

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest and Commons	8 September 2014
Subject: Epping Forest: Deer Management of the South West Essex Deer Herd on the Buffer Lands and Epping Forest.	Public
Report of: The Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 21/14	For Decision

Summary

The purpose of this report is to summarise the performance of the 2013//14 deer cull; to provide details of the 2014 deer count and propose 2014 deer cull targets for both Fallow and Reeves Muntjac Deer on the Buffer Lands and Epping Forest, reflecting the objectives set out in the Deer Management Plan (DMP) adopted by your Committee on 10th September 2012. The DMP recommended a 30% increase on the number of Fallow Deer culled, as part of a gradual population reduction over 5 years to 150 spring Fallow Deer, providing an average spring population density of 3 per 100 acres across the 5,146 acre count area.

The 2013/14 deer cull target was for 123 Fallow Deer and as many Reeves Muntjac Deer that could be shot across the count area. The actual City of London cull amounted to 65 Fallow and 18 Reeves Muntjac. Cull data from the area's other 12 landowners is not available. The Fallow Deer cull was therefore only 53% of the set cull figure. The culling shortfall was the result of low Deer numbers on the 15% of land in the count area under the City of London's direct culling control.

The 2014 day time deer count recorded 505 Fallow and 44 Reeves Muntjac. This shows a 69% increase on the previous year's Fallow Deer figure of 299. 44 Reeves Muntjac were also recorded as opposed to 43 in 2013. The number of Deer Vehicle Collisions (DVCs) in the Forest locality, an area wider than the count area, also increased from 64 to 123 DVCs, an increase of 92%. Year-on-year populations vary significantly due to variable factors such as weather; patterns of disturbance and the availability of winter food supplies. The more reliable five-year average for 2010-2014 (based on four counts) is 285 Fallow Deer, up 7% on the previous five-year average for 2009-2013 (based on four counts). This equates to an average population density of 5.5 deer per 100 acres. The proposed cull figures for the 2014/15 season recommended to your Committee are 105 Fallow Deer and as many Reeves Muntjac Deer as possible. The lower cull figures have been set using data from the deer count, recommendations from the DMP and the experience of stalkers during the 2013/14 cull.

While the City of London remains grateful to neighbouring landowners for their cooperation over access during the deer count, sadly, this cooperation has not extended to the sharing of cull figures which was to be mediated by the Deer Initiative. Without improved cooperation, the target of collective progress to a reduced deer population in the South West Essex herd by 2017 is in jeopardy. This report recommends increased engagement with local landowners to improve co-operation on the setting of a herd cull figure and the collation of progress by all landowners.

Recommendations

Members are asked to

- Approve the cull figure of up to 105 Fallow deer and an unlimited cull of Reeves Muntjac, for the 2014/15 season in line with the Deer Management Plan.
- Approve a further meeting between the major estate owners for land within the South West Essex Deer Herd mediated by the Deer Initiative to encourage increased co-operation on the overall management of the Deer Herd.

