

Feral red deer

Cervus elaphus



Declaration details

The feral or wild red deer is a declared Class 3 pest animal under the *Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002*. It is an offence under the Act to introduce, feed, supply or release Class 3 pest animals without a permit.

Landholders are required to control wild red deer numbers on their land when their land is in or adjacent to environmentally significant areas.

Red deer that are contained within a deer-proof fence are not declared; for example, farmed red deer or red deer held by a game park. Any red deer not contained within a deer-proof fence are considered feral or wild and subject to control under the *Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route*

Management) Act 2002. The natural disposition of deer means that farmed animals escaping captivity quickly revert to the wild state.

It is important to manage wild red deer to protect our agricultural industries, for native flora and fauna conservation, and to avoid social impacts.

Wild deer damage crops, pastures and forestry plantations and compete with livestock for pasture. They can alter the structure and composition of endangered ecological communities.



Commercial use of wild red deer

Commercial harvesting

Red deer can be trapped for the wild venison trade. 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 wild 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.

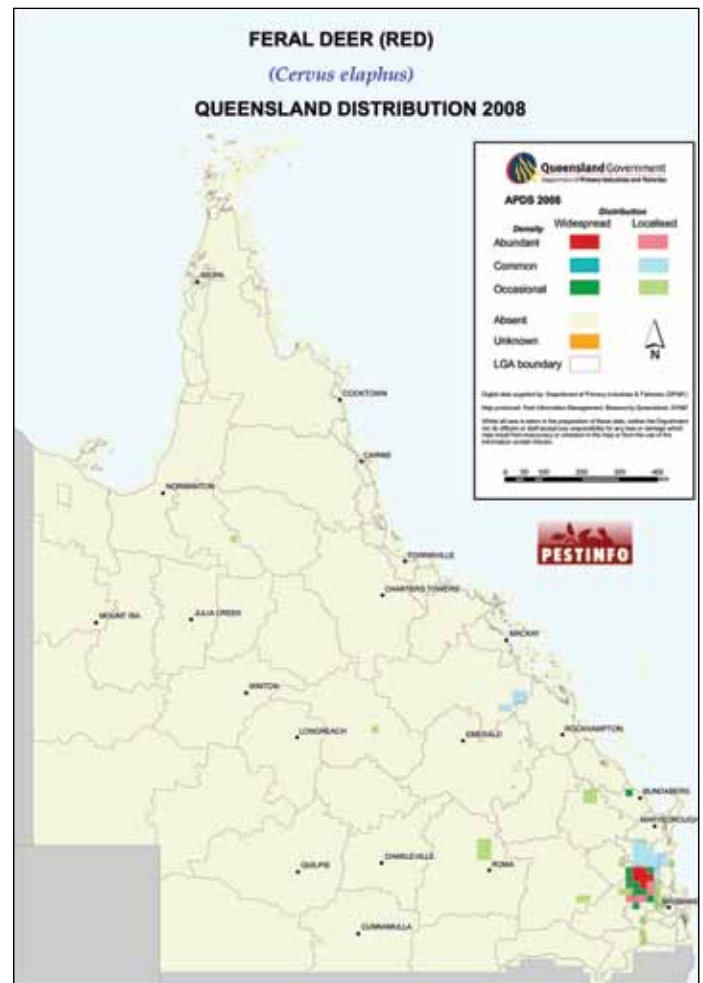
Habitat and distribution

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 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 to 15 000 red deer in this area of south-east Queensland. Regular sightings suggest that the species is expanding its range into environments contiguous with 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.



Digital data supplied by: Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries (QPIF).

Map produced by: Pest Information Management, Biosecurity Queensland, QPIF

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Description and general information

Red deer have a glossy reddish-brown to brown summer coat, while mature 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.

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.

Potential damage

Production losses

Wild deer are opportunistic and highly adaptable feeders that both graze and browse. Their diet is largely determined by what is locally available, but because they require a diet twice as high in protein content as cattle—and with significantly higher quantities of digestible vegetable matter—they will normally feed selectively on the highest quality plants in a pasture. Because of this, deer can impose substantial costs on primary producers.

Wild deer have been reported to cause damage to a wide variety of agricultural crops, pastures and forestry plantations. They also directly compete with cattle and other livestock for pasture.

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

Parasites and diseases

Wild 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 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.

Wild 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 weeds, overgrazing causing erosion (and 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.

Control

Prevention and early detection is the best cure.

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 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 the *Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002*, 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 Act.

Early detection

If red deer are seen in areas outside the core red deer range in south-east Queensland it should be reported immediately to the Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries on 13 25 23. Early detection of new populations will allow more effective control.

Coordinating control

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 in coordinating efforts.

Shooting

Shooting must be carried out by trained personnel with appropriated 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 effective in inaccessible areas such as broadacre crops, swamps and marshes. However, most new deer populations in Queensland are at comparatively low densities and in areas of thick cover and therefore helicopter shooting is unlikely to be an economic option. This form of control also risks disturbing and dispersing the deer population.

Recreational hunting

Hunting is a means of reducing populations. The RIDGE group and the Australian Deer Association (ADA) manage deer hunting access for landholdings totalling over 420 000 hectares in south-east Queensland. Landholders receive a proportion of the fees charged. Other hunting operators and land holders may also offer access to hunt wild red deer on land holdings in south-east Queensland.

Trapping

Trapping may be an option for deer control in some circumstances. The simplest form of trapping for deer involves a self-mustering trap.

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

Further information

Further information is available from your local government office, or from your local primary industries and fisheries biosecurity officer: contact details are available through 13 25 23.

Fact sheets are available from Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries service centres and the Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries Business Information Centre (telephone 13 25 23). Check our website at www.dpi.qld.gov.au to ensure you have the latest version of this fact sheet. The control methods referred to in this pest fact 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, Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.

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