Fallow Deer

Photo Credit: Marisa Lee-Sasser

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Dama dama*

**DESCRIPTION:** Fallow deer (*Dama dama*) are members of the Family Cervidae and are native to the Mediterranean Region of Europe, Asia Minor, Palestine, Iran, and northern Africa. Coloration of fallow deer is highly variable, but there are four main color varieties, more than any other species of deer: (1) common – upper parts of summer coat are rust-colored with a white rump patch and belly, white spots on back and sides that merge into a white line along the lower side and near the rump on the haunches; a black line runs down the back and often connects with the black upper surface of the tail; the winter coat is dark grayish brown and the spots are barely detectable, (2) menil – coat is pale tan and heavily spotted with white all year long, (3) white – coat is white and eyes are dark – not a true albino, and (4) black – coat is very dark, but not jet black, in summer with barely detectable gray brown spots; the coat becomes dull brown in winter. The summer coat is acquired in May and the winter coat in October. Males (bucks) grow antlers each year. Antler growth begins in May and continues until August. Antlers are shed in April. Antler growth begins when bucks reach approximately one year of age. Their first antlers typically are unbranched spikes. Deer two to four years of age usually produce slightly larger antlers with more points. Their antlers become palmated and have many points once a buck reaches five or six years of age. Antler size usually increases as bucks grow older. Deer five to nine years old produce the largest antlers. At birth, fawns have a coat slightly darker than the common color phase spotted with white. Newborn fawns weigh about eight to eleven pounds. Adult females (does) weigh between 65 and 100 pounds; adult bucks usually weigh between 175 and 225 pounds. Does tend to reach their maximum size between four to six years of age and bucks reach maximum body size at five to nine years of age. There are two subspecies of *Dama dama*: *D. d. dama* and *D. d. mesopotamica*. *D. d. mesopotamica* is classified as an endangered species.

**DISTRIBUTION:** There is uncertainty over the natural distribution of this species in recent times. It is believed *D. d. dama* occurred in Europe and *D. d. mesopotamica* occurred in the remainder of the deer’s range, which included Asia Minor, Palestine, Iran, and northern Africa. Fallow deer are the most widely kept species of deer in the world and have been introduced to all continents other than Antarctica. Wild populations of this species have been established in numerous countries, including the United States and Canada. Numerous captive populations of fallow deer also are found in these two countries. The first documented attempt to establish a wild population of fallow deer in Alabama occurred in 1925 in the William B. Bankhead National Forest in Winston and Lawrence Counties. The last report of a wild fallow deer in that area was 1930. A wild population was established in the Miller’s Ferry area in Wilcox County. During 1931 or 1932, 15 to 20 fallow deer escaped from a captive herd in Miller’s Ferry. This population was estimated at 200 to 300 animals in 1962 and fallow deer could be found in portions of Wilcox, Dallas, and Marengo counties. As the white-tailed deer population increased in these areas of Alabama, the fallow deer numbers declined. Today, probably fewer than 40 wild fallow deer still exist in the area near Miller’s Ferry. Numerous captive fallow deer herds are found in Alabama. Some captive animals occasionally escape and are seen in the wild.

**HABITAT:** Fallow deer can be found in a variety of habitats, but they have a preference for deciduous and mixed forests, interspersed with open, grassy areas. They require some tree cover for shelter and winter food.

**FEEDING HABITS:** The fallow deer is predominately a grazer, but also commonly browses trees and shrubs. The largest portion of the fallow deer’s diet consists of grass and browse. They also feed on fruits, nuts, and fungi when available. Most water requirements are acquired from the deer’s diet and dew, but they occasionally drink from free water sources.
LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY: In some areas, fallow deer do not appear to be gregarious, while in other regions groups of 30 or more animals can be seen together. Adult bucks are usually solitary, but may form bachelor groups of six or less individuals in the summer. Doe/fawn groups are common throughout the year. Fallow deer are polygamous, with adult bucks breeding as many does as they can attract during the breeding season, or rut. The rut begins in September, peaks in October, and continues into November. During the rut, older, more dominant bucks establish small territories about 100 meters apart. They develop scrapes and thrash trees and shrubs with their antlers within this territory. Bucks also perform a dance-like ritual and bellow in a deep, guttural voice to attract does. There are frequent fights and shoving matches among bucks during the rut. Fallow deer may utilize a system known as lekking in areas with dense populations. In these situations, numerous bucks gather at a favorable site called a lek. Each buck attempts to defend a zone about 5 to 10 meters across and mates with any does attracted into his zone. Weaker bucks only may be able to hold their position in the lek for a few hours at a time, while stronger bucks may last several days in a row. Outside of the rut, bucks use very few if any vocalizations. Does are quite vocal throughout the year, using various mews and bleats to communicate with their fawns and other members of their social group. Does generally give birth to one fawn in late May or June. Most does are not bred until they are two years old. Bucks reach sexual maturity at about 1-½ years old, but generally do not successfully breed until they are four years old. The average lifespan for fallow deer is 11-15 years, with some captive animals living 20 years or more.

REFERENCES:
Fallow deer – the ecology of the European fallow deer (Dama dama dama). http://www.deer-uk.com/fallow_deer.htm

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