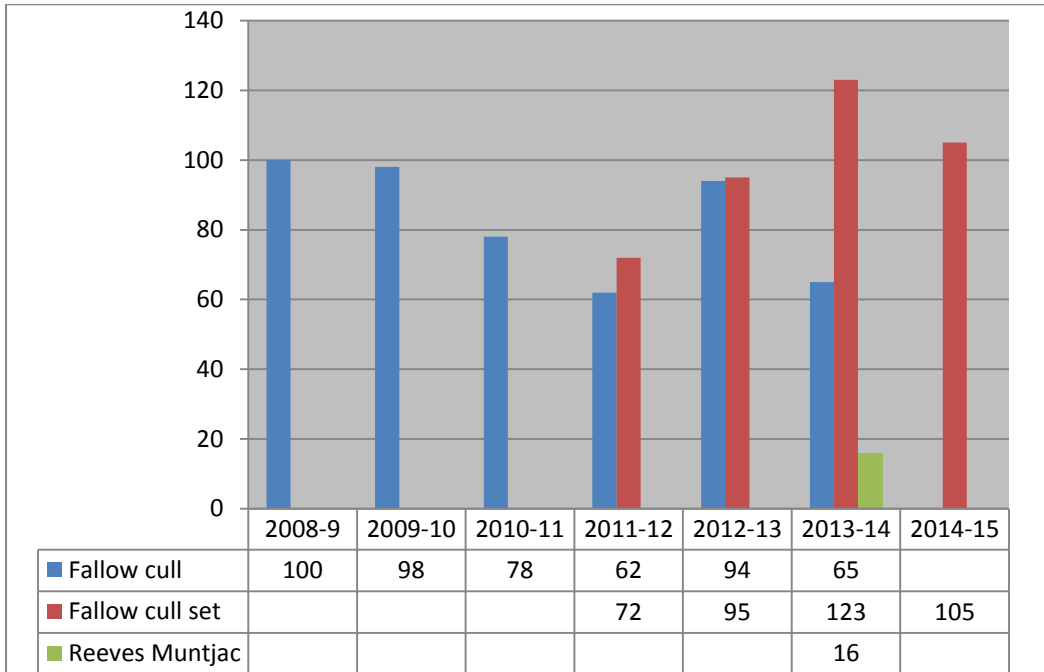
Main Report

Background

1. This annual report provides an update of the outcome of the spring deer count, the annual deer cull and proposes cull figures for the next season as a result of the data collected. .
2. An annual report to your Committee was approved by your Committee on 9 July 2012 as part of the “Deer Management on the Buffer Lands” (SEF 21/12). A second report was received at your meeting of 10 September 2012 entitled “English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) application for the management of deer and woodlands in the Epping Forest Buffer Land Estate.” (SEF 30/12) which required a “Deer management Plan” (DMP) to be written which was approved by your Committee as “Appendix B” to the above mentioned report.
3. The DMP concluded that the level of damage by both Fallow and Reeves Muntjac Deer, to Buffer Land woodlands, was much higher than expected and that the level of cull targets needed to be set at a higher level. The DMP recommended a 30% increase on the number of Fallow Deer culled, as part of a gradual population reduction over 5 years to 150 spring Fallow Deer, providing an average spring population density of 3 per 100 acres across the 5,146 acre count area.
4. The recommendations of the DMP were taken into account when the annual Fallow deer cull figure was set by the Head Forest Keeper for the 2012/13 deer season. An increase of 30% on the previous year’s cull figure was set as part of the recommended 5 year plan to reduce spring herd numbers to 150. The resulting cull figure for 2012/13 was 95, while the actual cull achieved was 94. See Table 1 below.
5. The Deer Act 1991 restricts the ‘window’ for culling deer to between the 1 hour before sunrise and 1 hour after sunset. One of the concerns associated with the proposed larger scale cull was that the deer would change habits and become more nocturnal and increase their range due to the increased disturbance. This change in habit may restrict the amount of deer that could be effectively culled.
6. The DMP also recommended that the culling of Reeves Muntjac should be seen as a much higher priority. The licenced stalkers were therefore

instructed to cull as many of the population, estimated at 150, as possible in the 2013/14 season.

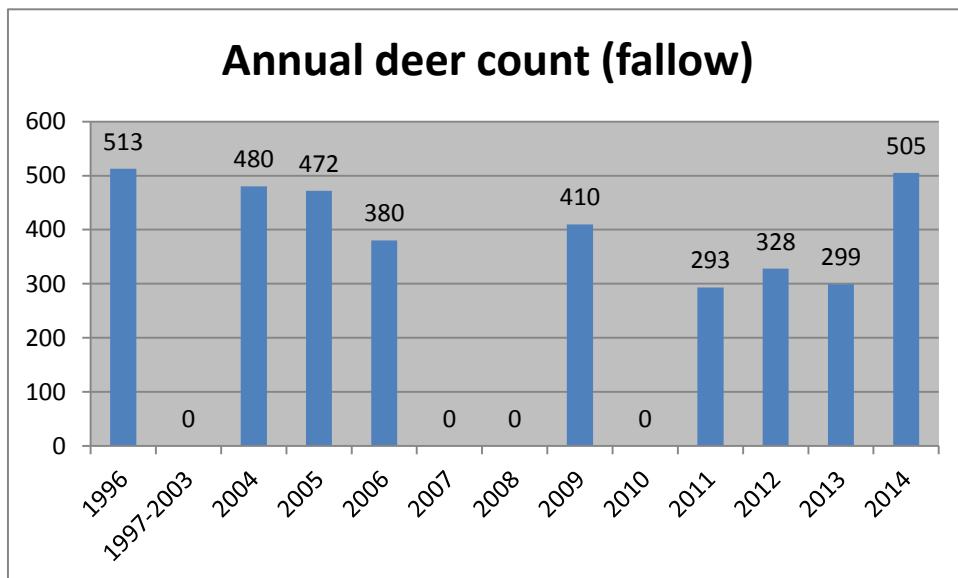
Table 1
Annual cull figures



Current Position

- The annual “day time deer count” took place on 12th March 2014 which resulted in a count of 505 Fallow deer. This shows a 69% increase on the previous year’s figure of 299. (See Table 2 below.) 44 Reeves Muntjac were also recorded as opposed to 43 in 2013. 101 Fallow Deer were counted in the 770 acres of Epping Forest Land, which represents 15% of the count area.

