



To all deer count helpers, landholders and members of QDM&CG

The 34th annual end of winter Quantock deer count took place on **Sunday 3rd March 2024**.

The ground based 2024 count took place on a dry and clear Sunday morning as usual in early March. Despite some 'rave music' being audible in the north end of the hills (apparently from Kennisham Hill!) it didn't seem to put the deer off. The weather conditions seemed perfect and nearly all counters saw deer. Some counters saw some big numbers!

This is our first 'count' of over 1000 Red Deer! Based directly on numbers there has been an increase of 459 red deer. It's such a big increase on 2023 it raises a lot of questions – has the deer herd 'actually' increased by nearly 460 in one year? Actually could the herd have increased by 459 in a year?? Have we under counted in the last couple of years? (we don't assume we count 'all' the deer), how much does the weather influence the counting conditions? Is this the best time of year to count (however we need to keep the methodology the same to keep the numbers comparable), how much do crops influence the deer movements on / off the hill? Has the wet winter reduced public pressure on the hills and allowed the deer more space and less disturbance?

Quantock Visual Deer Count - Summary total of ALL deer counted 3rd March 2024

Red Deer	Hinds& calves	Prickets	Young Stags	Older Stags >4yr old	Roe Deer	Fallow deer	Muntjac deer	Sika
1102	918	56	108	20	144	0	0	0

We don't assume we count all the deer on each count, we spend quite some time going through all the count returns to include or discount double sightings. It's really useful 'counters' annotating their maps with where they saw the deer as well as their walking route and times as we can then compare neighbouring count areas and the deer seen there. 65 counters that gave up their Sunday morning, counting the usual 52 areas totalling 15,000 hectares. This in itself is quite a logistical task. The areas themselves vary from farmland to open hill tops, steep wooded areas and thick dense conifer plantations – each varies in ease or difficulty finding and then counting the deer - especially if they are on the move.

Breakdown of **RED DEER** seen by region and comparison with average over previous four years

Year 2024			4-yr Average 2020 - 2023		
Total	Hinds & Followers	Prickets & Stags	Total	Hinds & Followers	Prickets & Stags
1102	918	184	600	521	79
A: North (all count blocks lying north of the Crowcombe to Overstowey road)					
872	741	131	423	370	53
B: Central: (South of Crowcombe to Overstowey Road to Lydeard Hill, incl.					
170	126	44	145	125	20
C: South-East (all areas south-east of Lydeard Hill – incl. Cothelstone,					
60	51	9	32	26	6

So could the herd have increased by 459 in a year? Probably not, the 2023 count totalled 533 hinds and followers. 'If' each hind had a calf then there's 265 breeding hinds, so 2023's increase could have taken the 2024 count to around 900. This then assumes no management, mortality, road casualties etc. If a greater percentage of these hinds (and followers) calved in summer 2023 then this would have accounted for some of the increase. It would have required pretty much all the hinds (and followers) of 2023 to have calved to recruit this increase. So this is unlikely. More likely then that we've undercounted in the last couple of years.

There are so many factors that influence the count numbers, most notably the weather on the morning, the weather was good, following such a prolonged wet winter so likely they made the most of a dry morning, making them more visible.

The greatest increase in numbers was in the northern hills – north of the Stowey-Crowcombe Road. Increasing from 484 red deer to 872. This is most of the increase on 2023 numbers in one part of the hills. The central and southern hills also increased but at a much lower percentage / number. Arguably this is where people want to see the deer, on the open heather hill tops and oak woods. It does though increase pressure on neighbouring farmland as well as increasing risks of crossing the A39 or A358.

Has management (culling) (in the Northern end) not been keeping up with recruitment (calving), why isn't culling keeping numbers in check (as the previous count results have suggested), stag numbers haven't increased as much as hinds, what external influences are involved with culling (locally and nationally). Will the herd increase by the same number in the 2025 count?

We also had a drone survey conducted in the week before the ground based visual count. More information on this will follow. This was grant funded by a FiPL grant and was undertaken by 3 experienced drone operators over 2 days. The technology was astounding, the thermal imaging picking out deer where they weren't visible by human eye. The initial results suggested we were way out on the visual counting method, significantly undercounting. However, with this year's visual count we ended up with much closer totals than we expected.

The Quantock deer count is one of the longest running deer counts in the country. We aim to keep the methodology the same each year. Some areas have been added but we assume that by keeping the method the same we can compare results year on year and over longer time periods.

The Quantock Deer count continues annually through the ongoing interest and deep seated culture of 'Quantock Deer'. Throughout this time there have been notable 'other' deer counted. Roe deer are very difficult to count, while we counted less than last year the drone technology came into its own counting many more. A lot of these being counted in the adjoining farmland surrounding the hills. Muntjac never seem to have taken hold, although they are occasionally seen – while there seem to be a few currently on the hills none were counted on the count morning or by the drone survey. Sika seem to keep popping up, but none were seen on the morning of the count.

Thank you again to all the counters and helpers who plan and undertake the count!

*Matt Peaster
Chairman*

(See overleaf for graph showing changes in annual ground based visual red deer counts 1991 – 2024)

Quantock Deer Management & Conservation Group
Annual ground-based visual Spring Counts of Red deer 1991 - 2024

