

THE ROE DEER

By H. A. FOOKS

Roe deer have been called the "Fairies of the Woods" and their elfish charm and graceful movements certainly bear out this name. Even when found living in the proximity of man, they never lose their shyness in the same way as would the red or fallow under the same circumstances.

In spring and summer their coats are a foxy red unrelieved by any other colour except on the lips, which are black with a white patch near the corners of the mouth and a patch of yellowish hair on the target (the rump). Although they actually have a tail, this is not visible; yet many old prints and some modern drawings as well, show them with tails which would not shame a fallow.

The main charm of these animals is, to my mind, their restlessness and repeated display of some graceful movement or pose; for example, the old buck continually throw up their heads whilst grazing. Should roe be seen early on in the afternoon it can usually be taken for granted that they are young animals. The older they grow the fonder they get of the half-light of the dawn and dusk.

As summer advances into early autumn, that is between the last week in July and the first week in August, the doe comes into season and the buck during this period, like most other deer, will scarcely eat. The advent of the heat in the doe is made known to the buck by scent and by her oft-repeated calls. These calls are hardly audible to the human ear at more than a few yards distance. They are an incessant "peep-peep-peep", rather short and sharp and soft in tone and could easily be mistaken for the call of a bird. Under favourable conditions, the buck can hear this call over half a mile. I have called roe many times across open moor for long distances; yet my wife, who has been sitting not more than one hundred yards away, has not heard the calls. Both buck and doe have an alarm bark very similar to that of a dog. That of the buck is shorter and deeper than the doe's. A third cry is one that cannot be mistaken for anything else except what it denotes—terror and anguish. It is a rather quavering and high-pitched scream.

The old buck are at this time of the year far less wary than usual but, in spite of this, it is amusing to watch some of the old stagers taking precautions. Buck will follow the scent of a

doe and it is quite common to see one following a line like a hound. Whilst following a scent the buck's pace is usually an intermittent trot.

Like most woodland creatures, the senses of the roe are very acute, and from personal experience I should say that their sight and hearing are better than that of the red deer, but their powers of scent not quite so good at long distances.

For several months after the rut, the old buck become almost nocturnal and to those who do not know their habits, seem to disappear altogether.

The expenditure of energy during the rutting period must be quite incredible and buck will normally cover does between sixty and seventy times during the course of ten to fourteen days. In the intervals of copulation, the buck drives the doe at full gallop, and although the ground on which this takes place may be restricted, the actual distances covered must be very large. The rut is the climax of the previous six months' horn growing, grazing and resting which should result in the buck being in prime condition or in the correct term—"in pride of grease". At the end of the rut the buck is but a poor shadow of his former self and is unfit for human consumption. At this time too he again becomes very wary owing, no doubt, to his exhaustion; and he may know that this may have impaired his normally acute senses and will therefore take no risks during the hours of daylight.

At the approach of winter, the peltage changes from red to a grizzled grey and the hair itself becomes longer and more brittle; the target patch becomes larger and changes from yellow to a pure white, visible from long distances. At this season a curious second rut takes place. This once led to the belief that this was the "true" rut and it made the period of gestation only some five months when in actual fact it is nine. It is only comparatively recently that the discovery was made that the embryo was in the uterus of the doe in what may be called a suspended state of animation. From November onwards the embryo continues to grow abnormally fast. Perhaps this "false rut" is introduced by nature to stimulate certain secretions connected with the growth of the embryo. It is, however, a curious fact that does covered in the late autumn or early winter do not undergo the suspended animation period and kid more or less at the same time as those covered in August.

In any case most buck have shed their horns by this time of year and as the culminating period in the annual life of a male deer is the growing and cleaning of his antlers prior to the rut,

it would seem that a male denuded of his antlers would not be in the most suitable state to fight off any rivals.

Driven by hunger the roe will in winter, like any other starving animal, browse on anything it can find and they can scarcely be (but are) blamed for this. The buck unfortunately has one very destructive habit and this is his predilection for young growing conifers on which to polish his horns. He does not confine himself to a single one but will thrash all and sundry in demarcating his territorial boundary. The damage is often more apparent than actual as it is normal forestry practice to plant many more trees than are expected to mature.

The horns of a roebuck, if size is the criterion, are nothing to speak of, measuring when good, between 8 and 10 inches. But if beauty of form, colouring and general appearance mean anything, then the roe horn holds its own. The roebuck has two scent glands at the base of his antlers which are dormant in winter and reach their functional peak with the rut. These glands are depressed when the buck marks his territory and deposit a secretion on the twigs and branches which he thrashes with his antlers. He furthermore has two more scent glands between his cleaves and another two on each pastern. The latter are beneath two visible tufts of hair on the hind leg. It is for this reason that roe are a great attraction to hounds.

To the stalker no animal offers more fascinating sport yet the buck is only stalked with a rifle by a handful of enthusiasts. The vast majority of roe, both buck and doe, meet their end in drives or die of wounds, unfound. Many thousands of pounds are spent annually in pursuit of the red stag, yet were the roebuck more generally known and his very sporting qualities recognized, then the stalking of this animal would become a popular sport and possibly a lucrative one to the landowner. Incidentally, a roebuck will yield thirty pounds of good meat.

The roe is an intelligent beast and deserves a better fate than to be fired at with shot-guns at varying ranges, often to creep away and die a miserable and lingering death. Let us hope that lovers of the countryside may see the day when all deer are treated, not with sloppy sentimentality, but at least with fairness. They are, after all, among the most beautiful animals of our woodlands.