

## **County Wicklow Deer Management Project**

Although the official estimates of the size of the large deer population found in the east of the country vary considerably, there is no doubt that the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands are at the heart of the growing national issue of unsustainable numbers. Sightings of deer in locations far from their traditional breeding grounds, are now a daily occurrence. One well-known group regularly spotted grazing next to the county's only motorway, the M11, is indicative of a population greater than the lands suitable to contain them.

It is against this backdrop and the findings of some recent field studies, that the County Wicklow Deer Management Project was established. Launched in 2018, the project is being strategically managed by Wicklow Uplands Council in conjunction with the Wicklow Deer Management Partnership (WDMP), and is seeking to tackle this issue by creating a long-term sustainable management framework involving multi-stakeholders and with an ongoing emphasis on collaboration between all parties. This is backed up by the recording of data at every stage and the hosting of training events to share knowledge and best practice.

The three year contract for the provision of sustainable Deer Management Services in County Wicklow was awarded through a joint funding initiative of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine and The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and it represents the first of its type and scale in the state.

The key concept of the project is the establishment of Deer Management Units (DMUs), which are made up of a wide range of stakeholders that includes landowners, hunters, state bodies such as Coilte, National Parks and Wildlife, the Government Departments of Agriculture and Heritage, the Forest Service, and representative organisations such as Wicklow Uplands Council. A veterinary surgeon has recently also become involved with the project and it is envisaged that he will provide guidance on animal welfare and health.

The project design initially sought to establish three DMU's in locations where particular issues were known to be present. However, thanks in large part to the significant interest and timely rollout of the project, five DMU's have been established and are now fully operational in the west, south and central areas of the county. Each DMU will oversee the management of the deer population in their area using invaluable local knowledge of the terrain and deer habits – which can vary considerably.

Deer management activities of the project focus on the weaker members of the population and refrains from the practice of trophy hunting that is often associated with recreational shooting. This ensures that the population remains healthy, stronger and adept to the woodland and mountain landscapes they traditionally inhabit.

All deer that are selected are photographed, geo-tagged and most importantly, are sold into food supply chains based in Counties Wicklow and Kildare. Although the demand of venison meat has momentarily dropped due to Covid measures in place in both Ireland and the UK, this model has proven to be successful in creating financial incentives and offers long-term viability to addressing the population management issue at hand.

Education and training also continues to be an important feature of the project, with HCAP training and certification for firearms and food handling training offered through a partnership approach with other organisations.

In January of 2021, the project held its first public event, with a combined training and social gathering held in west Wicklow that attracted 62 attendees – something that seems a distant memory since the arrival of the Covid 19 pandemic. Centred around a BBQ serving venison, those in attendance to enjoy the outdoor banquet included landowners, hunters, NPWS rangers, specialist butchers and other interested parties. Lots of great conversation ensued between the representatives of the various roles within the project, and it marked an important occasion for the collaborative model of learning and knowledge sharing that the Uplands Council strives for.

Also present and leading a presentation, was a scientist from the Backweston Laboratory Complex in County Kildare, the essential lab service which is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to support the agri-food sector. On this occasion, an informative presentation with the aid of two deer carcasses kindly supplied by NPWS, was given before the BBQ event. The principal focus was to demonstrate first-hand how best to identify the presence of TB in the lungs and lymph glands and to assist the stakeholders in recognising the general health of the deer they observe.

This new awareness is of particular interest to the farming sector and it is hoped that it will contribute to a better understanding to the spread of TB in the area, which in some locations has remained stubbornly high.

Given that much is still to be discovered on the negative impact that of a high deer density has to the balance of biodiversity found in upland and grassland habitats, Project Manager Pat Mellon has been keen to record some baseline data with the use of a metal cage temporarily installed on grassland across multiple locations.

The device which is approved and used by the state agency Teagasc, discourages wildlife access within the cage itself to provide measurements to compare against the loss to the yield of grass due to consumption by deer in the areas outside of the cage. A difference of up to 30% has been recorded at some locations, indicating deer are opting for easier foraging in non-traditional settings and often putting them closer to farming activities and livestock.

Another ecological impact that a large population certainly has to the region, is related to broadleaf species which are particularly vulnerable to consumption or trampling by deer when they are in the sapling stage. The ambitious targets laid out in the Government's 'Climate Action Plan' published in 2019, seeks new forestation of approximately 22 million trees nationwide per year over the next 20 years - with a target of 30% broadleaf species. To achieve this goal locally, it seems logical that the County Wicklow Deer Management Project, should offer great insights to how it can be successfully implemented with minimal impact from deer.

As the project approaches its half way point, the warm reception it has received along with the great interest from other areas of the country also experiencing challenges with a dense

deer population, indicate strongly that a self-sustaining collaborative model to better manage the situation is not only possible, but is badly needed. At this early stage, it already appears that the framework created and tested through this project's delivery, should certainly provide a measured solution to guiding future projects and informing national policy on this growing issue.