

Feral red deer

Cervus elaphus



Originally introduced in the 19th century from Europe and Asia as game animals by European settlers, Australia is now home to six species of deer; fallow deer, red deer, chital deer, hog deer, rusa deer and sambar deer. Queensland is home to four of the six species; fallow deer, red deer, chital deer and rusa deer.

While deer continue to be farmed for venison, the wild populations are causing significant environmental

damage. They can damage crops, pastures and forestry plantations and compete with livestock for pasture. Feral red deer can alter the structure and composition of endangered ecological communities, cause erosion and spread weed seeds. They stray onto roads becoming traffic hazards and may cause motor vehicle accidents in rural and urban areas. Deer may also play a role in transmitting diseases that affect livestock.



**Queensland
Government**

Legal requirements

Feral red deer is a category 3, 4 and 6 restricted invasive animal under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*. They must not be moved, fed, given away, sold, or released into the environment. The Act requires everyone to take all reasonable and practical measures to minimise the biosecurity risks associated with invasive animals under their control. This is called a general biosecurity obligation (GBO).

At a local level, each local government must have a biosecurity plan that covers invasive animals in its area. This plan may include actions to be taken on feral red deer. Some of these actions may be required under local laws. Contact your local government for more information.

An animal ceases being considered an invasive restricted animal (feral) if a person is keeping it in a deer proof enclosure and has become a registerable biosecurity entity (RBE) to keep that designated animal. Feral red deer can be considered as designated animals if a person keeps them.

Description

Feral red deer have a glossy reddish-brown to brown summer coat and greyish brown winter coat. Red deer show a straw-coloured rump patch.

Adult stags stand up to 120 cm at the shoulder, while adult hinds stand up to 100 cm at the shoulder. Stags weigh up to 220 kg, hinds up to 100 kg. Stags develop a mane during winter and the best trophy stags have antlers with six or more points on each side.

Life cycle

Mature stags live apart from the hinds until the start of the rut. They are most active at dawn and dusk. Their preferred habitat is open, grassy glades in forests.

The mating season (the rut) is from March to April. Mature males compete to gather harems of females and hold them against rivals.

Calves are born from late November to December. The gestation period is about 233 days, and the females usually give birth to a single calf. At birth the coats of calves are reddish brown with distinct white spots.

The white spots gradually fade and disappear in about three months.

Habitat and distribution

Red deer are native to Eurasia—the traditional continents of Europe and Asia. They were released in 1873 and 1874 by the Queensland Acclimatisation Society with the consent of the Queensland Government. The original animals were a gift from Queen Victoria to provide ‘... additional food and sport’ for the people of the state. The initial release of six hinds and three stags occurred at Cressbrook Station near Esk.

Red deer are concentrated throughout the upper reaches of the Brisbane River valley and into the headwaters of the Mary and Burnett rivers. It is estimated that there are

around 10 000–15 000 red deer in this area of south-east Queensland. Regular sightings suggest that the species is expanding its range into environments contiguous to the core red deer area, including into the outer suburbs of Brisbane.

Two other red deer populations in Queensland have been established by translocations—one (with a population of fewer than 100 animals) in the Rockhampton region and another (with a population between 100 and 500) in the Roma–Injune–Mitchell area.

A large part of southern Queensland appears to offer suitable habitat for red deer. In the past, it was considered that agricultural activity on the boundaries of the traditional red deer range formed an effective barrier to further expansion. However, the recent assisted dispersal of red deer sounds a note of caution.

Impacts

Production losses

Feral deer are opportunistic and highly adaptable feeders that both graze and browse. Their diet is largely determined by what is locally and seasonally available and often overlaps with cattle. They will normally feed selectively on the highest quality plants in a pasture and are not constrained by fences like domestic livestock. Because of this, deer can impose substantial costs on primary producers.

Feral deer have been reported to cause damage to a wide variety of agricultural crops, pastures and forestry plantations.

