

# Deer in Northern Ireland Forests: Distribution, Impact and Management

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## Summary

Red, Fallow and Sika deer occur in Northern Ireland forests. Fallow, often associated with old estate deer parks are most widespread; Sika occur in large numbers in Tyrone and Fermanagh, while Red are a comparatively minor species slowly spreading in from Donegal.

Economic damage in coniferous woodland has been relatively light arising mainly from the activities of male deer cleaning velvet and marking territories. Lodgepole pine is particularly susceptible to damage by Red and Sika deer.

The essence of good deer management lies in the design of more open forests enabling the deer to be observed, assessed and culled as necessary. Deer have an important educational and recreational role within forestry.

## Introduction

The comparatively large increase in the area of forested land over the past thirty years has probably resulted in more deer than ever before in Northern Ireland. Forestry plantations form an almost ideal habitat for deer by providing shelter, good feeding and concealment. Land tenure patterns have resulted in many of the larger forests being put together by an amalgamation of small farms. This has produced a situation where deer can extend their range by colonising nearby new plantations. Whitehead (1964) gives an account of the deer herds throughout Ireland before large scale afforestation took place.

## Distribution

All three species of deer which occur in Ireland Red, Fallow and Sika are present in Northern Ireland forests to a greater or lesser degree. Fallow are the most widely distributed, Sika are confined to Tyrone and Fermanagh while Red are relatively minor species in terms of numbers in the forests. Kilpatrick (1986, 1987) in a series of articles in *Deer* traces the evolution of deer in Ulster from the 17th through to the 18th and 19th centuries culminating in a detailed assessment of the herds in the 1980s.

Arguably the finest Red deer in Ireland are confined within the deer park

of Caledon estate. It is only rarely that one of these animals escapes from the park and any which do are shot by the estate keeper as soon as possible. This park does not therefore provide a source of Red deer to colonise the forests of south-east Tyrone.

In County Down near Ballynahinch there is a herd of Red deer owned by the County Down Staghounds. This herd is one of only two in Ireland (the other being the Ward Union in County Meath) which hunt the carted stag. Occasionally a stag evades recapture and there are many records of individual outliers living in woodlands throughout County Down. This never posed a problem until ten years ago when the Staghounds moved their enterprise to a new location. During the catch-up in the original park a number of hinds escaped, eventually made their way to the private woodlands around Seaforde to be subsequently joined by a few outlying stags. Nowadays there is a small but very successful herd of Red deer building up in the sanctuary

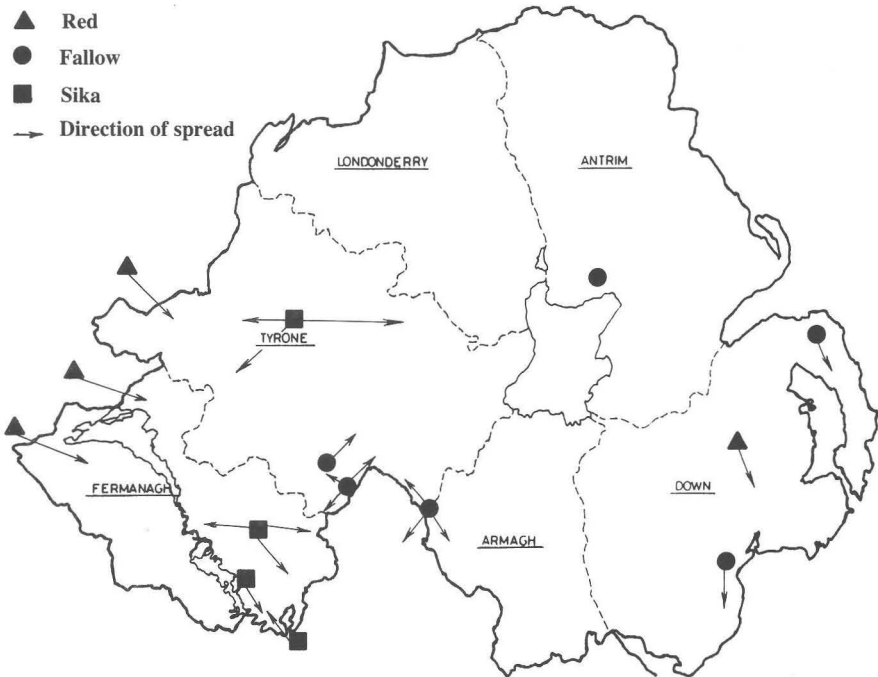


Figure 1: Location of main herds and direction of spread.

of the broadleaved woodlands of Seaforde Estate and lying out in summer in adjoining State plantations.

The only truly wild Red deer in Northern Ireland occur in the forests of Tyrone west of Castlederg and within the vast coniferous plantations of West Fermanagh both north and south of Lower Lough Erne. The ancestors of these deer colonised the forests from Donegal where they would have been descendants of Red deer escaping over many years from the vast area of what is now Glenveagh National Park.

The widespread occurrence of Fallow deer can be directly linked with the old estates. In the past any large estate worth its salt possessed at least one deer park which, more often than not, contained Fallow deer. These were regarded as the most attractive of the deer species as well as providing superior venison for the big house. Deer park fences inevitably fell into disrepair, deer escaped, many of the estates were broken up, often to be purchased by the Government for forestry, with the result that the new plantations were rapidly colonised by resident Fallow deer.

