

COTSWOLDS NATIONAL LANDSCAPE POSITION STATEMENT



Cotswolds
National
Landscape

THE MANAGEMENT OF WILD DEER

This position statement addresses the issue of wild deer in the Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)¹ as both a valuable asset and as a potential threat to the character of the CNL and to achieving net zero and nature recovery ambitions. It takes forward policies in the Cotswolds National Landscape Management Plan 2023 – 2025², particularly Policy CE9 problem species, pests and diseases.

The Board recommends:

- A collaborative approach towards deer management by landowners and organisations within the CNL, particularly through the establishment of Deer Management Groups.
- An increase in awareness of deer and deer-related issues in the Cotswolds, targeted at a range of audiences including landowners and managers, public bodies and the general public.
- Removal of barriers to a local Cotswold wild venison market. This should include putting in place an infrastructure which allows market development and addressing issues such as planning, food hygiene requirements and other regulations.

BACKGROUND

National Landscapes have been designated to ensure that the special qualities of the finest landscapes in England and Wales are conserved and enhanced.

The Cotswolds National Landscape Board is the body set up by Parliament to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) and increase awareness and understanding of its special qualities. In fulfilling these roles, the

¹ Cotswolds National Landscape is the new name for the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The new name takes forward one of the proposals of the Government-commissioned 'Landscapes Review' to rename AONBs as 'National Landscapes'. This change reflects the national importance of AONBs and the fact that they are safeguarded, in the national interest, for nature, people, business and culture. The Position Statement uses the name Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) for the area designated as the Cotswolds AONB. AONB is still the legal designation.

² https://www.cotswolds-nl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CNL_Management-Plan-2023-25_final.pdf

Board seeks to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities within the AONB.

Deer are integral to the Cotswolds countryside, with park deer being a particularly important historical and cultural component of the area. Some features in the Cotswold landscape are the direct product of deer management, including high boundary walls and park pales to keep deer in parks. Lodge Park, for example, was built in the 1630s as a grandstand for deer coursing.

The chance to see these large mammals is part of the pleasure of living in, working in or visiting the Cotswolds. The CNL Board is therefore committed to maintaining a population of wild roe and fallow deer within the Cotswolds. Moreover, a properly managed deer population in balance with its environment can be a source of local income generated from stalking and sales of venison.

There are currently four species of wild deer in the Cotswolds: fallow, muntjac, roe and sika. Of these species only roe deer are native to the UK. Fallow deer are a prehistorically native herding species, which were introduced to the UK in the Early Middle Ages and which are seen as a traditional part of the Cotswold landscape. Muntjac were brought to the UK in the early 20th century and through escapes and deliberate releases have spread rapidly across southern and central England and Wales. Since 2019 muntjac are classed as an invasive non-native species.

Sika are present only in small numbers and in a restricted area around Wychwood, principally escapees from a captive parkland herd.

Fallow and muntjac are present in high densities throughout the CNL and in significantly increasing numbers. Roe are present at low to medium densities in many parts of the CNL and are much easier to control and protect crops against than both Fallow and Muntjac.

The extension in geographic range of deer and the increase in deer densities have been encouraged by a lack of management in many areas, changes in land use (particularly the move to year-round crops), expansion of woodland and tree cover, and increased habitat connectivity. These have increased suitable habitat for both deer foraging and shelter.

In addition, warmer winters mean that there is a more plentiful supply of food all year round, with fewer and shorter periods of harsh conditions, resulting in higher rates of breeding success and survival.

There is currently no reason why the trend in increasing deer numbers and range expansion will not continue.

The deer population in the Cotswolds National Landscape

Thermal imagery drone surveys have been undertaken in two areas of the CNL in 2023 and 2024. The surveys covered 52,870ha (17.5% of the CNL) and established the population densities of fallow, muntjac and roe for those areas. From those figures the deer population of the CNL can be estimated.

