

FALLOW DEER

Source: **WILD DEER MANAGEMENT IN IRELAND: STALKER TRAINING MANUAL** (2005) by Liam M. Nolan & James T. Walsh ([LINK TO STALKER TRAINING MANUAL](#))

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Fallow deer (*Dama dama*) are not native to Ireland but are the most widespread of our three deer species. They are thought to have been introduced by the Normans to the 'Royal Deer Forest' of Glencree, Co. Wicklow in 1244. They were then spread over the centuries to numerous deer parks throughout the country. Examination of maps shows many place names relating to deer parks. A good number of these parks fell into disrepair many years ago and the deer escaped to nearby forests where they thrived, due mainly to the widespread natural hardwood afforestation which marked the Irish countryside through the period of plantation and clearance from the middle of the seventeenth century. Many more were abandoned around the time of independence in the early part of the last century and more recently there have been new wild populations resulting from deer farm escapees.



Common-coloured fallow buck in early winter coat – from a high seat

Fallow are members of the genus *Dama* rather than *Cervus*, which includes red and sika deer. The main difference between these groups is that deer of the *Dama* group produce palmated antlers, lack a mane in the rut and have no upper canine teeth. There are two members of this genus, the European fallow deer and the Mesopotamian or Persian form, an endangered subspecies which is only found in the wild in Israel and in a few isolated

areas of Iran. Though endangered, a number of the Mesopotamian-European hybrids were introduced to Ireland and used as sires on fallow deer farms, to increase body size. There is always a danger that some of these hybrids could escape and pollute our fallow gene pool. Though a bigger animal, these crosses do not have the wide antler palmation that we associate with fallow deer.

Unlike our other two deer species, it is difficult to define definite regions in the country where they are to be found. They are widely distributed both in the Republic and Northern Ireland. They tend not to travel widely and are still concentrated very much in the areas where they originally escaped, even in some cases after many centuries. As will be described later, there are several colour variations of fallow deer; some or all will be found in these different populations, probably dependant on the colour preference (if any) of the owner of the original park.

The major populations of fallow deer are Laois/Offaly, Tipperary/Waterford, Clare, Galway, Wicklow, Monaghan/Louth/Armagh, Fermanagh, Down, Roscommon around Lough Key and Sligo/Leitrim around Lough Gill. However in each county, the populations are often distinct, with little if any mixing between them. For example there are a number of distinct areas with fallow deer in Co Galway, including Portumna, Ballygar and Mountbellew.

Fallow deer are larger than Japanese sika deer but equate in height and size to the sika-like deer to be found in the Wicklow region. Fallow have a longer tail than the other species and their ears are long and pointed.



Fallow buck browsing in broadleaf woodland, in this case on a mature tree

Fallow are predominantly grazers but will browse, particularly on bramble during the winter months. They can cause considerable damage in young broadleaf woodland, eating the leaders and side shoots, and also in agricultural crops. In more mature blocks a large number of fallow will create an obvious browse line. The movement from forestry to open feeding areas is usually along well-marked tracks. The species has become almost nocturnal in their grazing habits in areas of high disturbance, however in their

preferred habitat of mixed pole-stage and semi-mature woodland, there are usually enough secluded places to graze undisturbed and a good understory of cover for lying up. Fallow may vacate an area completely in areas of high disturbance or widespread felling, but reappear in following years when conditions settle. Like our other species, fallow deer are gregarious, though both bucks and does live in separate herds for most of the year, with the exception of the rutting period. More so than red or sika, fallow are particularly sensitive to changes in weather, and are unlikely to be visible in the open in wet or windy weather.

Fallow Deer Male: Buck (shoulder height 1.0 metre, approximate weight 100kg)
Fallow Deer Female: Doe (shoulder height 0.85 metres, approximate weight 45kg)
Fallow Deer Young: Fawn

Males

Male fallow deer can be distinguished from females as young fawns by the presence of long hairs on the end of the penile sheath, which grow further as they mature. Pedicles first appear around eight months of age. Fallow prickets can sometimes be difficult to recognize by novice stalkers, as sometimes the antler development is very small, with only very small buttons developing. The more experienced will instantly recognise a male by the shape of the body, particularly as the rut approaches and the neck starts to swell. There is no mane development. Bucks have a very pronounced larynx or Adam's apple.

*Fallow bucks in hard horn, late summer.
Note prominent Adam's Apple, penile sheath and tail*

Fallow deer antlers are palmate in shape, rather than carrying a given number of tines on a main beam. While they have brow tines and the equivalent of the red deer's *trey* tine, the latter just below the beginning of the palmation, the antler then sweeps up in a curve. It is wider at the top than the bottom and is backed by protuberances of antler known as *spellers*. In a mature buck there should often be a rear-facing tine. In general, wild fallow do not develop palms until about four years of age.



