

Ashridge deer culling 2018

Introduction

The National Trust values the deer at Ashridge very highly and our aim is to maintain a healthy herd.

However, the deer at Ashridge have no natural predators. Deer can cause considerable damage to our native woodlands. If deer numbers are uncontrolled, we will lose rare flora at Ashridge, have little or no natural regeneration of trees and few bird nesting habitats due to the lack of a shrub layer which is under constant pressure from deer browsing.

We do not permit any shooting of deer for sport. Deer culling numbers are based on an annual assessment of the damage they are causing. Every stalker holds a formal deer management qualification and undergoes a shooting test to ensure their competence. We also carry out an inspection of all the firearms used. Ashridge is regularly held up as an exemplar in deer management practice. We do not use drones at all in any aspect of our work.

Authorised stalkers wear an arm band so that members of the public who encounter them on duty can be sure they are authorised by the National Trust. We urge any members of the public who witness unauthorised deer stalking to contact the police.

Further information about our deer management policy is available on our website: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/ashridge-estate/features/deer-management-at-ashridge-estate>

Why do you shoot the deer at Ashridge?

We highly value the deer at Ashridge and our aim is to maintain a healthy herd in balance with healthy woodland.

However, the deer at Ashridge have no natural predators. Uncontrolled numbers of deer cause considerable damage to our native woodlands. If we did not control deer numbers, we would continue to lose rare flora at Ashridge, have little or no natural regeneration of trees and few bird nesting habitats due to the lack of a shrub layer which is under constant pressure from deer browsing.

Why do the deer need to be shot – why can't they just be 'put down'?

Shooting is the most humane method of dispatching deer. In the hands of an experienced and trained marksman, a rifle is the best way to kill a deer. Rounding them up, catching them and then injecting them is extremely stressful and frightening for the deer and causes unnecessary welfare problems.

How many deer are on the Ashridge estate?

We carry out regular deer counts which indicate numbers well in excess of 1200. This is a huge increase on 40 or 50 years ago, when the numbers were just a couple of hundred.

It should be remembered that the counts take place in the early Spring, so after the cull has taken place and before the new season's fawns are born. So, around May, when the fawns are born, that number will rise by around 30% to 40%.

However, the number of deer at Ashridge varies day-to-day as it is a wild, rather than captive, herd. The deer roam the whole estate and cross onto neighbouring land owned by others.

How do you decide how many deer need to be culled?

Cull targets are based on the annual assessments we carry out of the damage they are actually causing. Deer count information is useful too as an indicator of whether we're achieving the reductions we're aiming for.

When is the cull?

The main cull starts on 1 November each year and can continue on until the end of February. Culling takes place between dawn and dusk. We take a break over the Christmas/New Year period. Small amounts of culling take place on farmland to protect crops during the summer months.

Are there laws relating to deer and deer management?

Yes, the Deer Act of 1991 governs all deer management that takes place, with amendments in 2007. The act governs such things as closed season and calibre of rifle used. Deer control is a legal and widely undertaken part of countryside management across England.

Do you sell licences for deer stalking at Ashridge?

No. We do not permit any shooting of deer for sport.

We have never sold licences to anyone to stalk deer and have no intention of doing so. Deer management is a considerable outlay to the estate, but one which is necessary to allow a range of species to thrive in the very special woodland habitats of Ashridge.

Who carries out the deer culling?

Ashridge uses professional external contractors for its deer management services. In 2015 the deer management contract was reviewed and we received 26 applications from professional stalkers. The selection process, overseen by the national authority on deer management, the Deer Initiative, was rigorous, robust and fair. We are coming up to our fourth season with our selected stalking team.

How do you know they are professional?

Every stalker holds a formal deer management qualification and undergoes an externally audited annual shooting test to ensure their competence. We also carry out an inspection of all the firearms used. This is thought to be the highest level of competency assessment taking place anywhere in the country at present and is regularly held up as an exemplar in deer management practice.

I've heard of people shooting deer from moving vehicles...

Our stalkers never shoot from moving vehicles. Shooting from static vehicles is legal and we do use this method. The shot is taken from the road into the woodland and has helped to reduce the number of collisions here between deer and vehicles. The level of accuracy achieved by our stalkers is excellent.

We do receive reports of poachers on the estate. Anyone seeing unauthorised shooting on the estate at any time should call the police immediately.

What happens to the deer after they're killed?

The carcasses go to a registered game dealer. Some of the venison is returned to the estate and is for sale in our shop from November. Some of it is also made available to the central National Trust food & beverage teams so that it can be used at other properties.

The income from venison is much less than the cost of carrying out the cull. We cannot stress strongly enough that the cull is carried out for conservation purposes rather than for commercial gain.

Why am I seeing so few deer this year?

The population has remained pretty static for the past four or five years. However, the changes in the way that we manage their numbers has influenced their movement. They are now behaving in a much more natural way, moving in much smaller groups, avoiding human contact and tending to use the periphery of the estate in preference to the central areas.

We are still seeing deer in very significant quantities almost every day.

Spotting deer

To spot deer, you should walk quietly in areas that are less well-used. You should keep your dog, if you have one, on a short lead. Look into the trunks of the trees and you will very soon be rewarded with the glint of an eye or the flick of a tail. Where the trees grow straight and tall, look for horizontal lines about waist height – that's the deer, beautifully camouflaged.

Does using parts of the estate for filming interfere with the rut?

No. The deer have rutting stands all over the estate. The rut is well underway in all the usual places with fine bucks being seen strutting their stuff to an audience of excitable does. Filming is an important strand of our income and we oversee all filming activity carefully to ensure that damage is kept to a minimum. The film companies are also very good – they put a lot of work into reinstating any damage that is caused while they are here.

How do you ensure public safety?

The stalkers are all highly trained professionals who undergo a skills affirmation test at the start of each season. They are trained to ensure that there is a clear backdrop behind the deer they are aiming at and all members of the team are assisted by thermal imaging devices that enable them to spot even concealed people/dogs. We work closely with the police and have a thorough risk assessment that we review prior to the start of the cull each year. The signage that we put out prior to the cull is to let people know that the activity is taking place.

How does a member of the public know if a deer stalker is authorised?

Our stalkers all wear an arm band so that members of the public who encounter them on duty can be sure they are authorised by the National Trust.

We are always very happy to speak to people about our work. If you'd like to come in and speak to us, please call 01442 841800 to arrange an appointment.

About Ashridge Estate

Ashridge is a 2,000 hectare estate in the Chiltern Hills, comprising woodland, commons and chalk downland. Much of the estate is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of the national importance of the natural habitats cared for by the estate.