

# RED DEER

Source: **WILD DEER MANAGEMENT IN IRELAND: STALKER TRAINING MANUAL** (2005) by Liam M. Nolan & James T. Walsh.

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Red deer are Ireland's largest land mammal. Once widespread, changes in habitat, in particular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and excessive hunting around the time of the famine in the nineteenth century led to a substantial reduction in numbers and distribution. Red deer are related to wapiti, the North American elk and the various species of Asiatic sika deer. Irish red deer were the most westerly race in the grouping *Cervus elaphus atlanticus* which also included Scottish and Norwegian red deer but each population had its own characteristics. Many of the park deer that were introduced to Ireland contain genes from Eastern European red deer, and also probably some wapiti and sika blood. There are several distinct populations of red deer in Ireland each with its own history, which are discussed below.

## Co. Kerry

The remnant herd of what is considered to be the last of the "native" Irish red deer is to be found in the Killarney area of Co. Kerry. The main stronghold is in the mountains to the west and south of Lough Leane, having been given protection at the time by the Muckross and Kenmare estates. The herd is not completely pure in that there were a number of introductions of stags to improve antler quality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The significance of this population and its close proximity with sika deer, and the fact that there is to date no evidence of hybridization between the two species, has led to special protection being accorded to this herd. No red deer can be hunted in Co. Kerry. Hunting, particularly during the rut, can break up established breeding herds and increase the chance of mating between red and sika deer.

While red deer have spread over a large area in Co. Kerry and into Co. Cork, the majority are to be found within the Killarney National Park. The population has increased from just 110 animals in 1970 to about 1,000 today.



*Red deer stag in Killarney National Park. Red deer are especially protected in Co. Kerry and may not be shot*

## Co. Donegal

This population, though originating in Co. Donegal, now extends across the Border into Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh. The last native red deer disappeared from Co. Donegal in the mid 1800s. The Glenveigh Deer Park was created in 1891 when 23,000 acres were enclosed within a 28-mile deer fence around Slieve Snaght Mountain. The stock was originally Scottish hill deer but was supplemented over the years with English park stock. The fence broke several times over the years and deer spread throughout the surrounding hills. Extensive afforestation in the area has allowed the deer to spread through much of the county and across into Forestry Commission plantations in the North. Security considerations on the northern side of the border meant that little deer control was done over a period of 30 years, allowing numbers to build and spread. The Northern side of the border in Co. Tyrone is also the site of a large sika population originating from both Baronscourt and Colebrooke estates. The two species now share common ground and there have been some reports of hybridization.



*Red deer hinds in woodland, Co. Donegal*

## **Co. Wicklow**

It is generally accepted that native red deer went into steep decline in Wicklow, as elsewhere, from the early seventeenth century onwards. Some authorities claim that there were no red deer in the county from 1600 until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when escapees from Powerscourt are known to have repopulated the northern end of the county. This claim is based on a lack of references to red deer in Wicklow in the available historical literature, although their presence is noted in several other counties through to the late nineteenth century.

Alternatively we may say that, in the absence of proof of extinction, red deer may well have survived, albeit in highly localised and small populations, through to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially given that there were a number of deer parks throughout Wicklow, Wexford and Carlow from the mid seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, from which occasional escapes of both red and fallow deer may have augmented any remaining stock in Wicklow, facilitating a toehold until their scant numbers were given a fillip in the 1920s, and their survival underwritten, by deer from Powerscourt.

*For many years they existed on the open mountain around the Sally Gap area, gradually extending southwards, at the same time as sika deer were also spreading, helped considerably by widespread planting of forests. Though hybridization had previously occurred within the confines of the park, widespread persecution, particularly of red deer in the 1930s and 1940s, saw regular appearance of red/sika*

*hybrids in the wild and once this process started total contamination of both species of deer was inevitable.*

Commercial shooting of deer for venison accelerated the process from the early 1980s. The red-like hybrids, being open mountain deer, were particularly vulnerable to overshooting and the widespread road network in the mountains made them susceptible to illegal lamping at night. Numbers have increased slightly since the inception of the Wicklow Mountains National Park but the red-type characteristics of the remaining deer are very diluted. Body size is relatively small, deer tend to have more white than cream rump patches, red-like deer rarely sport antlers of more than eight points and even then look more sika-like than red-like in structure. Rarely will one see a group of red-like deer in Wicklow without sika-like deer within the group.

*Red deer of imported genetic bloodlines are now feral in many parts of Ireland.  
The exceptional head on this wild red deer stag is evidence of his origins*

### **Co. Meath**

The basis of this population is the Ward Union Staghounds based in Dunshaughlin, Co Meath and formerly in Slane Castle and Ashbourne. This hunt follows the carted deer, that is to say, deer taken from the park and hunted until held at bay whereupon they are caught up again and returned to the park. From time to time individual carted deer eluded their pursuers and lived wild, in due course breeding. A thriving population has now developed extending from the Boyne Valley in Co. Meath into Co. Louth and south to north Co. Dublin and north Co. Kildare. These deer have impressive antler genetics, the park having imported bloodlines from Warnham Court in Sussex, England. Antler quality is helped greatly by the good quality feeding available in this fertile area of the country.

### **Co. Down**

A similar situation exists in Co. Down where the Co. Down Staghounds hunted deer from their deer park in Monalto near Ballinahinch; a feral population now exists in this area.

### **Co. Galway**

A substantial population of red deer has developed recently in Connemara on the western side of Co. Galway. There are two distinct sources of this population.

