



BIG FIVE KEY FACTS: THE RED DEER



* the red deer

Scientific name: Cervus elaphus

Gaelic names: fiadh ruadh (singular) or fèidh ruadha (plural) also damh (stag), agh (hind), laogh (calf), eilid (female red deer after one year).

Size: Red deer are the largest land animal in Britain and Ireland and the fourth-largest deer in the world. Male deer (stags) are larger than female deer (hinds) and those living in woodlands are larger than deer that live on the open hill.

Height and weight: Stag (open hill) 107-122cm at shoulder, 95-114kg, hind (open hill) 92cm at shoulder and around 30 per cent lighter than a stag.

Antlers: Only stags grow antlers and these can be over one metre in length (average less), with 4-5 'tines' (points) on each antler. They shed them each spring and they start to re-grow again immediately. The nourishing 'velvet' skin that covers new antlers is rubbed off in the late summer and early autumn. The number of tines is not a guide to a stag's age, although mature stags tend to have thicker antlers than younger ones with the same number of points. Woodland-dwelling red deer tend to have bigger antlers than those living in the open.

Typical diet: They eat grasses, dwarf shrubs including heather (important in times of winter snow) and blaeberry, and trees.

Life cycle: Hinds sexually mature at 2-4 years old. Calves (born with spotted coat, unlike plain adult coat) are born as singles (twins are rare) 235 days after autumn mating: typically in late May to June. They can run alongside their mother within hours. They are weaned at 9 months. Female calves will tend to stay with their maternal group well into adulthood but stags disperse when they are 2 to 3 years old. Life expectancy is rarely beyond 15 years and exceptionally up to 20 years in the wild. Both young and adult red deer spend most of the year in single-sex herds of variable size. They come together during the mating season or 'rut' in late September and October, when stags follow groups of hinds and dominant stags attempt to create and hold a harem.

Courtship and mating: Stags roar as part of their display to one another in their battle to win the rights to mate with a harem of hinds. Stags compete by roaring, ritual posturing and movements (such as parallel walks) and fights, with locked antlers. Around 1 in 20 rutting stags can be permanently injured in fights each year and nearly one-quarter are injured in some way, with a high likelihood of antler damage occurring during clashes.

Habitat: They use different areas of rough grazing at different times of year, moving upslope in the summer and seeking more sheltered areas in the winter. Hinds concentrate on relatively grass-rich habitats, stags usually graze on poorer, heather-dominated areas.

Status: They are very numerous across much of Scotland's open hill range. The overall population is around 350,000 – sufficiently numerous to lead to conflicts with woodland expansion and conservation interests in some places. The commercial stalking is an important and significant land use for the uplands of Scotland, bringing in millions of pounds of revenue a year. Scottish venison is internationally in demand as a tasty, low fat choice.

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Spotting tips:



Patience is needed to scan for herds from high vantage points, for example on one side of a glen.



Binoculars or a telescope are useful. In closer encounters be aware of the wind direction and sudden movements but be careful to keep your distance during the rut (autumn) when stags challenge one another and can be aggressive.



Certain roads overlook good deer areas, such as the one from Braemar to Mar Lodge. You can also see deer along the shores of Jura (a deer-rich island, whose name may derive from the Norse word for deer) from the local ferries.

Art & culture:

Parts of red deer, including bones and antlers, have been used as tools by people in Scotland since at least the Neolithic. The meat (venison) will also have been a source of food through those millennia. Bone mattocks and antler limpet hammers are two ancient tools. Gaelic hill names in some areas bear tainchel or eilreig / iolairig - linked names that derive from the former practise of driving herds of deer towards enclosed spaces that acted as traps, where they could be killed by waiting hunters. Red deer have a central place in Gaelic poetry and folk tails. Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain (The Praise of Ben Dorain) is thought by many to be one of the greatest nature poems composed in the Gaelic language. It was composed by Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir between the years of 1751 and 1766. Donnchadh Bàn worked as a forester in the moors and glens around Beinn Dòbhrain and Coire Cheathaich and he describes the relationship between the deer and the mountain as well as the flora and fauna.

Red deer stags with good antlers, especially, have been the subject of numerous paintings. Most famous of all is Sir Edwin Landseer's 'Monarch of the Glen', painted in oils on canvas in 1851. Part of the widespread fame of this work stems from its use in advertising by the Pears Soap Company and then in malt whisky trademarks. The original is in the National Museum, Edinburgh.