Table 2
Annual day time count figures



8. Year-on-year populations vary significantly due to variable factors such as weather; patterns of disturbance and the availability of winter food supplies. The more reliable five-year average for 2010-2014 (based on four counts) is 285 Fallow Deer, up 7% on the previous five-year average for 2009-2013 (based on four counts). This equates to an average of 5.5 deer per 100 acres almost double the DMP target of 3 deer per 100 acres.
9. In line with the recommendations of the DMP and using the data from the annual day time count, the annual cull figures for fallow deer are set each year in order to maintain a reduction in the number of deer counted in the spring until the annual count is reduced to the recommended figure of 150 and the desired ratio of males/females, young/ mature is achieved.
10. There are several contributing factors to the change in deer distribution recorded on the 2014 daytime count;
 - a. The milder winter has led to improved deer fecundity
 - b. The 2013/14 winter was one of the wettest on record restricting deer mobility; this coincided with the doe season, 1st November to 31st March.
 - c. 2013 was a 'Mast year' which meant there was a large amount of natural food, causing the deer to be more nomadic and spend more time in an area where they found the food, often on land where there was not any deer management taking place.
 - d. The cumulative increase in cull percentages over the past years has caused pressure on the Fallow herd encouraging deer to increase their range beyond the influence of the licenced stalkers.
 - e. The cull area managed by The City of London licensed stalkers is only 15% of the total area.
 - f. Not all City of London Buffer Land is currently included in the stalking agreement. On the daytime count in excess of 100 Fallow were seen on land, owned by the City of London, but not currently under the management of the licenced stalkers, including part of St Thomas' Quarters, Fern hill Wood and land North of Cobbing Brook adjacent to the Breach Barns static home site. To maximise efficiency there needs to be a more flexible approach to active deer management to prevent the Fallow deer taking refuge on land owned by The City of London but not under the existing deer management agreement.
11. The Muntjac cull so far this year stands at 16. As this species has no close season the culling can take place at any time of year, giving a greater chance for the licenced stalkers to reduce the numbers to an acceptable level. See Table 1 above. The Reeves Muntjac population has remained fairly static, an increase of 1 animal, this is likely to be due to the very wet Winter, Muntjac breed year round and any fawns born during wet weather will have a high mortality rate.
12. In 2012, the tagging of Fallow fawns was piloted for the first time. The aim was to further evaluate the extent of the Fallow range. This has now entered into a 3rd project year. Observations show that the South West Essex herd moves freely from East of Copped Hall to the edge of Harlow at Latton Priory/Hastingswood. It should be noted that there are current plans for development to take place over the Latton Priory area, which may place more

pressure on the Fallow population and contribute to further displacement which will directly impact future numbers.

13. While the deer count area extends to 5,146 acres, the area of land under the direct management of the Conservators included in the cull is approximately only 770 acres, or 15% of the land covered in the annual count. The remainder is owned by some 12 landowners, many of whom have differing views on and priorities for deer management. Some landowners apply significant pressure on the deer herd pushing them into quieter areas. A cooperative approach to Deer Management has been explored with these neighbours. Landowners remain very supportive in the annual count activity, but this level of co-ordination has not extended to joint cull setting and the comprehensive sharing of cull data.
14. The remaining 12 neighbouring landowners, which cover the remaining 85% of the count area, employ stalkers to control the deer numbers, these cull figures are not obtainable for reasons previously stated. The total number of stalkers on this land extends to some 12 individuals. One other area is managed under a EWG Scheme and this scheme has a cull of 70 Fallow and unlimited Reeves Muntjac. During the 2014 daytime count 20 of the total Reeves Muntjac of 44, were counted within this one area.
15. The numbers of "Deer Vehicle Collisions" (DVCs) in the Epping Forest area have not mirrored the changes in the annual day time count figures. The year, 1 March 2013 to 28 February 2014 the figure was 123 DVCs as opposed to the previous five year average of 64 DVCs, an increase of 92%, with the 2014 annual day time count showing a 62% increase in numbers. Though a matter of concern it should be noted that DVCs are measured across a much larger area than the count area. DVCs are also not a simple response to overall deer populations, and are the result of a range of factors including increased reporting; traffic volumes and the level of disturbance from estate operations and visitors.