With the establishment of the Connemara National Park, it was decided in 1982 to deer-fence the park and translocate a group of native red deer from Co. Kerry to the

area to try to protect the Kerry strain from the possibility of hybridization. Not long after they arrived some deer broke the fence and a wild population developed. A second group of red deer escaped in the early 1990s from an enclosure in the Maam Cross area, further south. These were of English Park bloodlines and have moved through extensive Coillte forestry east towards Lough Corrib. There is thought to be some linkage now between this population and the original group in the Letterfrack area.

With the onset of deer farming there have in recent years been releases of red deer, both deliberate and accidental, in other areas of the country. At present there are known to be small feral populations in Tipperary, Wexford, Carlow, Sligo and the Dublin Mountains. Typically, these localised populations are short-lived unless the deer have access to extensive woodland. A small group of Kerry red deer are to be found on Inishvickillaune, one of the Blasket Islands still in private ownership. They were introduced in 1980 and have done reasonably well since, new blood in the form of stags from Muckcross having been introduced from time to time.

**Red Deer Male: Stag**  
**Red Deer Female: Hind**  
**Red Deer Young: Calf**

Red deer calves weighing about 6 kg. are born from late May until about the middle of June, though it is possible to get calves born later, particularly with first-time calving hinds. They are chestnut in colour, with cream spots across their backs. Hinds tend to have traditional calving areas, particularly in the open mountain situation. They leave the calf in thick cover, returning only a few times a day to suckle and clean it. Within two weeks the calf usually follows its mother for most of the day. By early autumn, the last traces of white spots are gone from the coat.



*Red deer calf*

Red deer have a well-defined social structure. Male and female deer live for most of the year as separate groups, coming together only during the rut or breeding season. The size of these single-sex groups will depend on the habitat. On the open mountain group size may be up to fifty animals but in the woodland situation five to ten may be a more likely number, this may be because feeding areas are better and more evenly distributed. Deer living in sheltered woodland, preferably oak or beech, with ample feeding and protected against extreme weather conditions, will have the advantage over deer living in more exposed conditions and sharing limited feeding with sheep.

*Red deer stag in newly established coniferous plantation*

Compared with sika or fallow deer, the habits of red deer make them relatively easy to see, count, assess and manage on open ground. The hind is the mainstay of the family unit and each group, whatever its size, tends to have a lead hind. Male calves usually stay as part of the group until their first rut as prickets. The hind group tends to have the same territory, usually the best grazing, all year round and the stags tend to move into this area during the rut. Dominance among the hinds is often settled by 'boxing', when they rear up on their back legs, striking out with their forelegs, to settle disputes regarding seniority. Hinds will bark when frightened or suspicious, this has the effect of alerting the other animals in the group to a potential threat. Sometimes they can alert the others in the group by just pricking their ears or stamping a forefoot. The only other noise that they make is an occasional squeaking, in communication with their calves.

Vital statistics of red deer vary widely, depending on their genetic background. Park type deer in Co Meath or on virgin territory in Co Galway will generally have higher body size and weights than woodland deer from Donegal, mountain red deer of Co. Kerry or the genetically compromised hybrid reds of Co Wicklow. However the following are guidelines (weights shown are live weights, not carcase weights):

**Red stag: Shoulder height 1.2 metres. Weight 150kg**

**Red hind: Shoulder height 1.1 metres. Weight 100kg**

This species of deer gets its name from the red or reddish brown colour of the coat in the summer months, being a light creamy colour inside the back legs. The summer coat is very short. Like all deer species there is a marked difference between the summer and winter coats. They have a 6-inch-long tail and a cream rump patch. In September the animal moults to its winter coat, which is grey-brown in colour. The spring moult from winter to summer coat is accompanied by a very scruffy appearance as it falls away over a couple of weeks.



*'Hybrid red deer' hinds in summer coat. Note faint spotting*

There are marked changes in the male during the rut. The neck thickens and a mane develops. There is staining of the hair of the underbelly in front of the penis where the animal urinates on itself. These changes get more pronounced as the animal gets older but each year they disappear when the rut ends. There is a characteristic odour associated with a red deer in the rut, which can often alert the stalker to its presence long before it is seen.

*Red deer hinds in winter coat*

The rutting stag roars, a distinctive deep sound that can travel over long distances, particularly on the open hill. This main bellow may be accompanied by a number of loud hoarse grunts. The red deer hybrids of Co Wicklow make a sound which has been described as a cross between the red deer roar and the sika stag's rutting whistle. Outside the rut, male deer tend to make little if any noise. The red deer rut usually runs from the end of September until the beginning of November.



*Each spring, red deer moult their winter coat and for stags, new antler growth starts*

Under Irish conditions the red deer hind will normally conceive in the rut of her second year at around sixteen months of age, thereby calving at two years of age. In the harsher climate of the Scottish Highlands this may be delayed until the hind is three or even four years. The pregnancy length is 240 days and should a hind not be mated while in oestrus, she will usually come into heat again 21 days later.

*Red deer hinds normally conceive at sixteen months of age*

It should be possible to arrive at an educated guess as to the likely age of an animal by studying its shape. The young male aged from three to six years has a straight back, a balanced body and carries its head erect. As he ages, the body becomes more concentrated in the forequarters, particularly during the rut. The antlers eventually regress with age, showing a less developed outline and shape, often losing the crown. The gait of a healthy young stag is rhythmic and paced with head erect. At a gallop or fast run, or under trees, the head is carried thrown back.

The hind has fewer but just as recognizable outward signs of aging; her body will thicken with age, her coat becoming duller and her flanks bonier. The skull is also heavier and nose apparently longer, her ears will be carried thrown back, as compared with a younger female, whose pronounced ears will usually be carried forward, especially when alert.



*Hybrid stags can have rump patches ranging from cream to pure white in colour*



*Hybrid hinds in summer coat – note faint spotting*



*Eight point 'red' hybrid and hybrid pricket,  
with sika-type deer in foreground.  
Note size differential*