

Roe Deer: *Capreolus capreolus*



Roe deer were a rare sight in the Parish right up until the 1990s. Now, however, if you know where to look, they can be seen fairly easily. The Roe became extinct across England and Wales in the 18th century. They were reintroduced to Dorset in the 19th and have slowly spread to reach Plumpton but they have barely reached Kent.

The Roe is the smaller of our two native species of deer. Adults are 10 to 30kg in size, 60 to 75cm in height at the shoulder. In summer they are usually reddish brown in colour; in winter that changes to grey, pale brown or even black. Unlike other British deer, Roe exhibit little in the way of sexual dimorphism – the sexes are very similar in size.

Roe are opportunists when it comes to habitat and will, if necessary, occupy habitats as diverse as upland moorland or lowland reedbed. They are most at home in woodlands with abundant understorey.

They are mainly browsers that actively select different food types, including forbs, bramble, ivy, ferns (especially in winter), coniferous/deciduous tree shoots grasses and fungi. As with other ruminants that evolved with predators, roe eat rapidly, barely chewing, and regurgitate and cud the food later when 'lying up', safely hidden. Roe feeding damage to saplings can be distinguished from damage caused by rabbits because one cut edge is left ragged – a legacy of their dental structure.

The senses of deer have been under-studied by the scientific community. However we do know some basic facts about Roe. Their olfactory abilities are vastly superior to ours and better than that of dogs. Their hearing range is broadly similar to ours although they can detect sounds up into the ultrasonic spectrum. Their hearing is, of course, aided by big cup-shaped ears that can rotate independently almost 180 degrees and are constantly moving. Roe lack the binocular vision that we have, although they are very good at detecting movement. They have limited colour vision in the blue/green spectrum and some scientists believe they may be able to use part of the ultraviolet spectrum. They have a good field of view of around 300 degrees and the presence of reflective tissue (*tapetum lucidum*) behind the retina improves their vision in low light conditions.

Roe live to seven years on average, exceptionally to 14. There is a 50% mortality of kids in their first year. In line with many species, a cold late spring in March/April that delays available food is the deciding factor. Man and weather aside, the next biggest killer of Roe is lungworm, which causes parasitic pneumonia.

The rut occurs between mid July and mid August and females give birth, usually to twins, between mid May and mid June. The Roe is the only hoofed animal in which delayed implantation of the fertilised egg occurs.

While Roe Deer numbers are at historically high levels across parts of Britain, their local population has recovered to natural levels. Signs to look for are tracks (slots), browsing and fraying damage, droppings and shed antlers in December.

For further reading, probably the best guide remains John K Fawcett's booklet *Roe Deer*, published by the Mammal Society (ISBN: 090628242X). It is now out of print but copies are still available from Abe Books (www.abebooks.co.uk).

Jon Wood