

New measures to help woodlands through improved deer management

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One-third of England's woodlands now estimated to be damaged by deer, with urgent action needed to protect trees and wildlife

Landowners, foresters and farmers across England will benefit from new measures to reduce the damaging impacts of deer on woodlands, under a new 10-year government plan announced today (Friday 20 February).

An estimated one-third of England's woodlands are now affected by deer damage, with excessive browsing and trampling preventing young trees from establishing, degrading habitats, and damaging crops. Without urgent action, this damage risks undermining woodland creation, nature recovery and domestic timber production.

Native deer are an iconic feature of the English countryside and play a role in maintaining healthy, wildlife-rich woodlands. However, growing deer impacts - including from non-native invasive species - are placing unsustainable pressure on trees, woodland habitats.

Overgrazing reduces the diversity of ground flora and scrub, including flowering plants essential for pollinating insects and fruiting shrubs that support birds and mammals such as dormice. Reducing deer pressure has been identified as a key management activity to support the recovery of nightingale populations, which have declined by more than 90% since the 1960s, due to habitat loss and changes in woodland management. Deer damage also affects wetlands, with recent surveys of the Norfolk Broads showing more than 10% of rare fen habitat has been impacted.

Three of the six deer species present in England are invasive non-native, further intensifying pressure on sensitive environments.

Current management approaches have not kept pace with rising impacts. There is a need to reduce reliance on fencing and tree shelters and increase effective, active deer management at landscape scale.

Nature Minister Mary Creagh said:

“Our trees and native wildlife are under huge strain from deer damage, including from non-native deer species.

“This government is helping landowners and farmers manage deer impacts more effectively so woodlands can flourish and crops are better protected.

“These new measures will also help restore nature, boost our home grown timber industry and protect the millions of trees we are planting across the country”.

The package of measures announced today will give land managers the tools and support they need to act quickly and effectively. This includes:

- Dedicated deer officers to provide clearer, more accessible advice and coordination

- Grant funding to support effective deer management activity
- Streamlined licensing processes to cut red tape and enable faster action
- This includes potential changes to night shooting and close season licensing, allowing land managers to better protect crops, timber and habitats where there is a clear need

Forestry Commission Chief Executive Richard Stanford said:

“Deer damage is one of the biggest negative impacts on our trees and woodlands. Action has been long-overdue and these welcome measures will give land managers the tools they need to reduce pressures from excessive deer browsing to protect trees and restore biodiversity in our woodlands.

“This will help trees, and other plants to thrive, enable nature to recover and provide much needed habitat for woodland birds and other wildlife. We can all help in this endeavour by eating wild venison, the most climate-friendly red meat there is.”

Supporting the wild venison market

To complement these measures, the government will also support the domestic wild venison market, helping to offset the costs of managing deer impacts by lethal control, including supporting the British Quality Wild Venison Standard, to boost consumer confidence. This includes support for the British Quality Wild Venison Standard to boost consumer confidence and exploring the use of public procurement to increase consumption. Wild venison is a healthy, high-protein food, rich in essential amino acids and lower in cholesterol and saturated fats than many other red meats.

Research and innovation

The government will also support research to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of managing deer impacts, including the use of drone surveying to identify national priority areas and target action at a landscape scale.

Together, these measures will make it easier for foresters, farmers and land managers to reduce deer damage, allowing woodlands to recover and thrive. This will benefit woodland species like dormice and nightingales and support the government’s wider nature recovery goals.

The Deer Impacts Policy Statement follows Defra’s Grey Squirrel Policy Statement, published on 29 January, which set out measures to tackle damage to trees and woodlands caused by invasive grey squirrels and support native red squirrel populations.

Effectively managing the impacts of wild deer and grey squirrels will support the government’s ambitious plans to successfully plant millions of new trees and increase woodland cover to at least 16.5% of total land area in England by 2050, including three new national forests.

Additional information:

Chris Packham said:

“We live in one of the most nature-depleted nations on earth, composed of modified landscapes which need progressive management to restore and recover our treasured wildlife. The good news is

we know how to do it and we can do it.

“But to ensure we establish the richest mosaic of habitats, we unfortunately have to make some hard choices and managing a burgeoning population of deer is one of them. And let’s be clear, this is not sports shooting or hunting, this is about culling, management.

“If we want to reforest, if we want sustainable populations of woodland birds and butterflies, we currently have no other options. A joined up national policy implemented and supported by science will make a difference for biodiversity.”

Rebecca Chaney, Lead Policy Advocate (Tree Health and Invasive Species) at the Woodland Trust, said:

“Our native deer species are a much-valued part of our biodiversity. Sadly, with no natural predators to keep numbers of both native and non-native species at sustainable levels, they are causing serious damage to woodland habitats and their associated wildlife, right across the country. These habitats are already under enormous pressure from disease, fragmentation, and climate change.

“A strategic, joined-up approach to sustainable deer management is essential. The measures outlined in this plan recognise the need for coordination and incentives to support landowners to manage deer at a landscape scale. We particularly welcome commitments to deer management plans on publicly owned land, the identification of national priority areas, and the continuing provision of grants.”

- The Deer Impacts Policy Statement is available via this link. The Grey Squirrel Policy Statement is available via this link.
- The government has committed over £1 billion to tree planting and is creating three new national forests, including the Western Forest from the Cotswolds to the Mendips.
- Tree planting rates in England are at their highest level in over 20 years.
- The government published a revised Environmental Improvement Plan in December 2025.
- A recent large-scale woodland survey, known as the Bunce survey, indicates that 33% of our woodlands are impacted by deer; an increase from 24% in the early 2000s.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-measures-to-help-woodlands-through-improved-deer-management>