Deer monitoring



We monitor deer on the Chase to help us estimate the species and numbers that are present, their distribution, as well as to understand their impacts on habitats and ecology.

Over the years, different census techniques have been used to estimate the population. Currently, deer counts are carried out using a thermal camera equipped drone. This produces more detailed census data and plots their distribution more accurately.

Deer census data is provided for April 2022 and April 2024. These figures should be regarded as an absolute minimum and deer numbers are likely to be higher. Over time we will be able to analyse the data to show population trends.

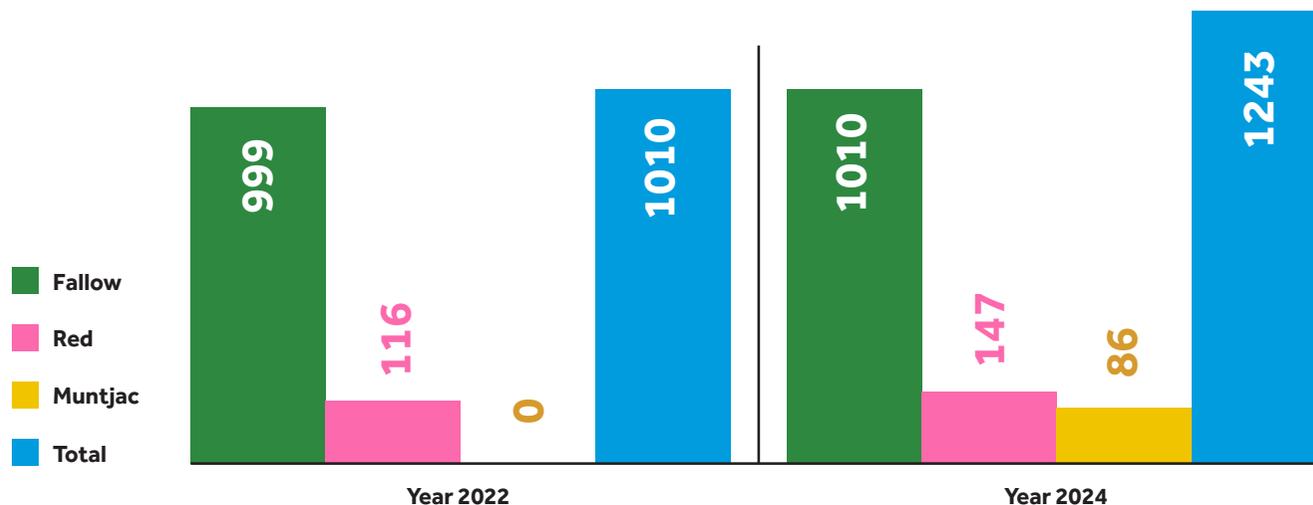
Detailed deer impact and activity assessments are also periodically undertaken to understand their distribution, use of the area and assess their impacts, both positive and negative.

We also record the number and location of road collisions involving deer. Sadly, a significant number of deer are killed or injured in collisions with vehicles each year. Deer vehicle collision data helps to inform targeted and effective use of deer deterrents and raise awareness with drivers to take care whilst driving on the roads through the Chase.



Red deer captured on thermal drone April 2024:
Image Credit: BH Wildlife Consultancy.

Cannock Chase National Landscape Deer Census Data



*Muntjac numbers were not recorded in 2022

Why we need to manage the deer population

Cannock Chase National Landscape is a protected landscape and contains wildlife and habitats of high biodiversity value. We have a responsibility to ensure that its natural beauty is conserved and enhanced.

Large deer numbers can put the natural beauty of Cannock Chase National Landscape at risk and damage its fragile ecology and landscape. They also have an economic impact, and the needs and livelihoods of farmers and foresters also need to be considered.

Without any natural predators, there are few checks on deer numbers. Furthermore, changing weather conditions with climate change, greater availability of food such as winter cereals, and increasing woodland cover, are all likely to contribute to further increases in deer numbers. Deer populations are therefore likely to increase without management.

High numbers of deer competing for limited food in an area can result in malnourishment and an overall unhealthy population. Concentrations of deer can also encourage the spread of diseases and parasites affecting other wildlife, livestock and humans.

Deer have been managed on the Chase by landowners for many years. We seek to strike a balance between maintaining a sustainable, healthy deer population, and conserving the special habitats, whilst considering the many different land uses on Cannock Chase. Management involves measures such as culling, protective fencing of trees and crops, tree guards to protect saplings, and deterrent measures on roads.

Image Credit:
Steve Welch

Our approach to deer management

Our aim is to have a sustainable, healthy wild deer population on Cannock Chase that is in balance with its environment. The deer will be managed to protect the National Landscape's special habitats and wildlife; safeguard its rural businesses, residents and visitors; look after the welfare of the animals, and ensure they are here for the future generations to enjoy.

To achieve this, the main landowners on the Chase together with the National Landscape Partnership have agreed the following approach to managing the deer population.

Aim	What we will do
Restore and maintain the deer population at a level that the ecosystem can support without negative effects.	We will monitor trends in deer populations and impacts on habitats and implement control measures when appropriate.
Develop and improve our evidence base, using this data to inform our approach to deer management.	We will undertake regular deer census and impact assessments – sharing this information as appropriate with land managers and landowners on Cannock Chase and surrounds. This will include monitoring for the arrival of new non-native deer species on the Chase e.g. Sika and Chinese Water Deer.
Work collaboratively at the landscape-scale, both within and beyond the borders of the National Landscape, to achieve effective and co-ordinated deer management solutions.	We will support a Deer Management Group for Cannock Chase that promotes a responsible and collaborative approach to deer management.
Control deer safely, humanely, and effectively as part of a deer management plan with time-limited reviews and evidence monitoring.	We will follow best practice guidelines for deer control. Deer stalkers will be suitably qualified and work to the highest standards of welfare and safety.
Reduce the impacts of deer on rural businesses.	We will work with farmers, foresters and landowners to find practical solutions to reduce deer impacts, including signposting to funding.
Minimise the number of deer vehicle collisions.	We will continue to use deer deterrents and investigate other new ways to prevent collisions to protect both road users and deer.
Promote understanding and responsible behaviour for the safe and respectful enjoyment of deer on Cannock Chase.	We will provide guidance on watching and engaging with deer safely without causing disturbance to the animals.

Enjoying the deer on Cannock Chase



Catching glimpses of the deer on Cannock Chase is a wonderful and memorable experience. It should always be remembered, however, that deer are wild animals. They can be unpredictable and will react if threatened and should be treated with due respect and care.

Always keep your distance. Do not approach any deer to within closer than 50 metres and stay at least 100 metres from deer during the rutting season. And be sure to keep dogs firmly under control.

Image Credit:
Alan Barrell

Please don't attempt to feed deer by hand or encourage them to eat anything that is not part of their natural diet. Regular feeding can also cause deer to become unnaturally dependent on humans for food. This can lead to deer becoming a nuisance in some cases with reports of them developing aggressive behaviour.

Please enjoy the deer responsibly.





**Cannock
Chase
National
Landscape**



**Cannock Chase National
Landscape Partnership**

c/o Staffordshire Place
Stafford
ST16 2LP

cannockchase@staffordshire.gov.uk

www.cannock-chase.co.uk

Image Credit: Ian Jones

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