

The Ashridge Approach to Deer Management

An overview of the local situation / Local deer collisions and its impacts

1. Brief history of deer at Ashridge

- Ashridge began life as a monastery in the 13th Century and at this time Fallow deer were introduced to a small medieval deer park (approx 200 acres) to provide a ready source of fresh meat.
- Following the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1539 Ashridge became a royal Estate and the Fallow deer were regularly hunted for sport.
- In later years however the Park contained both Fallow and Red Deer although they were kept as separate herds which was common practice at the time. (The first documented mention of the Red Deer is in 1681).
- The Park was expanded over the centuries to its maximum size of nearly 1000 acres and the deer continued to be managed for sport and meat by a Park Keeper or Verderer who lived in the tall lodge in the centre of the Park from which a geometric pattern of rides radiated out across the Park, allowing him to oversee his herds.
- Deer remained in the Park (with the exception of a few escapees) until the sale and threatened break up of the Estate in the 1920s, following the death of Lord Brownlow.
- At this time the Red deer were caught and most were taken to Richmond Park although others went much further afield.
- The Fallow deer however had a very different fate.
- The wrought iron fencing around the deer Park was also sold and the story goes that the fencing was removed before most of the Fallow deer were caught. This allowed the Fallow herd, which had been imprisoned since the 13th Century to go free and become the wild herd that roams Ashridge today.



- This story may be somewhat but of course the result was that during the 20th Century the numbers of Fallow deer in the Ashridge area has steadily grown and management of the herd and control of numbers is one of the major challenges we now face.



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- In particular as the number and speeds of cars on the roads through the Estate have built up over the years so has the number of deer / vehicle collisions.
- This issue together with a need to manage deer numbers so as to reduce damage to farm and forestry crops and also to the natural habitat necessitates a significant annual cull.

2. The modern Estate and the NT Management of wild Deer

The present Ashridge Estate extends to approximately 5000 acres and comprises woodland, parkland, chalk downland and farmland.

The Estate is also crossed by several very busy roads often used as commuter 'rat runs'.

On National Trust properties deer are generally a welcome and acceptable component of the fauna and this is very much the case at Ashridge.

The Trust's objectives in managing the wild Fallow deer herd are threefold:

- i. ***to protect desired natural plant communities.*** About three quarters of the Estate is designated SSSI and the deer are a serious threat to the quality of the habitat.
- ii. ***to contain damage to commercial crops.*** Particularly farm crops which do suffer significant damage in some areas.
- iii. ***to reduce the incidence of road traffic accidents involving deer.*** Ashridge as we know is a particular black spot for deer casualties which of course gave rise to the project we are discussing today. We record as many of the deer road casualties as possible over the Estate and the surrounding roads and in 2004/2005 they reached a peak of 125 casualties over that year.



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- Most of the casualties are Fallow deer however we do have a reasonable number of Muntjac deer and these also contribute to the casualty numbers.
- Management options to try and reduce the incidence of deer / vehicle collisions also fall broadly into three categories:

- i. **vegetation management;** This broadly means roadside vegetation and visibility splay.
- ii. **use of reflectors or other deterrents to reduce road casualties;** Over the years at Ashridge we have tried the more traditional deer mirrors with what I am convinced is very limited effect.



iii. **culling.**

- A combination of these three usually provide the most effective strategy.
- However I should stress that the key element in the reduction of deer collisions is the reduction of deer numbers and that necessitates the effective management of the Fallow herd.
- Speed of course is the principle cause of incidents and as we all know lower speeds give both the driver and the deer a much better chance of avoiding each other. It is hoped that if we can reduce the speed, and if possible the volume, of traffic we will see the numbers of incidents reduce.

3. Other factors which can contribute to deer vehicle collisions

- Visitor pressure - The Estate receives in excess of 500,000 visits a year many of whom are dog walkers.
- In recent years for a variety of reasons we have seen a steady increase in the number of dogs on the Estate and also a steady reduction in responsible dog ownership. Visitors have even been known to be actively exercising their dogs by allowing them to chase deer!
- This irresponsible dog walking very often results in deer being spooked or chased across busy roads with the inevitable result of a deer/vehicle collision. (Although last week, on one occasion it was actually the dog which was run over!!)



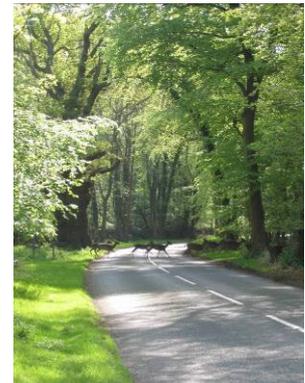
- Other recreation pursuits can also have an impact and will contribute in some cases to deer collisions. Mountain biking and horse riding (sometimes these are also combined with dog walking) can push the deer around and often across roads.
- One other very significant concern that I have is the government's South East and East of England growth agendas!
- This will not only lead to greater volumes of traffic on the roads in and around the Estate but also greater numbers of visitors to the countryside.
- This will have the direct impact of disturbance, pushing deer across roads but also the indirect impact of making the annual cull increasingly problematic.
- We do carry out a large annual cull at Ashridge and would hope that we will continue to be able to keep the deer numbers on a downward trend as at present, but it is becoming increasingly difficult.



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Raising awareness and publicity

- This is something else which is crucial in helping to deal with the problem of deer vehicle collisions.
- We need to regularly make drivers aware that when driving through places like Ashridge there is a very real risk of colliding with one or more deer crossing the road.
- We try each year to raise the profile of the issue in local newspapers, radio, etc and through this project we have also managed to interest the national media. I certainly think this does have a good effect especially at the most vulnerable times of year.



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Now moving on to the Impacts of deer collisions locally

- I'd now like to hand over to Rod Wilson, who is not only responsible for carrying out the annual cull on the Ashridge Estate but also deals with the vast majority of the deer road casualties in the Ashridge area.



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