Typical antler of mature fallow buck

Centuries of culling for antler quality does not appear to have benefited Irish fallow bucks greatly and antler quality rarely equates to the best available in mainland Europe. Many suffer from *fishtails*, an indentation in the main beam which gives the appearance of a fishtail. Fallow bucks also suffer from the fact that they can spend a large amount of the early autumn grazing in the open. Most male fallow do not live long enough to produce the antlers that are considered typical for the species.

Fallow bucks move from their summering areas to ground permanently occupied by the does, where they take up rutting stands, usually in thick cover. Males do not normally hold a rutting stand until five or six years of age - and often older. In many areas in this country, male fallow deer are under extreme hunting pressure due to a long open season (formerly six months) and as a result there is often a shortage of mature males; in such circumstances younger bucks may well hold a rutting stand earlier than elsewhere.



Fallow deer rutting stand in mixed forest

The females then wander into these stands when in heat. Fallow deer tend not to hold does, as red deer stags usually do. During the rut, bucks make a distinctive repetitive grunting noise which sounds like a belch while on the stand. For the rest of the year they are generally silent. Around the stand the ground is often torn up - bucks scrape the ground with their feet and antlers and thrash the branches of nearby trees but they seldom wallow. During the rut, the neck swells and the end of the penis sheath and the flanks become stained. They urinate over themselves and also scent-mark surrounding vegetation from their suborbital glands. The same areas tend to be used for rutting by fallow deer year after year. Unlike other species of deer, fallow bucks can rarely be called off a stand by the stalker.

Rutting activity consists of the continual parading of the stand area with occasional periods of grunting. Bucks eat little or nothing during this period; consequently they lose weight and are usually unable to defend their territory for much more than one to two weeks, after which time an otherwise subordinate buck may commandeer the stand.



Parkland fallow does exhibit their gracefulness on the run

Females

Does occasionally bark if alarmed and mewing is commonly heard, particularly when deer are moving. It is a gentle communication between doe and fawn. In general it is assumed that 70% of fallow does will bring a fawn through the winter, before any cull is considered, illustrating the necessity for hard culling just to maintain the local herd at a static figure.

Colour Variations

There are five main colour variations in Irish fallow deer. The fact that there is variation at all in this species is an indication that they have been inbred in parks, semi-domesticated, for many centuries.



This group of fallow bucks, photographed in Dublin's Phoenix Park, show all fallow deer colour variations except white

Common

As the name suggests, this is the colour form seen most frequently in wild populations. In summer it is a rich brown colour dappled with white spots on the upper flanks and with a black stripe running from a point in the middle of the back down to the tip of the tail, broadening as it goes. The chest and belly, and the underside of the neck, are distinctly white in summer. In winter this colour form becomes darker, almost donkey-brown in appearance, with the summer spots virtually disappearing. The broad stripe along the back in the summer coat becomes less obvious as it merges with the winter colouring. As with all deer, the summer coat is much shorter and glossier, making the definition of all spots and lines more obvious.

Black

Black fallow, also known as melanistic, are the darkest form. Whereas the coat is completely black in the winter, there are faint brown spots on the coat in the summer. There is no obvious rump spot.

Brown

The brown form was often considered as black as both are dark in winter, however there is a marked difference in summer coat as they are a distinctive dark brown colour. A black line is visible down the back and around the heart-shaped rump spot.

Menil

The menil colouration is basically a paler version of common pelage. All the black areas in the common animal are replaced with a pale brown. Spots are retained in the winter coat. There are various hues of the menil form. They are a popular form in deer parks. The genetics of coat colour in fallow are complex but suffice to say here that mating two menil deer will always produce a menil fawn. While many of these park deer escaped with the other forms, they have disappeared in a good deal of our wild populations as their relatively bright colour has made them particularly vulnerable to hunters. Menil bucks have a very pale antler velvet, unlike that of the other colour forms mentioned above.



Group of menil fallow deer in winter coat

White

Not a frequent colouration in wild Irish fallow, though seen in some populations in Waterford and Tipperary. They are often kept in parks in pure white herds. This colouration also breeds true. Two pure white fallow deer herds are to be found in parks in Mallow, Co. Cork and Parkanaur in Co. Tyrone. The fawns are initially born with a

sandy-coloured coat and turn paler with each succeeding moult, eventually turning white at about three years of age. White fallow are not albinos, which are characterized by having pink unpigmented eyes.

There are other variations of coat in fallow deer which have not as yet been reported in this country. There is a blue form (in reality, grey) found in Woburn Park, Bedfordshire, England and a longhaired variety, common in colour with a shaggy coat and tufts of hair growing out of each ear, found in Shropshire, England.



White fallow Buck