

Nature Notes 15: Deer in Swannington. Does it Matter Whether an Animal is an Immigrant or a Native?

Two of the four species of deer regularly seen in Swannington are native and two are non-native but does that make them any less welcome? **Fallow deer** were first introduced into the deer parks of manor houses a long time ago, as shown by entries in the Domesday book. Since then feral populations have spread into many woodlands throughout England, including those on our commons. Their striking dappled fur and the stag's large palmate (palm shaped) antlers, make them easy to identify in summer. In winter their coat is plain greyish fawn. They stand up to 95 cm at the withers and weigh up to 140kg.



Fallow deer stags (rspb.org.uk)



Muntjac (newforestguide.co)

Muntjac (Indian barking deer) are much smaller: 38 - 43cm high and weighing up to 22kg. They are the smallest deer seen in Swannington, easily recognised by their slightly humped back. Originally introduced at Woburn in 1890 they quickly made themselves at home in their adopted country and spread rapidly. Often seen by the roadside in Swannington, they are regular visitors to our garden in autumn to eat windfall apples. Is our enjoyment of seeing such wild mammals diminished by knowing their ancestors originally hitched a lift to our islands?

The most frequently seen mammal in the parish is also descended from immigrant ancestors: the **rabbit**, introduced into England by the Normans and farmed in warrens for its fur and meat. They were considered to be so valuable that as recently as the mid-nineteenth century, people were deported for taking a rabbit from someone else's land. Having become an established member of the British fauna, their importance in keeping grasslands and open heaths from turning into scrub and then woodland, was not fully appreciated until 1954, when 99% of the rabbits in the UK died of myxomatosis. This had seriously damaging consequences for biodiversity of open plant communities such as grasslands and heaths throughout the country, as it did on both Ugate and Alderford Commons. In the Breckland, rare species such as the stone curlew and spiked speedwell are heavily dependent upon rabbit grazing to maintain the sward structure in a suitable condition for them. Without an abundance of rabbits it is unlikely that buzzards would have that have spread so rapidly during the last decade into Swannington and elsewhere in East Anglia, because rabbits are their principle prey. Perhaps we should not condemn all alien invasive species too readily. Where would we be without such endearing literary characters as Little Grey Rabbit, the mischievous Peter Rabbit, and his goody-goody sisters, Flopsy, Mopsy and Cotton tail, not to speak of the irrepressible Brer Rabbit?



Red deer stag (pala)

Red deer are the largest native land mammal in the UK and are also found on Swannington Commons. They grow up to 140cm high and weighing up to 189kg. That is a large animal if you have the misfortune to hit one crossing the road. I saw this happen recently when a red deer ran in front of the car I was following along the Fakenham Road. The new BMW was immobilised, the front caved in, the radiator smashed and the driver seriously shocked.



Doe roe deer and fawn (Fieldsportsmagazine.co)

Roe deer, our other native species of deer, are considerably smaller, up to 73cm high and weighing up to 32kg. Their presence on Ugate Common is often indicated by them marking their territories. They do this by fraying the bark from young tree saplings and conspicuously scraping the leaves away around them: their way of announcing "Other roe deer beware: this is my patch" (perhaps the nearest we will get on our commons to mountain gorilla beating their chests!!!!)

Mark (February 2018)