Other impacts on rural enterprises include damage to fences, spreading of invasive plants and fouling of water holes.

Parasites and diseases

Feral deer are susceptible to exotic livestock diseases including foot-and-mouth disease, rinderpest, vesicular stomatitis, rabies and blue tongue. Unchecked, wild herds could play a major role in the spread of infection and act as a reservoir if these diseases are introduced to Australia.

Wild deer are also susceptible to a number of diseases and parasites currently in Australia including cattle tick, leptospirosis and ovine and bovine Johne’s disease.

The main concern is the cost in lost livestock production or the spread of disease to disease-free areas (e.g. bovine Johne’s disease). However, some of the diseases and parasites also have significant implications for human health.

Environmental impacts

Because deer are large animals, they are capable of damaging native vegetation by browsing and trampling understorey and seedling plants, and ring-barking young trees.

Deer are also selective feeders. Over time, their browsing will influence the variety and abundance of native plant species. A significantly lower diversity and abundance of plant species is evident in environments where deer densities are high.

Feral deer can significantly impact ecologically fragile areas and have the potential to eliminate threatened plant species from an area.

Other environmental damage attributable to wild deer is the fouling of waterholes, the spreading of invasive plants and overgrazing causing erosion (including the subsequent degradation of water quality in creek and river systems).

Social impacts

Red deer occur in both rural and peri-urban areas of south-east Queensland. Grazing deer may damage parks, residential gardens and fences in outer urban areas. Where close to major roads, wandering deer represent a serious traffic hazard and may cause motor vehicle accidents.

There is also the potential threat to human health of rutting stags, particularly in peri-urban areas where deer may become habituated to people.

Beneficial considerations

Red deer can be trapped for the wild venison trade in accordance with Food Safety Standards. Trapping deer to use as foundation stock for a farmed herd is less viable due to the animal welfare and human safety aspects of handling feral deer.

Recreational deer hunting

The cost of deer control may be minimised by enlisting or utilising commercial or recreational hunters to assist in control. Landholders wishing to engage a third party to assist in deer control on their property should carefully consider a number of points before allowing access to their property, including conditions of access, public liability insurance, and references.

Control

Managing feral red deer

The GBO requires a person to take reasonable and practical measures to minimise the biosecurity risks posed by feral red deer. This fact sheet provides information and some options for controlling feral red deer.

In many cases, deer control is best done as a joint exercise, involving all land managers in the district. Local governments and landcare groups can assist coordinating efforts.

Prevention and early detection

The first and most effective step to managing the impacts of deer in Queensland must be to prevent more deer from entering the wild.

Thirty-five percent of all current wild deer populations have resulted from deer farm escapes or releases, with a significant percentage of the remaining populations resulting from the deliberate translocation of deer.

Under Queensland legislation, the release or translocation of wild red deer is prohibited. Farmed deer and deer in game parks must be contained in deer-proof fences and it is the responsibility of the owner to ensure that deer are contained. Failure to do so is a breach of the legislation.

Shooting

Shooting must be carried out by trained personnel with appropriate firearms licenses. Shooters must possess the necessary skill and judgment to kill deer with a single shot. Lactating females should not be shot, but if they are inadvertently shot, efforts should be made to find the young and euthanase them.

Ground shooting

Although time consuming and labour intensive, ground shooting is considered to be the most effective and humane technique currently available for reducing feral deer populations. Such shooting is usually done at night from a vehicle, with the aid of spotlights.

Helicopter shooting

Helicopter shooting is most effective (highest kills per hour for a given deer density) in relatively open habitats such as broadacre crops, open rangeland and swamps.

Where deer populations are at comparatively low densities and in areas of thick cover, kills per hour will be lower for helicopter shooting, but it may still be the most economic option. There is no evidence that this form of control risks disturbing and dispersing the deer population.