Species	Average density km ²	Estimated population
Fallow	4.4	8,967
Muntjac	3.5	7,133
Roe	3.0	6,114
TOTAL	13.7	22,214

A SUSTAINABLE POPULATION OF WILD DEER

A sustainable population of wild deer in the Cotswolds is one which is in balance with the environment and is not having negative effects on the economic or social needs of those who live, work in or visit the Cotswolds. There are clear signs that this balance is not being achieved:

- Current densities of *fallow deer* are already too high in many areas and are having a negative impact on sensitive habitats. These populations must be reduced if a sustainable balance is to be achieved. In particular there is the need to focus on reducing fallow does. Surveys have shown a gender imbalance in the fallow population with does constituting 66% - 75% resulting in the growth of numbers.
- *Muntjac* numbers and densities are increasing and are having negative impacts on sensitive habitats and need to be reduced. Many game dealers do not take muntjac because of its relatively small size and as a consequence are often less of a focus for stalkers.
- *Sika* are a highly invasive species and are causing significant problems across the Purbecks in Dorset and should be eradicated from the wild whilst this is still a viable option.
- The level of *roe deer*, whilst currently not causing unacceptable damage, will need to be monitored and appropriate management put in place if negative impacts increase. There may capacity for an increase in the population to a sustainable level in some areas of the CNL, but only where fallow and muntjac populations have been significantly reduced.

ISSUES AND IMPACTS

Habitats & Land Use

Many Cotswolds woodlands (a significant number of which are small ancient woodlands particularly vulnerable to damage from deer) including new plantations, are suffering from the adverse impacts that high densities of deer can have. These impacts include

over-browsing of trees and shrubs (which damages tree saplings and coppice stools); over-grazing of the understory (which prevents, trees, shrubs seedlings and other flowering plants from regenerating so reducing the biodiversity of woodlands); and fraying (which strips bark from trees reducing their timber value and often causing infection and death).

National and local targets to expand tree cover will facilitate the spread and growth in deer numbers. Without reducing deer populations to sustainable levels, woodland targets will be compromised.

Muntjac are of particular concern in terms of biodiversity loss as their indiscriminate and intensive grazing habits can prevent coppice regeneration and contribute to the loss of ground flora.

Deer management is essential for the protection, management and enhancement of both ancient woodland and commercial forestry within the Cotswolds.

Deer also harm agricultural and horticultural crops adjacent to woodland, through grazing, browsing and trampling action. They may also visit and damage gardens in rural, suburban and urban areas.

Deer Vehicle Collisions

The growth in the number of deer, combined with the growth in road traffic volume and speed, means that there are an increasing number of road traffic accidents involving deer.

It is estimated that there may be up to 74,000 deer-related road traffic accidents each year across the UK³, raising obvious safety and animal welfare concerns (10% of deer hit by vehicles subsequently die of their injuries away from the collision site). Hotspots for deer collisions are the environs of Bath and Stroud, the escarpment between Painswick and Cheltenham, and Wychwood⁴.

Disease

Deer suffer from or may be implicated in the spread of zoonoses such as Lyme disease, and animal diseases such as Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB), Foot and Mouth, and Bluetongue.

In the Cotswolds bTB is of particular concern. A survey of tuberculosis in deer in South-west England and the Cotswolds found a prevalence of bTB in two of the three areas surveyed in the Cotswolds, with levels reaching 15.9% and 8.1%. One population of fallow deer in the Cotswolds had a prevalence of 26%⁵

³ <https://bds.org.uk/information-advice/issues-with-deer/advice-for-drivers/>

⁴ <https://bds.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/DVC-hotspot-maps-2010-2019.pdf>

⁵ Report of the 2006 – 2007 South-west England and Cotswolds Survey of Tuberculosis in Deer, Defra, August 2008

CURRENT DEER MANAGEMENT

Wild deer move through the Cotswold landscape without regard to ownership boundaries underpinning the need for collaborative management. The need for deer management at a landscape scale has been accepted in the Cotswolds by a number of organisations and landowners. However, currently there is only one Deer management Group within the National Landscape, the Central Cotswolds Deer Management Group, centered on the area around Calmsden. There is an urgent need for landowners to collaborate and establish Deer Management Groups for other areas of the CNL. Farm Cluster Groups can also play a part in coordinating deer management, as is being explored by the North East Cotswolds Farm Cluster.

Some financial support for deer management is available through Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier schemes⁶ where deer have been identified as a threat in the Woodland Management Plan.

Population monitoring and impact assessment

Traditional approaches to monitoring deer population on farms and estates have relied on direct counting of deer by people, or indirect observations such as sampling dung or fraying sites.

More recently, thermal imagery drones have been developed and used. Drones can quickly cover large areas, significantly improving the understanding of population numbers and characteristics. Drones are ideal for supporting a collaborative approach to managing deer over large areas.

