



red deer

Red deer are Britain's largest remaining native wild herbivore. Once widespread across the country, their numbers declined dramatically by the 18th century due to hunting and habitat loss. While introductions from Europe have helped populations recover, numbers remain highly variable, with both local overpopulation and regional extinctions occurring. Red deer are predominantly grazers and exhibit selective foraging behaviour that shapes vegetation, creating a mosaic landscape that supports a wide range of species.

Environmental Benefits



Grazers

+



Tree
Disturbance



Seed
Dispersal

+



Rutting
Behaviours



Wallowing



Wetland
Foraging

Red deer are predominantly grazers but will browse on small shrubs and palatable browse species, according to their nutritional needs. They are highly adaptable and thrive in a variety of habitats, including woodlands, scrub, heathlands, and wetlands.

Red deer frequently strip bark and rub their antlers against trees, creating deadwood habitats to support fungi, invertebrates and cavity-nesting birds. They can also browse on leafy vegetation from species like elder which contain cyanide – vegetation that other herbivores avoid.

They are highly effective seed dispersers, transporting over 130 plant species via their dung, hooves and coat, contributing to plant diversity and habitat regeneration across the landscape.

Rutting behaviour, which occurs in Autumn, involves clashing antlers, tearing up soil and rubbing against trees. The disturbance caused by the rut promotes new growth and creates microhabitats for insects and small mammals. Red deer often seek wetland areas to wallow throughout the year, creating pockets of ephemeral, wet, muddy water bodies that provide habitat for a wide range of species.

Red deer commonly frequent wetland environments, foraging on aquatic vegetation, which helps control dominant plants such as rushes and reeds, creating space for a wider variety of aquatic species.

Managing Red Deer in a Rewilding Project

Key management considerations include:



Public Safety / Ecotourism

Red deer rut in the autumn, and during this period their behaviour can be unpredictable. People should keep a safe distance and ensure dogs are under control. However, the rut is a spectacular sight and can offer valuable ecotourism opportunities when observed responsibly from a safe distance.



Fencing

While allowing wild red deer to move in and out of nature recovery projects is optimal for achieving maximum ecological benefits, some sites have chosen to keep red deer within the boundary by erecting deer-height fencing. Fenced-in deer are usually still considered legally wild, depending on the size of the site.



Population Management

Ensure appropriate social structures for each species is observed and maintain appropriate densities based on the carrying capacity of the area.



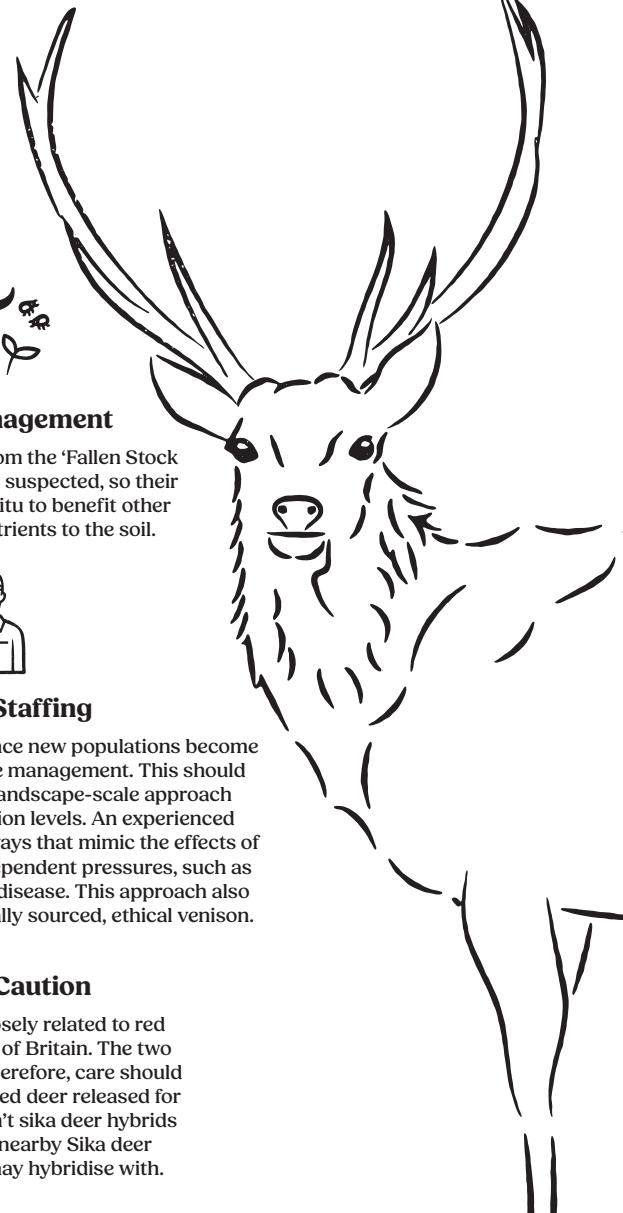
Carcass Management

Wild deer are exempt from the 'Fallen Stock Rule', unless a disease is suspected, so their carcass can remain in situ to benefit other wildlife and return nutrients to the soil.



Dedicated Staffing

If numbers are already high, or once new populations become established, red deer will require management. This should be done through a dedicated, landscape-scale approach to maintaining healthy population levels. An experienced stalker can regulate numbers in ways that mimic the effects of natural predators and density-dependent pressures, such as starvation, pests, parasites, and disease. This approach also provides a supply of healthy, locally sourced, ethical venison.



Sika Deer Caution

Sika deer, a species closely related to red deer, are found in parts of Britain. The two species can hybridise; therefore, care should be taken to ensure that red deer released for rewilding purposes aren't sika deer hybrids and that there isn't a nearby Sika deer population that they may hybridise with.

Legal Restrictions

The introduction of red deer in Britain must comply with specific legal and regulatory requirements:



Wild Release Licence

Red deer are a resident native species which does not require a licence from Natural England for release into the wild.



No Identification

Wild deer are not subject to identification requirements such as ear tagging or tattooing.



Protected By Law

Red deer are protected under the Deer Act 1991 from being taken, killed or injured in certain circumstances, as well as from particular capture methods.

A note on Diverse Herbivore Assemblages

Each herbivore has unique physical and behavioural traits that shape the environment in different ways and create habitats for a variety of species. Their combined impact supports a broader range of species and rewilding projects should therefore aim to introduce a variety of herbivore species where possible. Please refer to our other herbivore guides for more information.

The Large Herbivore Working Group (LHWG) is a UK-based network of experts formed in 2022 to support the restoration and introduction of large herbivores as part of nature-recovery efforts. It develops guidance, informs policy, and shares best practice across the sector. The LHWG is currently funded until 2027 and hosted by the Landscape Recovery team at The Wildlife Trusts.

Please note these species and nature recovery profiles produced by the LHWG are not legal advice and are intended to provide a high-level overview to support your understanding of considerations needed for large herbivore introductions and management for nature recovery initiatives in England.

Design and artwork by Lauren Hulbert.