



Herd reduction



Stalking guide and Zeiss pro stalker Paul Childerley looks at the subtleties of managing this unusual deer and his way of reducing overabundance with a collective effort

The Chinese water deer has proved to be a successful invader of middle England around its original area of release and escape. The fens also have a significant population, and as a whole England actually accounts for 10 per cent of this species' worldwide distribution. The two main concentrations mentioned above have been successful because of two very different reasons. Interestingly however, those reasons are also the limiting factors why this species hasn't mirrored the muntjac population explosion.

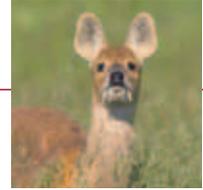
Introduced roughly at the same time as the muntjac, the CWD, although it became very common locally, hasn't adapted to myriad habitats as the muntjac has. Even more significantly, this deer is much more susceptible to predation by two significant predators. These are the pikey's lurcher, and to a lesser degree the fox.

The muntjac is much more cosmopolitan in its habitat tastes than the CWD and will live happily alongside other deer species. Furthermore, unlike its Asian relative it sticks less to open ground and stays close to woodland, hedgerows, thickets and briar patches. It will even live close to urbanisation, and inhabit overgrown gardens.

It is an aggressive species and will fight its corner. On occasion it will displace other deer species larger than itself such as roe, proving it to be the dominant breed in a shared habitat. Interestingly, for reasons that remain unexplained, in some areas roe and muntjac populations coexist happily, whereas in others the roe has been pushed out. Crucially, muntjac bucks are aggressive towards dogs when attacked.

By comparison the CWD is easy prey for dogs and its habitat preferences in middle England are much more akin to the hare: open fields with spinneys and other small woods. The fenland population feels at home in this unique reedy landscape, which is very similar to its original Asian habitat, but the species expansion here is limited as the fens give way to stock farms and un-kept arable farmland.

There is no doubt in my mind that kept ground has been the key to the CWD's survival and subsequent establishment in the wild. On kept ground there are fewer foxes, and poachers are more likely to look elsewhere to practise their despicable trade. Indeed our regular night patrols have made a massive difference, and we never become complacent. Where shoots coincide with a similar



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Class act: Using reliable and familiar tools is essential for sustained culling

management plan the CWD will prosper, but in areas where shoots are isolated with unkept ground in between, especially on smaller holdings, this species will always fail to become established.

Thankfully the estate I manage is right in the middle of the species stronghold and we have consistently produced an annual crop of mature bucks carrying top trophies. The quality of our deer has been maintained by careful management and selected culling. As I said, we have zero tolerance towards both poachers and foxes. We are a large commercial shoot, conscious of security and wildlife conservation. In the kind of environment that we provide, CWD can and do prosper very quickly.

This species has a high birth rate, with as many as five or more fawns not uncommon. They are vulnerable to foxes, as newly born fawns are often easily found in standing cereal crops with a distinct trod made by the doe to the seat. On fox-populated ground, many

fawns are taken this way – indeed 40 per cent of fawns die in the first few weeks of life, mostly to predation or exposure.

However, they are soon able to keep up with the doe and become less vulnerable until after the harvest. That's when their real problems begin. The combined harvester heralds the danger time, and a number of them fall victim to the header. But the open stubbles left behind expose the deer to the dog men, and this continues right through cultivation until spring when the crops become too high to run them down.

Problems of overabundance are easily overlooked, but this is something that should be addressed with equal vigour as the preservation aspect of conservation. Each year we tend to hold more stock than we should at the end of the game shooting season. We have a lot of shoot days, and the pheasants and partridges take up most of our available spare time. I tend to take out most of the



CWD: Culling

Equipment reviewed by: Paul Childerley

Product: SAKO 85 .22-250

Distributor: GMK = 01489 587500 = www.gmk.co.uk

Price: £1,710

Comments: Accurate, practical and affordable

Product: T8 MODERATOR

Jackson Rifles 01644 470223 www.jacksonrifles.com

Acquired from: R & K Stockcraft = 01908 561298

www.rkstockcraft.co.uk

Price: £244.99

Comments: Dependable favourite

Product: ZEISS VARIPPOINT 3-12x56

Distributor: Zeiss = 01707 871350 = www.zeiss.co.uk/sportsoptics

Price: £1,780

Comments: A deserved market leader

Product: ZEISS VICTORY HT 10x42 BINOS

Distributor: Zeiss = 01223 401525 = www.zeiss.co.uk/sportsoptics

Price: £1,630

Comments: Unbeatable in the field

Product: WINCHESTER SUPER-X .22-250 REM, 55-GRAIN SOFT POINTS

Distributor: Browning = 01235 514550 = www.browning.eu

Price: POA

Comments: Hard-hitting and accurate

medal heads I have earmarked during my rounds from 1 November to end of January, fitting in stalking clients between driven shoot days. The rut during December and January is a popular time to shoot trophy bucks. Culling, however, is mostly done in the months of February and March when more time can be dedicated to the greater work involved.

Targeted culling of CWD in the later months of the season can prove difficult to achieve on one's own. The deer get pushed about during the game shooting days, and as such become quite skittish to approach. They also have a propensity to lay out in the middle of our large arable fields. This necessitates a lot of crawling and the best use of any available dead ground to make a successful approach. Shooting distances are more usual to red stag hunting on the open hill and can be up to 250 yards. All guest stalkers and clients who help in the cull have to prove they are capable shots at this sort of shooting distance on the range before we set out.

A flat-shooting calibre is required, with a reliable rifle, optic, moderator and ammo combo that the operator is familiar with – there is no room for error in any live quarry shooting situation. For culling I personally prefer my .22-250 Sako 85 with Zeiss optics, a T8 mod and Winchester soft points. A lot of shots are taken prone so a good bipod is often an advantage.

The problem with leaving too many deer on the ground is twofold. Our estate grows a lot of commercial flower crops and the deer can have an adverse effect on these by biting of the flower head, but other than this they honestly do very little damage. However, as in most cases of overpopulation, parasites and disease are a real problem. I have seen scouring on CWD deer on other areas when in high densities, and emaciated animals with a clear worm burden. To avoid crashes the numbers must be efficiently

culled to maintain a healthy stock. This keeps disease at bay and worm burdens low.

During culling time I offer a management option to clients who would like to assist with the cull and shoot a number of cull beasts for an inclusive price. This is certainly good value, and opens up this species to stalkers who cannot justify the higher prices that come with shooting a trophy buck. Equally, many of those who have shot a trophy buck with me often return on the management hunts to experience more of the same stalking again at a relatively realistic price.

Cull hunting is a combination of guided foot stalking and high seat shooting for the inexperienced, while returning, qualified and experienced clients may hunt alone on a particular patch I've selected. A collective attempt at reducing the deer numbers by a well-briefed group is the single most effective way of reducing deer numbers with the minimal amount of disturbance. Minimum bookings are for two for two outings. It is a great experience and a wonderful opportunity for enthusiasts who haven't had the opportunity to get the chance to stalk them and do some real good at the same time.

We are a working shoot that has to make money so there has to be a charge, but it is incredible value to shoot a number of selected animals in a short period. Maximum effort for best effect – this policy has always worked well. It puts prime venison in the larder, makes a very valid contribution to the conservation of the local herd and is a lot of sport for at a realistic price. I can get a number of colleagues to help me out but to be honest I like to see clients enjoy the sport on my doorstep and the income is of course well received as it all helps the shoot to pay its way. ■

For cull hunting with Paul Childerley, call 07715 638934 or email paul@childerleysporting.co.uk.



Completing the quota: The results of good culling practice