Fallow occur in the forests at Randalstown in County Antrim; Clandeboyne and Tollymore Park in County Down; Caledon and Favour Royal in County Tyrone; Crom Castle and Castle Archdale in County Fermanagh. All of these have an association with an old estate at some time in the past.

The introduction of Japanese Sika deer into Ireland is already well documented. Suffice to say ten years after the original introduction into County Wicklow in 1860 Lord Powerscourt was in a position to supply Sika to his friend Sir Victor Brooke at Colebrooke in County Fermanagh. Some twenty years later in 1891 a similar transaction saw Sika introduced to the Duke of Abercorn's estate at Baronscourt in County Tyrone. The deer did exceptionally well in both new locations to the extent that in the mid 1970s there were at least a thousand Sika in the general Baronscourt area and a further three hundred at Colebrooke. A policy of very heavy culling for a number of years at Baronscourt reduced the herd to more manageable proportions.

Sika deer, particularly the stags, are great colonisers. Emanating from the two sources of Baronscourt and Colebrooke these deer have extended their range eastwards to Gortin Glen forest near Omagh, Davagh Forest near Cookstown, west to Killeter Forest on the Donegal border and towards Rosslea and Lisnaskea in south Fermanagh. There are even reports of a small number of Sika resident in forestry areas around Pettigo in south Donegal. Colonisation northwards towards County Londonderry would seem to be curtailed by the lack of suitable woodland habitat within range.

### **Impact**

The presence and impact of deer in forestry can often lead to exceedingly heated discussions among professional foresters. Attitudes can range from "the only good deer is a dead one" to "the Bambi syndrome" which sees

deer in the Disney image of a very attractive inoffensive woodland animal.

Insofar as growing trees is concerned it really depends what species is being grown. Even in a situation of extreme pressure such as Baronscourt damage of economic importance is not a serious factor on Sitka spruce. Minor local fraying damage can occur adjacent to rutting stands. Norway spruce is more vulnerable to both fraying damage and browsing. Young pliable larch is particularly favoured by male deer both for fraying when cleaning velvet in August and again when marking territories in September/October. Lodgepole pine suffers from the whole range of deer activities: browsing, fraying, bole scoring and bark stripping, particularly by Red deer. Tsuga, of the minor conifer species is particularly vulnerable.

Pressure from the conservation lobby has increased the importance of growing broadleaves. This is the aspect on which major conflict between forestry and deer is likely to occur. The fact that the establishment of broadleaves will take place on the better soils, often in areas previously associated with the old estates, means that Fallow are more likely to be the deer involved. Fortunately in comparison with Red and Sika, Fallow tend to be more grazers than browsers, although they will certainly eat young shoots of oak and beech and positively seek out ash and elm. The use of tree shelters, providing they are of adequate height, offers an additional method of protecting young broadleaves. Deer fencing is exorbitantly expensive so a reduction in impact of deer on broadleaved plantations is best achieved by good deer management. Prior (1983) discusses at length many alternative methods of minimising deer damage. His philosophy of damage avoidance is 'Don't fight nature – encourage it to go away'.

## Management

The essence of good deer management is that you must be able to see the animals within the confines of the forest. To attempt to manage deer in the old style wall to wall conifer forest is an almost impossible task. The forester establishing a new forest must ask the question "are deer likely to colonise the forest during this rotation?", or indeed when clear felling creates the need for the second crop. New forest design must ensure adequate open spaces are left along roads, streams and around old wallsteads where the deer can be seen, assessed and culled as necessary. In established plantations the deer themselves will select their own special areas, often rutting stands, where they will defy the forester to establish trees. These often small locations should be surrendered to the deer and incorporated into a matrix of deer management areas covering the whole forest. Access for the stalker to these open areas is vital. The planting of non-commercial species particularly willow will reduce the pressure of fraying and browsing on the commercial crop.

Legal protection for deer was late in coming to Northern Ireland, it was only with the advent of the Wildlife Order in 1985 that close seasons and

the minimum calibre of weapons to be used in deer control were laid down. The last deer drive to shotguns took place within the Forest Service in 1965. Two years later it became official policy that deer would only be shot with full bore rifles and close season as laid down by the English Deer Act 1963.

The vast majority of deer culled in Northern Ireland State forests are shot by trained and experienced members of Wildlife Branch. Deer stalking is not leased but there is a scheme whereby visiting stalkers pay a fee to be taken out by a Wildlife Warden to shoot part of the normal cull. They must provide their own weapons and be fully insured. No unaccompanied stalking is permitted.

The Forest Service is keen to utilise the educational potential of deer. Three small deer parks at Randalstown, Parkanaur and Gortin Glen forests have existed for many years in which the public and in particular school children are guaranteed to see Fallow or Sika deer. A new park for Red deer was established at Gosford Forest Park in County Armagh in the autumn of 1989.

Deer have an immense value in forests such as Tollymore Park where public recreation is a major aspect of forestry. They do not have to be confined in a park. Even a glimpse of a deer bounding across a ride line or standing partially concealed among the trees can create a lasting favourable memory of a visit to the forest.

Deer numbers should not exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat. It is better to have a small number of well managed deer which everyone can regard as an asset, rather than a surplus, creating unacceptable levels of damage with everyone's hand against them. That is what good management is all about.

#### REFERENCES

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