

## SPECIES OF THE WEEK



### Red Deer

*Cervus elaphus*

Fia Rua

The red deer is the largest and only deer species considered native to Ireland. It is also Ireland's largest terrestrial mammal. The Killarney red deer herd is thought to be the only herd completely indigenous to the island. Others may have been introduced by British and Scottish settlers in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Red deer are recognisable from their red-brown coat, which turns a dark brown-grey during the winter. Mature stags bear antlers of multiple points (tines), which are cast in late spring and regrow every year. These are used to fend off and overpower competitors during rutting season, as well as offering protection from predators.

Red deer breeding season (rut) starts at the end of September, and continues until the end of October. This is when stags will look for hinds to herd together for their harems. On average these harems contain five hinds. A stag will mate with the fittest of these hinds. Calves are born in June. Unlike many other species, calves do not follow their mother. Instead, hinds leave their offspring hidden while they feed.

The preferred habitats of red deer in Ireland are transition areas between woodland and open grassland. They can inhabit both deciduous and coniferous forests, providing there is adequate cover. Due to Ireland's low woodland density, red deer have also been known to inhabit moorlands, wetlands, and lowland riverside forests.

Red deer are primarily grazers, but will also eat plants such as heather, shrubs and rough grasses. In harsh conditions, when food is scarce, red deer may move closer to farmland and eat crops.

Red deer are protected under the Wildlife Act, but they can be hunted under license at certain times of the year. Hunting of Kerry red deer, however, is strictly prohibited.