

# Long live the emblem of Exmoor!

Simon Lester charts a year in the life of a treasured red-deer herd and discovers why the animals are such an integral part of the community





The Devon and Somerset Staghounds play a vital role in maintaining the health and population of the Exmoor red-deer herd

THE Exmoor National Park is a special place—a vast expanse of bleak, boggy, ancient cleared forest blurs into gentler heathery moorland set against the silvery light of the sea (to the north) and a verdant patchwork of small fields split by old north Devon banks (to the south). Greens and browns dominate in daylight hours, but, at night, under huge star-studded skies, the only twinkles of light are from the farmsteads—yellow dots in a vast blackness—where live the guardians of the moor, those who work the land and hunt.

I was fortunate to live and work on Exmoor as a gamekeeper in the 1980s, when hunting fox, mink and deer was unfettered by a Government ban and shooting, now a major economic booster, played second fiddle. It didn't take me long to work out that field-sports were a big part of life there, but it was the stag hunting that was particularly cherished.

The red deer is Britain's largest mammal, Exmoor's inhabitants being some of the finest examples in the country, fuelled by rich grassland, arable crops and much kinder weather than their Scottish counterparts and thus boasting magnificent heads and bodies. They live a relatively charmed life, as most farmers afford the deer sanctuary and tolerate the costs in crop damage because of their association with the hunt and tradition. In periods when no hunting occurred, such as during the Second World War, deer numbers fell, as damage couldn't be tolerated and farmers and poachers shot them.

As your eyes attune to the landscape, you will spot groups of hinds placidly grazing or a single old stag lazing in pasture, their reddish coats adding pleasingly to the colour palette. As you pass through villages, you notice a subtle smell of wood smoke, the pairs of antlers over cottage

doors and the ubiquitous stag's head as a business logo.

Deer were a major draw for Richard Eales when he became an Exmoor National Park ranger. 'Everyone involved in deer management has a huge passion, if not obsession, with them,' he observes. 'They're magnificent, prestigious and watched over closely. Farmers keep large herds and are happy to give up valuable grass to them.'

'They play a huge role in the social make-up of Exmoor, through hunt meets, shows, deer walks or just going out to watch them while eating your fish and chips. People are obsessed with getting that great photo of the bolving stag or the new-born calf and the fiercest competition is to pick up the cast antlers in spring (there are classes for these at local shows). Deer are a bigger talking point than lambing, calving and haymaking! To get out on the moor and sit in the molinia grass and heather quietly watching them is sanity.'

Management of the large herd, presently 3,115 head, is essential. The Devon and Somerset Staghounds (DSSH) keeps a close eye on numbers and health. Members cull the old and infirm and, crucially, by hunting three days a week from August to April, keep the deer moving and not dwelling on one farmer's land.

The biggest overall threat to the deer would be to stop hunting. Controversially, the National Trust banned stag hunting on its ground in 1997, but it does manage the deer sympathetically. Charles Harding, who works as deer manager for the National Trust-owned, 12,000-acre Holnicote estate and is secretary of the Exmoor & District Deer Management Society, has lived on the moor all his life, has huge empathy with animals, local people and hunting and controls numbers by shooting selected beasts.

In contrast, the League Against Cruel Sports bought the Baronsdown estate in

1959 as a sanctuary for deer and other wildlife. In 2002, an exposé by the estate's frustrated deer manager revealed that overpopulation was causing animals to die through starvation and disease, although that situation has now improved. However, organised poaching will always be a threat due to rising venison prices—only this spring, Minehead residents reported finding discarded bits of deer carcass in the streets—as will mindless trophy hunting.

## Spring

The staghunting tradition dates back to the 13th century, when the land was deemed a royal forest, although it wasn't until 1724 that it really got going, started by Lord Walpole when he was lessee and warden of the Exmoor Forest. Last month, I had a day's spring-stag hunting with the DSSH from Pitcombe Head, above Porlock in Somerset. As I pulled up and paid my dues, the bowler-hatted harbourers (who had been out early in the morning selecting the hunted stag) and scarlet-coated hunt staff were in discussion about the day.

A blast of the horn grabbed our attention, followed by the booming voice of joint-master David Greenwood, who briskly issued a welcome, a thanks to the host, a statement that they were hunting within the law and a warning to quad-bike followers, then announced the whisky draw—this through-and-through Exmoor man wanted to get on with the hunting.

Moving to a vantage point with sweeping views of the moor, we observed this beauty still in its winter slumber—the grass white, the heather dark and skeletal, the beech trees wind-blown. Skylarks serenaded, as did a passing cuckoo. As we watched the cavalcade circumnavigate the combe (valley), I chatted to other car followers. They'd come from far and wide—Gloucestershire, Oxford and Cornwall plus a carload from Wales—to see this moving spectacle. For many, it's an annual pilgrimage when hunting has finished up country.

In spring, the DSSH hunts stags that still have their antlers (called horns on Exmoor). Sometimes, the animal that's been selected drops its horns and another is chosen. As the old stags cast first, the younger flightier stags are usually targeted. The state of the deer's body and head or any signs of disease or damage are deciding factors.

