

Muntjac Deer



In Essex there are four species of deer - the red, roe, fallow and muntjac. Of these, red deer and roe deer are restricted to woodlands and scrubland in the north and north-west of the county while fallow deer and muntjac deer are found throughout Essex. In our immediate locality these two deer are readily seen in Epping Forest and other nearby woodlands, in scrubland and grassland, on farmland and even in large gardens.

There are several species of muntjac in the world, but the one introduced to England from China in 1900 by the Duke of Bedford is the Reeves' muntjac. This was named after John Reeves, a naturalist working in China in the early nineteenth century. As a result of a series of escapes and deliberate releases from private estates, aided by their prodigious all-year-round breeding, large numbers of Reeves' muntjac are now found throughout southern and central England.

Like many introduced species, they have left their mark on the countryside, eating almost any plant material that grows within their reach, including shoots, leaves, fungi, berries, nuts and bark from trees. This, in turn, impacts upon many species of insects and birds. They feed frequently, eating quickly and retreating to cover to chew the cud and digest food in their four-chambered stomach, characteristic of ruminants.

Muntjacs are the smallest deer in the county, about the size of a labrador dog but half their weight when adult, with bucks (male deer) being slightly larger than does (females). Apart from the dark markings on the head, a muntjac's coat is light brown in summer becoming darker in winter, with pale, often white, patches under the throat, belly and tail. Muntjac bucks have short, unbranched antlers which curve backwards and are shed each year. Both males and females have long canine teeth which appear as small tusks protruding downwards from the upper lip.

Bucks may fight for access to does but remain unusually tolerant of subordinate males. After mating, which may be at any time of year, a single kid is born and very soon the doe is in season again. The kid is weaned after six to eight weeks and is completely independent of its mother when six months old. Muntjacs do not form long-term pairs and are generally solitary animals except when a doe is with her kid. They are fully mature at a year or even less and may live for as long as 18 years.

Although active throughout the day and night, the best time to see muntjacs is at dawn and dusk. Even when you cannot see them, look out for their signs especially tiny hoof prints in soft soil. These show the two toes on each hoof, small compared to the prints made by fallow deer, sheep and cattle, and quite unlike the single toe prints of horses. Muntjacs are also known as barking deer because they make dog-like sounds as mating calls and when disturbed, especially by predators. By homing in on their calls, you may well catch sight of these miniature deer.