

## ROE DEER, FALLOW AND SIKA

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ROE AND FALLOW

*Dorset and Epping Forest*

Although roe deer, *Capreolus capreolus*, are at present fairly widely distributed in Britain, and in many areas are undoubtedly increasing and extending their range, their numbers and numerical trends vary greatly in different localities. It is, moreover, apparent that the status of the species, in given habitats, is conditioned by factors other than human control and the availability of adequate cover and keep. Relevant comparison may be made between the respective success and failure of attempts to reintroduce roe to Dorset and to Epping Forest. The increase of roe after their release near Milton Abbas, in Dorset, about the year 1800, was remarkably rapid and within a few decades they had become common in almost all suitable localities in the county. During the two world wars, particularly the 1939–1945 war, they suffered heavy casualties at the hand of farmers and others, yet in the opinion of many observers roe actually increased in Dorset during these periods.

One of the few districts of Dorset where roe deer are other than fairly plentiful is the neighbourhood of Powerstock and Hooke, near Maiden Newton. The large woods near these villages are frequented by wild fallow, and wherever the fallow are numerous roe are almost invariably absent. Roe, however, occur all round the periphery of the fallow territory and when fallow vacate or are driven out of one of the woods within their area, it is usual for a pair or two of roe to take their place.

Direct human persecution was wholly precluded in Epping Forest, where a number of roe from Dorset were released in 1884. It was thought that they would thrive in a wood of such dimensions, with its sufficiency of good food and freedom from disturbance. In the event their numbers increased only very slowly and failed to reach more than a fraction of that of the fallow deer in the same area. Shortly before the first World War a marked decline was noticed and by the early 1920's roe had vanished once more from the Forest.

It has been suggested that the failure of roe to re-establish themselves permanently in Epping Forest was due to a paucity of dense cover, or to the presence of some fungoid or other

obnoxious growth. Various other theories have aroused controversial interest but a wholly satisfactory explanation has not been forthcoming. Light may, however, yet be shed upon this mystery by seeking analogies between the history of the Epping Forest roe and that of deer in other areas where the species has of recent years decreased, or failed to establish itself in strength.

### *Sussex*

Inquiries which I have carried out in the Weald of north-west Sussex show that immediately prior to the second World War, roe were tolerably plentiful in the woods to the north of Rogate. Since 1939 they have greatly decreased. Deer drives are popularly supposed to have been the cause of this reduction which has amounted to 80 per cent or 90 per cent of the pre-war population. A parallel decrease of fallow deer has not taken place, in spite of the fact that deer have been slaughtered regardless of species and that fallow are, if anything, more vulnerable than roe to control. Before 1939 there were few or no fallow at large in this area, but war-time escapes from parks, enabled a colony of some size to establish itself. These have taken up regular abode in many large woods which were once exclusively tenanted by roe, but where roe are now rare. Has this incursion of fallow caused roe to disperse? Did Epping Forest fail as a desirable roe residence because it already contained a fairly large herd of fallow, a species with which the roe were either unable or unwilling to compete? The answer must clearly be sought in a study of fallow and roe populations elsewhere.

Both fallow and roe are widespread in west Sussex, but I have so far failed to find a single area where both are abundant. In the Rother vale, near Petworth, and in the wooded downs east of Up Waltham, for instance, there are many roe but very few fallow. The reverse is true of the vicinity of Up Park and the downs south-east of Stoughton. Only where there is but a small fallow population can roe and fallow be found in about equal numbers, for example in Stansted Forest, Charlton Forest, and parts of Marden Forest.

### *The New Forest and Wiltshire*

The rapid spread and high population of roe in south-west Wiltshire may be contrasted with the slow infiltration of the species into the New Forest from Dorset. Roe are really plentiful only in those parts of the New Forest where fallow

are absent or infrequent, e.g. the neighbourhood of Holmsley and the woods to the south of the Brockenhurst-Southampton railway. As one travels northwards fallow increase, roe decrease. The population peak of New Forest fallow is perhaps reached near Fritham, where roe are only of sparse and sporadic occurrence.

Deer control in the 90,000 acres of the New Forest is certainly not more intense than it is on some Wiltshire estates where roe abound. Shooting and hunting together account in an average year for about 150 deer of all species. In contrast to this, there is at least one Wiltshire woodland of not more than 5,000 acres where a "bag" of 100 roe in a single year is not exceptional. Staggering though such a toll may seem, its limiting effect on the roe population seldom lasts long.

In the woods to the west of Salisbury, where roe have abounded for several decades, no other species of deer has been reported except as "occasional". East of Salisbury, however, the picture is different. Here fallow have long been established in the larger woods. Roe have also been present in small numbers for many years, yet they did not noticeably increase until after the end of the second World War. During the war years fallow were reduced over much of south-east Wiltshire by at least 50 per cent and possibly by 75 per cent, and their increase since the end of the war has been kept severely in check. The roe therefore have to some extent been able to fill a vacuum.

#### ROE AND SIKA

In parts of southern England, and in certain Scottish districts where Japanese sika deer and roe live together in a wild state, there have been rumours of interbreeding. Far from bearing this out, reliable evidence points to a relationship similar to that between roe and fallow.

Before the last war, when sika increased and expanded their range in the Carradale area of Kintyre, a steady decline occurred among roe in the region. Roe are also virtually absent from the main haunts of sika at Strathbran in central Ross-shire, though numerous enough at near by Inchbae and Achnashellach, to which sika have penetrated only as stragglers.

Sika have been present locally in the New Forest for half a century, concentrated chiefly in a small area between Beaulieu and the main railway line. During the last two years I have observed them here time and again but, in the wood where sika

are most numerous, I have not found a sign of roe. I have, however, repeatedly seen roe in an adjacent enclosure where the population of sika is relatively small and somewhat transient.

Roe are no longer nearly as plentiful as formerly in the part of Dorset now known as Wareham Forest which has become one of the principal southern strongholds of sika. The ratio of sika to roe killed is in the region of 5 : 1.

Sika and roe both occur in moderate numbers along the Purbeck shore of Poole Harbour and seem to be indifferent to each other. But here their habitats are complementary. Sika chiefly haunt the salt marsh reed beds and the damp woods along the shore line, whereas roe favour the heathlands and the heathland side of the woods. When sika journey inland the roe are quick to melt away.

#### CONCLUSION

Sika, being aliens, are also intruders and usurpers, and the same must almost certainly be said for fallow deer. It is, I think, clearly evident that the presence of fallow or sika in any locality is a very powerful deterrent to the increase of roe. The root of their antipathy is wholly open to surmise, but its influence in bygone centuries may well have been fundamental to the fortunes of roe. Until Saxon times roe are known to have been plentiful all over Great Britain. After the Norman Conquest wild fallow became abundant and widespread, being second only to red deer in royal esteem as beasts of venery. Roe, meantime, mysteriously and rapidly decreased to the point of extinction in England and Wales. Those who are familiar with the difficulties of roe control even with modern weapons, must have wondered how our forbears could have banished them with the weapons at their disposal. Indeed, were roe banished by human agency at all? Is it not more likely that, when almost every forest and woodland became stocked to capacity with fallow, the roe found themselves displaced and could only maintain their existence in the extreme north of England and in Scotland where at that time fallow deer were few and local.

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