The effect of deer management can be demonstrated by means of a Habitat Impact and Deer Activity Assessment⁷. The recommended methodology is based on walking through woodland recording signs of deer and their impact to establish a baseline. The survey is then repeated to monitor the effect of managing deer.

Population counts and impact assessment are used to establish deer management targets.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/countryside-stewardship-grants/ws1-deer-control-and-management>

⁷

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63f8c4058fa8f527f9834c98/WS1_Deer_Habitat_Impact_Activity_Survey_Guide_.docx#:~:text=The%20method%20is%20based%20on,gross%20activity%20and%20impact%20level

Venison marketing

Currently, the majority of deer carcasses that are produced from deer culling in the Cotswolds are sold direct to game processors outside the CNL⁸. Prices fluctuate according to regional and national demand.

Changes to the Meat Hygiene Regulations have relaxed some constraints on the production of wild game meat (including venison). This could create new opportunities for small producers seeking to sell local venison directly to the consumer.

FUTURE ISSUES AND OPTIONS

Unregulated and unsustainably high numbers of deer will be a major impediment to achieving some of the management objectives for the CNL. Concern arises because increasing deer populations in the Cotswolds are likely to result in:

- Increased adverse impacts on the biodiversity and ecological condition of ancient and other woodland.
- A threat to achieving net zero carbon and nature recovery targets resulting from deer damage to trees and shrubs.
- Economic damage resulting from harm to timber and other woodland produce.
- Increasing costs of planting and managing trees and shrubs.
- Greater incidence of disease, including bluetongue, and bTB.
- More Deer Vehicle Collisions with the increasing likelihood of both human and animal casualties.

Conversely there are potentially positive benefits to be gained through the active management of the deer population, including:

- A viable local venison industry, potentially benefitting from Cotswolds branding and promotion, producing low-carbon food and contributes to a sustainable food economy
- Creating opportunities for local people and visitors to watch and enjoy deer, for example on guided walks.

Sources of Advice and Support for deer management

Deer management advice, including to the local Deer Management Groups is provided through the Forestry Commission.

Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, South Gloucestershire and Bath & North East Somerset:
southwest.fce@forestrycommission.gov.uk

Worcestershire and Warwickshire:

⁸ Central Cotswolds Deer Management Group 2022

nwwm@forestrycommission.gov.uk

Oxfordshire:

southeast.fce@forestrycommission.gov.uk

Woodland creation and mitigating the impacts of deer:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/woodland-creation-and-mitigating-the-impacts-of-deer/woodland-creation-and-mitigating-the-impacts-of-deer>

The British Deer Society provides information on deer biology, ecology and behaviour, and provides training in deer management and avoiding hazards:

<https://bds.org.uk/>

The British Quality Wild Venison Standard was launched in 2023 to develop a growing market for British wild venison by establishing a quality standard for producers and processors with traceability to increase consumer confidence -

<https://britishqualitywildvenison.co.uk/>

The Country Food Trust has set up the Wild Venison Project promoting the use of wild venison in restaurants and donating this sustainable and extremely lean meat to alleviating food poverty. The Trust has it's England office in Wotton-Under-Edge.

<https://www.thecountryfoodtrust.org/wild-venison-project/>

NOTES

The Cotswolds National Landscape Board has the statutory duty to pursue the following two purposes:

- a) to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB; and
- b) to increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB.

In fulfilling these purposes, the Board has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of people living in the AONB.

Purpose of the Board's Position Statements

The primary purpose of the Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) Board's position statements is to expand on relevant policies in the Cotswolds National Landscape Management Plan. They provide further context, guidance and recommendations in relation to specific policies and associated issues. They are not intended to create new policies.

The Board's position statements are also intended to help local authorities, developers and other relevant stakeholders:

- to further – and positively contribute to - the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the CNL;
- to ensure that the purpose of AONB designation is not compromised by development and that the natural beauty of the CNL is conserved and enhanced;
- to fulfil the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Practice Guidance (or, where relevant, National Policy Statements) with regards to AONBs and the factors that contribute to their natural beauty;
- to take account of relevant case law;
- to have regard to and be consistent with the CNL Management Plan and guidance published by the Board;
- to emulate best practice in the CNL and other protected landscapes;
- to develop a consistent and coordinated approach to relevant issues across the whole of the Cotswolds National Landscape and its setting.

Website: <https://www.cotswolds-nl.org.uk/>