

Feral rusa deer

Cervus timorensis



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 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.

Legal requirements

Feral rusa 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).



Queensland
Government

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 rusa 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 rusa deer can be considered as designated animals if a person keeps them.

Description

Rusa deer have a greyish to yellowish or reddish-brown coat, which is darker brown on their hindquarters and thighs. Their body hair is coarse and stags develop a mane during winter.

Stags stand up to 110 cm, hinds up to 95 cm. Stags weigh about 120 kg, hinds up to 80 kg.

Stags have three tined antlers with the beams forming a characteristic lyre shape.

Life cycle

During the rut, rusa deer stags 'plough' vegetation and amass bundles of greenery on their antlers.

Rutting may take place at any time, but the tendency is for breeding from June to October. Most fawns are born in March and April. In good seasonal conditions hinds may have consecutive births nine months apart.

The gestation period is about 252 days and females usually give birth to a single calf, occasionally twins. Rusa deer calves do not have spots and are reddish-tan in colour with white underparts.

Habitat and distribution

Rusa deer are native to Asia. Indonesian rusa deer were introduced to Friday Island in the Torres Strait in 1912. The deer later swam or were transported to other islands including Prince of Wales Island which now supports the major population. The original Torres Strait population is estimated to be at least 500 animals but may be substantially higher.

In recent years, at least six other rusa deer populations established by translocations have been identified. Three of these are in areas around Townsville and Rockhampton, and three are in southern Queensland, including a population located near Stanthorpe. The Rockhampton and Stanthorpe populations are estimated at between 100–500 animals. The remaining populations are estimated to number fewer than 100 animals. However, populations in more remote areas may exceed these estimates.

Rusa deer have been translocated to the traditional chital deer range around Charters Towers. There are also anecdotal reports of 600 rusa deer being released into a flood plain environment in the Gulf. Given the suitability of the environment, observed reproduction rates suggest that such a herd could number 3000 within five years.

Because rusa deer are a tropical species, much of coastal Queensland and adjacent areas would be suitable rusa deer habitat.

They prefer grassy plains bordered by dense brush or woodlands to which they can retire during daylight hours. They are preferential grazers of grass, but also browse depending on season and availability of food.

Rusa deer are gregarious and form herds. They are seminocturnal, preferring to remain under cover during the day. However, they also spend time sunning themselves on ridge clearings. They have been reported to occasionally swim in the sea, and to eat certain seaweeds.

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.

Of particular concern is the potential for rusa deer in the Torres Strait to spread the exotic blood parasite *Trypanosoma evansi* that causes surra—a disease causing acute, often fatal, illness in livestock. Surra occurs widely in South-East Asia and has probably already reached Irian Jaya as a result of livestock movements within Indonesia.

There is a significant risk of surra reaching Australia in the same way as screw-worm fly—through the Torres Strait, assisted by rusa deer (and pigs) on the Torres Strait islands and in the Gulf.

Feral 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 human health issues.

Environmental impacts

Deer are comparatively large animals 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 (and the subsequent degradation of water quality in creek and river systems).

Social impacts

Rusa deer are established in both rural and peri-urban areas of 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

Rusa 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 rusa deer

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

Thirty-five per cent of all current feral 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 feral rusa 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 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 wild 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 rusa deer, supported by well strained top, bottom and belly wires and pegged securely to the ground. Gates would be of 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 US 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.



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.