Options

16. There are a number of options available to your Committee:-
 - Option One is to increase the 2013/14 cull figure of 123 Fallow Deer by the 5 year average of 7% to 132 Fallow Deer within the existing area. This is not recommended as it would risk increasing the disturbance 'window' around sunset and sunrise and potentially further reduce the Deer population available for culling at this time.
 - Option Two is to retain the cull figure at 123 Fallow Deer within the existing area. Again this not recommended as available deer numbers in 2013/14 could not justify the cull level.
 - Option Three is to reduce the cull figure by 15% to 105 Fallow Deer within the existing area which represents 50% of the 2013/14 increase, but still may be more than the potentially available deer on existing City of London land.
 - Option Four is to reduce the cull figure by 15% to 105 Fallow Deer and increase the cull area to include part of St Thomas' Quarters, including Fernhill Wood and City of London land North of Cobbins Brook to maximise the cull potential and prevent the deer taking refuge in City of London land outside the current deer management agreement.

Proposals

17. It is proposed that Option Four is approved, to increase the cull area. This option represents a more realistic use of current resources to meet the annual cull requirement. This is consistent with relevant advice and guidance from a range of organisations including Natural England.
18. In order to maximise the effective cull for 2013/14 a proposed minimum cull figure for 2014/15 of 105 Fallow deer is proposed. See Table 1 above. The proposed cull figure of 105 Fallow is recommended to be broken down as follows:
 - Fallow Bucks over 2 years old will not be culled to try and increase the number and quality of mature Bucks.
 - Prickets (1 to 2 years old male) 17
 - Buck fawns (up to 1 year old male) 5
 - Does (female) 69
 - Doe fawns (up to 1 year old female) 14
19. The Superintendent has previously given undertakings to market test the stalking contract in line with City of London Procurement Service guidance and a wider review of estate contracts and licences. The current contract holders the Cobbins Brook Deer Management Group have indicated that a three year stalking agreement would be preferential in managing infrastructure needed to support a cull.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

20. The proposal, if approved, meets ***The City Together Strategy: the Heart of a World Class City 2008-14*** vision of a *World Class City* and, specifically, theme 3 of its 5 themes 'a world class city which protects, promotes and enhances our environment'.
21. The report also supports the Open Spaces Business Plan 2014-17 aims of protecting, promoting and enhancing our environment by delivering sustainable working practices to promote the variety of life.

Implications

22. **Financial-** The culling of deer on the Buffer Lands is currently carried out at no cost to the Conservators. Four stalkers Licensed by The City of London carry out the cull and in return the carcasses of any deer culled become the property of the stalker.
23. **Risk Implications-** All of the licensed stalkers are fully qualified and hold all necessary firearms and food hygiene certificates to legally carry out the cull. Stalkers all have £10 million insurance cover to indemnify the City of London and produce annual risk assessments covering all tasks involved with culling the deer.
24. **Licensed stalkers-** Who are all qualified deer managers, provide all their own equipment and are obliged to follow policies laid down by the Head Forest

Keeper in respect of numbers of deer culled, times/days when stalking is permitted, areas allocated to each stalker and records to be kept. There is a commitment for the stalkers to carry out at least 100 outings each year, this has been exceeded and adds up to over 400 man hours in the season. Epping Forest conditions prevent the gralloching (disembowling) of deer on public access land.

25. **Legal Implication** - Under section 4 of the Epping Forest Act 1878, Deer on Forest Land are considered to be the property of the Conservators 'to be preserved as objects of ornament in the Forest'. Outside the Forest, Deer are wild animals, or *ferae naturae* under common law, and are not owned by anyone. A landowner has the right to kill or take game on his or her land or permit others to do so subject to statutory restrictions. The Deer Act 1991 restricts the killing of deer (other than Muntjac) during the close season and at night other than under licence.