As the last horses disappeared over the horizon, we moved to the other side of the hill, where we were rewarded with the magnificent sight of a herd of more than 100. The huntsman, Donald Summersgill, who retired last month after



Top: 'Through-and-through' Exmoor man and joint-master David Greenwood. Above: Hounds patiently waiting—the law only allows a couple to hunt at a time. Left: The Exmoor stag is everywhere you look

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A hind with her young calf in the bracken cover. Antler searching is a major summer pastime in Exmoor's shady coombes

32 seasons, arrived with his couple of hounds, a beast was selected and separated from the herd, which exited stage left. Spring stags, which are less territorial and have less cover to contend with at this time of year, tend to run further than their autumn counterparts—occasionally up to 40 miles, but generally about 15.

## Summer

The deer continue to draw people to Exmoor. In June, hinds return to the same place to drop their dappled calves and locals look out for and welcome the returning matriarchs. According to an Exmoor saying, antlers grow back with the bracken, the plant's vigorous growth giving hinds and calves plenty of cover at this vulnerable time.

I met David a couple of days after going hunting—as I approached Cloutsham, where he's a tenant farmer for the National Trust and his partner, Kathy, runs a B&B popular with wildlife watchers, I recognised the distinctive figure of a man who had swapped a horse for a quad taking ewes and lambs to the field. We shook hands—his were stained with iodine from lambing. Working farmers are the backbone of the moor, men who live and breathe Exmoor—they farm, they go to local shows, they hunt and they're content.

I ask David what the deer, which he can observe every day from his bedroom

window, mean to him. 'They're an integral part of my life,' he answers. 'I never lose the excitement of watching them and you can always see something you haven't noticed before. It's the heritage of the place—the moor, the deer and the people are entwined.'

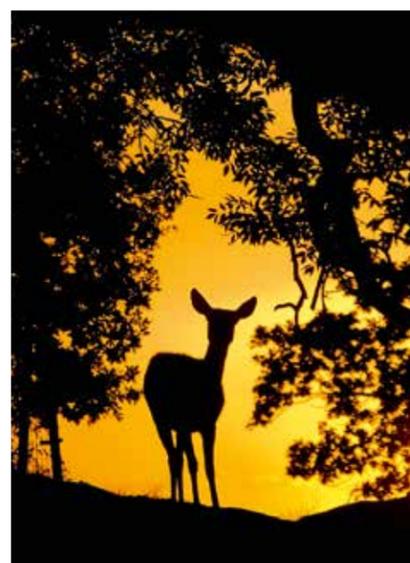
However, he then struck a cautionary note: 'The deer belong to everybody, but if people try to take ownership of them, their future becomes very doubtful.'

## Autumn

The deer are in their finest fettle—their bodies honed and the stags' antlers stripped of velvet, hardened and ready for combat in the October rut. The harbourers pick out the older stags that have sown their seed for two seasons—if these beasts aren't removed, there's a serious risk of inbreeding. Finding these old boys requires careful observation and lots of walking to check for slots to see if they're lying up in a wood or just passing through.

In the past, tufters (three to five couple of the best hounds that could be called off if it wasn't the right animal) were used to flush the stag before the rest of the pack (up to 10 couple) was laid on. Now, only two hounds can be used at a time, according to the law, which can make for a longer process.

These older stags are canny—they use the terrain to outwit the huntsman and



Rob Moon; James Silverthorne; Richard Cannon/Country Life Picture Library; Andrew Stuhridge

his two hounds, breaking the line of scent by crossing water or running up or down streams. When they turn to fight—stand at bay—they're instantly despatched by the huntsman or a farmer carrying the gun. The huntsman will gralloch the deer and the venison is distributed to the farmers on whose land the deer have fed.

The rut is an evocative time, as gutteral roaring and clattering antlers haunt the evening air on the moor. An equally raucous noise will permeate some pubs; for the uninitiated, this is the curious local trad-

ition of 'bolving' contests, in which young men compete to see who can make the loudest and most realistic noise.

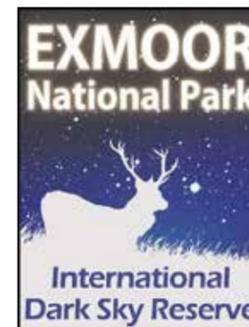
## Winter

Hind-hunting is not for the faint-hearted, when the days are short and the cold biting, but hinds also need to be managed. Old, barren or sick animals are identified quite easily as, when the herd is disturbed, weaker animals fall to the back. As hinds tend to be more territorial, these hunts are shorter.

In February, there's the annual deer count, carried out by local people and organised and collated by Mr Harding. 'Deer management is about having a healthy, structured herd—that's what the society aims for, but it's threatened by an increase in indiscriminate shooting,' he warns. 'There's also been an increase in the incidence of bovine TB, which is a concern, particularly to farmers, as it can change their attitude to having deer on their land.'

Numbers have, however, been fairly constant and, as well as being a source of local pride, the deer keep people flocking to Exmoor, which, in turn, keeps the economy ticking over. The world is changing, as is this place, but, for now, watching these magnificent creatures feels timeless. Mr Harding sums it up: 'I've grown up with the deer all my life. I can't think of Exmoor without the deer.'

To find details of deer walks, visit [www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk](http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk)



Top, above and below right: The red deer is an integral part of life in Exmoor. Right: Charles Harding, a deer manager for the National Trust. Below: Gutteral roaring can be heard during rutting season