Fencing

Generally, the minimum escape-proof enclosure for farmed deer or an exclusion fence for feral deer is a well maintained high netting fence or equivalent. An example of an effective deer fence is one that is 2.1 m high, has strainers and posts made of heavy duty material such as hardwood or metal that are set deeply into the ground and no more than 9 m apart.

The netting would be 17/190/15 or 13/190/30 for red deer, supported by well strained top, bottom and belly wires and pegged securely to the ground. Gates would be of a similar standard and the same height. Fence lines should preferably be cleared to minimise trees falling on the fence. Note that this is an example only and fence construction should be appropriate for the individual circumstances.

Trapping

Trapping may be an option for deer control in some circumstances, particularly in areas where shooting may not be an option such as urban and peri-urban locations. The simplest form of deer trap uses a trip wire to activate a self-closing gate. Deer may also be trapped in clover traps.

Traps must be monitored closely and deer should be promptly tranquilised or euthanased after trapping. Deer mortalities of 3–7% post-trapping have been recorded in United States studies and animal welfare issues must be considered in using this method.

More information

For more information contact your local government or to download a copy of the Queensland feral deer management strategy 2022–27, visit biosecurity.qld.gov.au.

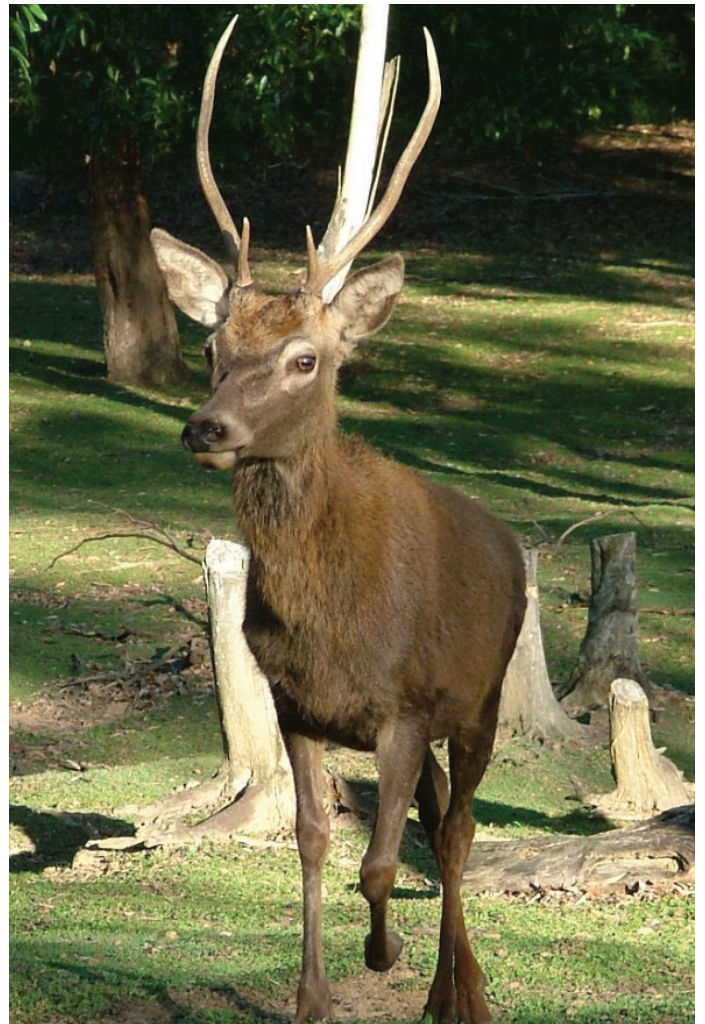


Photo courtesy of Andrea Vonhoff

Fact sheets are available from biosecurity.qld.gov.au. The control methods recommended should be used in accordance with the restrictions (federal and state legislation, and local government laws) directly or indirectly related to each control method. These restrictions may prevent the use of one or more of the methods referred to, depending on individual circumstances. While every care is taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, the department does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.

