

## Reeve's Muntjac Deer

Garth Lowe

For many years now the numbers of this whippet sized deer has just locally kept on increasing, as it has in much of England. While out walking in the woodlands where I live it is quite easy to come across them, sometimes just sauntering across the path in front of you. They are even more noticeable by sound as they are also known as the barking deer. A single bark is made at regular intervals as a way of keeping in touch, but the barking does not set off the many others that are around. The males tend to have a territory including a number of females but the females seem to overlap theirs.

Visual evidence is quite common, firstly as a group of round small droppings on a path, and very tiny feet marks or slots in any available patch of mud. Bramble leaves also tempt them as they wander along, seen as a stem with a lot of leaves missing. Ivy is another tasty food and a fallen tree with ivy can be seen to be stripped of leaves. They prefer deciduous woodland but are also seen in conifer plantations, gardens and even railway embankments. In more populated areas they can cause serious damage in gardens as the Primula family is another of their favourites. Unless areas needing protection are well fenced this little deer will force its way into many places sometimes getting hung up while trying to squeeze through a wire fence.

They are one of our most ancient deer and have lower tusks, with fossils indicating they could be some 35 million years old, but of course are not native here but come from China. They appear to have been introduced to Woburn Abbey around 1838, with other possible releases later, and are now widespread with some estimates of 150,000 now present. Unlike other deer that give birth in the spring Muntjac will breed throughout the year possible giving birth three times every two years. This does mean the does spend nearly all their lives being pregnant!

They have no natural predators in Britain, the now extinct lynx would be a help but unlikely to find favour in a reintroduction program. It is possible the young are so small like a rabbit, creatures such as a fox could easily take them should they come across one. I have experienced a Sprocker dog finding one laid up in a tangle of bramble and it easily brought it out screaming.

This leads to the subject of are they dangerous? Two scenarios arise, one of causing numerous car accidents and also the fact they will attack dogs. After a dog we looked after got severely ripped one day and a Muntjac Deer ran off, it is better to err on the cautious side when in woodland, making enough noise to scare them off. One observation from an observant friend out walking was suddenly seeing a Fox appear and then a Muntjac apparently chasing it!

In the wild males can live to 10 years but females probably longer, in captivity longevity is much longer than this. The meat is considered to be of excellent flavour, but culling is awkward with does as they can be pregnant at all times of the year. The bucks of course can be shot in any month.

Having seen plenty evidence of them in this fairly wooded area of west Worcestershire north of the Malvern Hills, my opinion is they are not yet causing serious damage here and seem to have slotted in well with our local flora and fauna. But they have caused serious damage in woods elsewhere in Worcestershire and England by destroying re-growth of coppice and tree and shrub seedlings.