

Start at the RSPB viewpoint south of Westleton Heath between the car parks on Dunwich Road. At weekends in season, RSPB volunteers offer views of the deer through telescopes. As the need for such optics implies, however, animals can be rather distant. For intimate views, you could pay a moderate fee to join a RSPB vehicular safari. Alternatively, proceed by foot, for example along the west-east footpath that starts near King's Farm, 500m south of Dunwich Road. Be wary, however, of approaching *too* close: hormonal stags will readily charge any mammalian intruder.

Whatever your preferred viewing strategy (and you have time to test several), the rut should not fail to astound. Little wonder really, given the prize: access to a harem, and thus to descendents. The winner really does take it all.

Preparation takes all year. Mature stags shed antlers in late winter, and grow a new set during spring and summer. In mid-August, the 'velvet' covering to the antlers withers, then the stag shreds the remnants against a tree. The resulting armoury is ready for deployment.

Combat, however, is the last resort, only required when all other methods of dispute resolution have failed. The first tactic is vocal: the guttural bellowing. The bigger the stag, the more resonant and further-carrying the bellow. The fitter the stag, the longer he can holler. The further the sound carries and the longer it lasts, the less likely a young pretender is to risk confrontation.

Should voice not deter a challenger, the rivals proceed to stage two. Walking in parallel, they literally size each other up. Should a physical discrepancy be clear, the smaller or weaker male retreats. But should the strutting not reveal any tangible difference in stature, one male will lower his head in declaration of war.

The opponents then charge at each other and interlock antlers with an audible *clack*. As each stag seeks to surmount the other's guard, musclebound necks thrust and twist while hind legs tense and turn. Combat frequently turns brutal until one male acknowledges that his time is up, and retreats. The victor pauses for breath, and either resumes or assumes command of his troop of females.

Take a break from deer voyeurism by looking for another charismatic mammal at nearby RSPB Minsmere. The reserve has become East Anglia's most reliable location for otter. Check the noticeboard for

A deep bellow from a red deer stag serves as the call to rut. (c)



details of favoured sites or simply spend a few patient hours in Bittern or Island Mere hides. Quietly stake out reedy borders and open waters for a lone male fishing or a female and cub cavorting.

Conveniently, the same hides also overlook prime real estate for another shy, brown resident: bittern. Minsmere is one of Britain's most significant sites for this rare heron, and it is here that the RSPB tested and perfected many of its reedbed-management techniques. The reeds through which bittern may stride or over which it may fly are equally the domain of bearded tit. If the day is windless and the sun bright, you may witness an 'eruption' of this charming bird. Parties fly up into the sky, gain height, circle and then disperse westwards or southwards to spend the winter elsewhere in Britain.

If time remains, sift through the waders and wildfowl on the 'Scrape'. You may find scarce shorebirds such as curlew sandpiper, and pintail amongst the teal. When you spot a little egret, take a moment to remember that this now widespread heron was a national rarity as recently as 1989.

Yet while you revel in the reserve, you will not resist keeping half an eye on your watch. As mid-afternoon draws near, your anticipation starts to soar: the energy and spectacle of the rut is utterly addictive.