

Deer Walk with Russell Downs, Wildlife Officer

Home Park 18 December 2021

This informative and engaging Home Park walk, led by Russell, was organised by Rebecca Harvey for the benefit of the Friends of Bushy and Home Parks.

Russell started with a reminder that Home Park and Bushy Park were run by different charities, Historic Royal Palaces and Royal Parks. The two teams worked collaboratively as far as was possible.

The deer in Home Park

Home Park is home to approximately 300 fallow deer. (There are no red deer which would easily jump the barriers into local roads.)

There are four colours of fallow deer:

Common: tan/ginger coloured with lighter spots and a bold horseshoe marking on their rear.

Menil: like Common but paler without the obvious horseshoe mark.

Melanistic: which are dark brown or black.

White: this is a genetic trait. They are not albinos and have normal eye pigmentation.

Fallow deer life stages

Russell summarised the stages for the male fallows or bucks (cf. the term stag for Red Deer).

Fawn: first year

Pricket: male, in their second year when they begin to grow antlers, usually two initial spiked antlers but no branches.

Sorrel buck: three years old

Sore buck: four years old

Bare buck and buck: by which time they will have full palmate antlers

Antlers grow new each year from a pedicle which is present only in deer and giraffe. Antlers are initially covered in velvet, rubbed off by the deer in August.

On average, a deer in the wild would reach perhaps 8 or 9 years of age. In the Park, this would be closer to 14 years.

Why feed the deer?

Russell spread the contents of large bags of specially formulated feed for the resident fallow deer. They raced over eagerly followed closely by large flocks of gulls and some Egyptian Geese.

He said he was often asked why the deer needed to be given food. Home Park is a walled habitat; deer cannot forage further. Available natural food resources were therefore limited. Feeding usually took place between November and March when it's much needed by pregnant female deer and by weight depleted males after the rutting season.

Impact of Covid lockdown

As Russell observed, the pandemic lockdown brought out the best and worst in people. It was good that more people visited Home Park but not all dog owners were observant of the rules about dogs on leads. The Home Park herd suffered higher than usual deer fatalities with 12 killed by dogs. Birth rates were also lower than expected with delays in births by approximately 19 days in part due to females being chased by dogs.

Deer behaviour

The oestrous and breeding cycle was generally consistent annually in October. Males would wallow to make themselves as disgusting and smelly as possible, "leaking from everywhere", which attracted females. The buck defends a rutting stand where the does visit them to mate. On occasions, a female would fall outside the usual cycle and bucks would be keen to mate. If she proved to be unwilling, they would persist in compelling her to stand up using their antlers which could cause very serious injury.

About the cull

The cull was often questioned by the public and remains a sensitive area. Russell reminded us this was a confined, walled environment with no natural predators. If the population were allowed to grow in number unfettered, there simply wouldn't be enough food to go round. The consequence would be hunger, disease, parasitic infection and an unhappy existence. The cull was therefore necessary to maintain a healthy herd.

Great care was taken in the selection of deer for culling trying to emulate nature including the balance of male and female, old and young. The system to maintain a balanced herd was based on scientific research by specialist academics. Deer are counted, especially recording the number of new fawns that season. The park has a "carrying capacity" where enough food is available. Deer are observed carefully for problems. For example, some old bucks were at a stage where their antlers would be almost touching their backs; on occasions a seemingly productive deer could be suffering (one example was a doe still producing babies but who had no teeth and was wasting away); weaker fawns who might not have survived in the wild.

Contrary to some misguided speculation, deer culling was in no way driven by commercial gain. The wholesale price gained for venison does not even come close to covering the cost of the bags of feed.

Other mammals

Home Park also has rabbits and badgers, which may have been introduced by a well-meaning conservationist. Badgers are great excavators, so at some expense work has been needed to protect certain boundaries in the Park, such as entrance to the gardens. Badgers are nocturnal and can be seen emerging from their burrows at twilight. They are omnivores and eat a wide variety of foods, unfortunately this can include some rarer species of invertebrate, amphibians and hedgehogs.