

Sparsholt's Deer Herd

At Sparsholt there is a small herd of ornamental Japanese Sika Deer. Here they are kept primarily for the students studying Game Management or Wildlife Conservation, however deer are considered to be a viable farm animal for the production of venison. It is usually Red Deer that are farmed for this purpose. Currently there are 47 deer in the herd. This is made up of 1 master stag of 7-8 years, a reserve stag of about 4 years and 22 female adults 'hinds' and their calves from last year.

Japanese Sika deer are the smallest of the Sika deer and can be identified by their greyish colour winter coats and lighter brown summer fur. When new antlers grow they are covered in black velvet which is rubbed off. The calves have a distinctive baby coat which is darker brown and has fewer spots. They also have no white spot under the tail. This 'caudal patch' appears at 1-2 months and will have a black edge like the adults. By 3-4 months the calves appear the same as the adult deer. The stags are always slightly darker in colour.

The Sika deer live in herds and would travel like this in the wild looking for food. They are browsing animals that will eat grasses, broadleaf tree buds, twigs, leaves, fruits, acorns and fungi. They can live permanently in this field which is big enough to support an increasing herd size. They will eat grass until the end of the growing season then they will be given hay during the winter. If the hay is good quality, this is all they need. Extra concentrates 'deer nuts' may be brought in to supplement their diet if the hay is poor. The deer mostly feed at night and just 'nibble' during the day. You will see the Sika move around the field according to the weather conditions, using the shade and shelter as appropriate.

Rutting takes place in October and the calves are then born the following June. A pregnancy lasts for 7.5 months. Only one calf is born at a time and the calf will stay with its mother until the following year when a new calf arrives. At the end of the first year the male calves begin to grow antlers which appear as small bumps on their heads and then form single spikes. The one year old calves are then known as 'spikers' or 'prickets'. These will drop off at the end of the second year and new larger antlers will grow. This happens every year. The number of side spikes or 'racks on the antlers does not however correspond to the age of the deer. A deer can live to 15 years or more in captivity.

At Sparsholt some of the deer are culled in winter usually December /January. They are not normally sold live. The game keepers will remove the intestines and hooves. The venison is sold privately through college at approximately £3/lb. Any excess is sold to a game dealer for approx £1/lb.