Conclusion

26. In the absence of natural predators, the culling of deer on the Buffer Lands is a necessity that benefits the overall health of deer populations, together with the economic viability of agricultural crops and grasslands. Critically for Forest Land and the Buffer Land woodlands, the South West Essex deer population needs to be managed at levels which allow sufficient levels of woodland regeneration through the growth of sufficient numbers of young tree seedlings, understorey plants and shrub species. Combining the future management of the woodlands with that of deer populations, particularly through the closer coordination and control of culling operations will be beneficial to all concerned and will help maintain this important area in the years ahead.
27. Given the wide range of the Epping Fallow Deer herd, which has recently been confirmed by ear tag observations, it is important that the 12 significant landowners in the 5,146 acre count area improve the current level of cooperation around shared objectives, counting, cull targets and cull reporting if the ambition of a sustainable deer herd is to be achieved by 2017.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 - Map of annual day time deer count area
- Appendix 2 - Map of woodland within the daytime count area

Background Papers:

"English Woodland Grant Scheme application for the management of deer and woodlands in the Epping Forest Buffer Land Estate." (SEF 30/12)

10 September 2012

University of East Anglia deer survey, "Journal of Wildlife Management" 7 March 2013

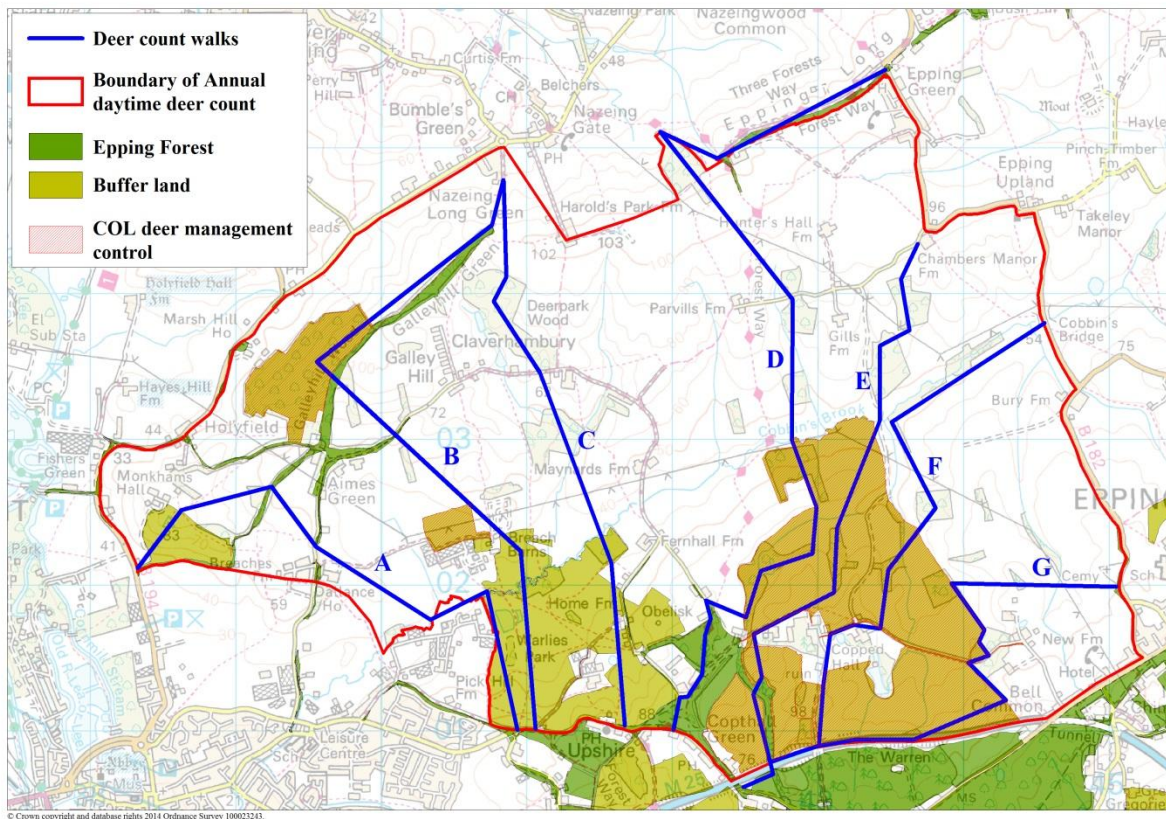
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- Appendix 2 – Map of woodland within the daytime count area.

