DEER MANAGEMENT

On Woodoaks Farm.

Woodoaks Farm
Growing Together

Frequently asked Questions

Why do we need to manage the deer?

Deer are a natural and important part of our countryside, and we value the role they play in the wider ecosystem. However, where deer numbers become too high, they can have a significant impact on woodland, hedgerows and other habitats.

At Woodoaks, this is particularly important in **Bottom Wood**, where we have had to undertake significant woodland management in response to ash dieback. Our priority now is to support the **natural regeneration and recovery of this woodland**, allowing young trees and a diverse range of woodland plants to establish. High levels of deer feeding on young trees, shrubs and woodland plans can prevent this regeneration from getting established, undermining the recovery of the woodland.

Managing deer numbers is therefore an important part of our wider nature recovery work. It helps us create the right conditions for Bottom Wood to regenerate naturally, while also protecting newly planted trees, hedgerows and other habitats across the farm. The aim is not to remove deer, but to maintain a healthy balance between deer and the habitats they depend upon.

Why can't we just leave them alone?

If deer numbers were naturally regulated by predators, disease and availability of food, there would be less need for human intervention. However, in a modern, fragmented landscape there are few natural predators capable of regulating deer populations at the scale needed.

Simply leaving the population unmanaged can result in increasing pressure from deer feeding in the woodland. A young tree may grow successfully, but if deer repeatedly eat its new shoots and leaves, it can struggle to grow into a mature tree. When this happens across a woodland, natural regeneration can fail and the diversity of plants and habitats declines. In some circumstances, high deer densities can also lead to poorer animal welfare, as competition for food increases.

For Woodoaks, doing nothing would therefore not be a neutral choice – it could undermine the habitat restoration work we are carrying out across the farm.

How do we know how many deer there are?

We use professional advice and evidence from monitoring to assess deer activity and population levels. This includes observations of deer, signs of trees been eaten, deer tracks and other field evidence, alongside assessment of how the woodland and newly planted areas are responding.

Deer management is not based on trying to achieve an exact number of animals. Instead, the aim is to maintain a population at a level that the land can support while allowing woodland, hedgerows and other habitats to regenerate successfully.

Why is culling necessary?

Where deer numbers are too high, controlled culling is currently the most effective and practical way of reducing this pressure and maintaining a healthy population.

This is not unique to Woodoaks. **At the nearby Ashridge Estate, the National Trust has identified growing deer numbers as a significant threat to its internationally important woodland and says that managing the deer population is necessary to allow woodland habitats and other wildlife to flourish.** Their approach combines deer monitoring, impact assessments and population management alongside other measures such as protecting vulnerable areas.

For Woodoaks, the principle is the same: we want deer to remain part of the ecosystem but at a level that allows the wider landscape to recover. In particular, as we work to regenerate Bottom Wood, we need to ensure that young trees and woodland plants have a chance to establish.

This is not about eliminating deer from Woodoaks. The aim is to manage numbers responsibly so that deer can continue to form part of the ecosystem without their feeding habits preventing other species and habitats from thriving.

Culling is one part of a wider approach to deer management, alongside monitoring, habitat management and protecting particularly vulnerable areas where appropriate.

Have alternatives been considered?

Yes. We consider non-lethal measures wherever they are practical and proportionate. Tree guards and fencing can provide protection for particularly vulnerable planting, but they are not a practical long-term solution for protecting the whole farm and woodland from deer pressure.

Exclusion fencing can also fragment habitats, restrict the movement of other wildlife and be expensive to install and maintain across a large area.

The most effective approach is therefore a combination of measures, with population management playing an important role when deer numbers and the pressure from deer feeding on new shoots are too high.

How do we ensure the deer are treated humanely?

Any deer management at Woodoaks is carried out in accordance with relevant legislation, recognised best practice and high standards of animal welfare.

The objective is always a clean, humane and safe dispatch. Work is undertaken by appropriately trained and experienced individuals who understand deer behaviour, welfare and the requirements of safe deer management.

We take the responsibility of managing a wild animal population seriously and will not undertake management where suitable conditions cannot be achieved.

Who carries out the work?

Deer management is carried out by appropriately qualified and experienced professionals or competent deer managers appointed by Woodoaks.

They work within the agreed management approach for the farm and are responsible for ensuring that all activity is undertaken safely, legally and with appropriate regard for animal welfare, visitors, neighbouring landowners and other land users.

What happens to the venison?

Where an animal is suitable for the food chain, the venison is recovered and used rather than wasted. Deer are a valuable source of nutritious, locally produced wild meat and using the venison recognises that the animals have a wider value beyond their role in managing the landscape.

Our ambition is to make the venison available locally through Woodoaks, creating an opportunity for people to enjoy high-quality, wild venison from the landscape around them and connecting our approach to deer management with our wider commitment to sustainable local food.

We are currently working through the practical arrangements for this and will share more information, including when and how the venison will be available as soon as these are confirmed.

The handling of venison is undertaken in accordance with the relevant food hygiene and traceability requirements.

When does management take place?

Deer management is undertaken at appropriate times of year and in accordance with legal requirements, taking account of deer welfare, the needs of the wider farm and woodland and the safety of visitors and other land users. It will take place either at dawn or dusk and clear signage will be used.

Management is planned carefully rather than taking place continuously, and activity may be adjusted according to conditions, deer behaviour and the needs of the habitats we are trying to protect.

Will Bottom Wood remain open?

Yes. Woodoaks will remain a working farm and a place for people to enjoy, learn about and connect with nature.

Where deer management is taking place, there may be temporary restrictions or changes to access for safety reasons. These will be kept to the minimum necessary and communicated clearly to visitors, volunteers and other people using the farm.

Our aim is to balance safe public access with our responsibility to manage the land and its wildlife responsibly.

Contact Us

For further information, please email us at info@woodoaksfarm.com