

Invasion of the barking deer

John Humphreys charts the explosion of the muntjac population in Britain

THERE are 12 sorts of muntjac in the world, mostly confined to the Far East. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were those who believed with misguided passion that some of them would make an attractive addition to the fauna of the UK. Wrong again, as such plans often are. First, the large Indian muntjac was introduced in 1900 by the Duke of Bedford on the Woburn estate in Bedfordshire. Some escaped, but the breed didn't survive and died out.

His Grace also introduced the smaller Reeves muntjac from southern China—this is the one that we see every day on driven shoots south of the Scottish Borders. The Woburn stock liked it here and thrived, assisted by artificial dispersals. Following a population explosion in the 1950s, it's close to being the most common British deer.

It's small but not especially attractive, with a broad, ridged forehead—some called it the ridge-faced deer—designed for bursting through impenetrable brambles and dense ivy. I once saw a muntjac run flat out into a wall of tangled ivy, brambles and thick blackthorn as solid as a rock face and simply vanish into it like Harry Potter on Platform 9¾ at Kings Cross.

At about 3ft long, standing just over 1½ft at the shoulder and weighing in dripping wet at about 31lb, along with the introduced Chinese water deer, it's the smallest deer in Europe. It has small antlers that it sheds in May and June, little more than tooth-picks, but there are stalkers who specialise in them and the antler scores are recognised by the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC).


Unlike other deer, muntjacs don't use their antlers for fighting, although they're fiercely territorial. They do battle with their long, canine teeth that, when the mask is in repose, may be seen protruding over the lower lip like those of a vampire. However, they do little damage in their battles as the skin on their necks is far too thick. When disturbed by walkers, they will bark like a snappy little terrier—another of its names is the barking deer. At home in dense woodland, it has no road sense and casualties are common, as any driver will attest.

So far so harmless, but the muntjac has to eat. Its short stature means it browses the low undergrowth, the shoots of trees, brambles, nettles and scrub at the very height where low-nesting birds live. Stand at the end of a muntjac wood (almost anywhere in the southern counties), and bend down to discover you have an uninterrupted view to the far side. In pre-muntjac days, it would have been an impenetrable wall of scrub, rich in nightingales, willow and wood warblers and whitethroats. The RSPB attributes the decline of such birds in part to the browsing of muntjac. Butterflies and small mammals are also affected by their eating habits.

The little dears also have a thing about suburban gardens and it's possible for a family of them to live in one undetected for years. They love choice bulbs and the shoots of precious herbaceous plants, showing a special liking for roses.

They are prolific breeders and mate all year round, so a doe is invariably at some stage of pregnancy. A poignant story was the Bedfordshire stalker thinning out muntjac who shot a pregnant doe that gave birth in the moment of her death. The fawn was no bigger than a small rabbit and was taken home, fed by a dropper and grew up to be a charming and agreeable pet. Pip by name, she slept in the toy box and asked to go out to relieve herself. When she grew up, she was given a run in the field and lived a long and happy life. However, anyone seeking to tame deer should beware the males, which become aggressive when losing their fear of man. People have been killed by roebucks tamed as fawns and believed to be harmless. The males of most species should be treated with extreme circumspection.

Back to the shooting day, it's an unusual woodland drive when the porcine, scuttling little chap fails to come scampering through, low to the ground, dodging and evasive as a rugby centre. You must shoot them with a rifle and not a shotgun and many stalkers find good sport in their muntjac stalking.

And muntjac do have one compelling virtue—they make excellent eating. 

Muntjac have designs on your garden plants and snow won't stop them



