

Deer

By John Fletcher. 2014. Reaktion Books Ltd., 33 Great Sutton Street, London, UK, EC1V 0DX. 207 pages, 19.95 USD, Paper.

As I read author John Fletcher's book, *Deer*, I couldn't help but thinking of some of the deer that I have seen in my lifetime. White-tailed deer are overabundant throughout much of Northeast U.S., but interestingly, not particularly common where I live (Cape Cod, Massachusetts), so encounters are especially memorable. My son and I commonly position our trail-cam in different places to try and capture pictures of the elusive white-tailed deer among other animals such as eastern coyotes/coywolves, fishers, and otters inhabiting Cape Cod. I have fond memories of seeing a white-tailed buck in a clear-cut stand and moose in ponds in the White Mountain National Forest, New Hampshire on family camping trips; moose in Baxter State Park Maine is where my son saw his first wild moose; Yellowstone National Park introduced me to mule deer and elk (or wapiti as Fletcher refers to them to not confuse them with moose since *Alces alces* is called elk in the Old World), as well as bison, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats, ungulates that are related to deer. Although my professional interest involves studying predators, mainly coywolves, I am always interested in seeing and learning about the various deer species that I encounter.

The back cover of Fletcher's book introduces the reader to his book and is worth quoting here: "The Celts called them "fairy cattle" and the Greeks associated them with the hunter goddess Artemis, but for most people today, deer are seen as cute, like Bambi, or noble, like the Monarch of the Glen. They can be a danger when we're driving at night, or they can simply be a tasty venison burger. But while we may not often eat humble pie—an actual pie filled with deer organs—deer still appear in religion and mythology, on coats of arms, in fine art, and in literature ranging from *The Yearling* to *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In *Deer*, veterinarian and deer farmer John Fletcher brings together the cultural and natural history of these dignified animals. Fletcher traces the evolution of deer, explaining why deer grow and cast aside their antlers each year and describing their symbolism in various cultures throughout history. He divulges the true story of Rudolph and Santa's other reindeer and explores the role deer have played as prized objects of the hunt in Europe, Asia, and America. Wide-ranging and richly illustrated, *Deer* provides a fresh perspective on this graceful, powerful animal that will appeal to hunters and gatherers alike."

The above description accurately articulated the meaning of the book and what I learned from it. The book is well illustrated with 93 pictures, 66 of those in colour. Fletcher introduces the 40 species of wild deer (including elk/red deer, moose, roe deer, white-tailed deer, and caribou/reindeer), or Cervidae family, found

throughout the world. Fletcher makes it clear that there are many kind of deer (like moose) even if they aren't the proto-typical "deer", such as the white-tailed deer in North America. The first chapter provides a good taxonomic introduction to both Old and New World deer. While Fletcher divides them into the two regions it can be a little confusing as some species such as elk/wapiti, *Cervus elaphus* (meaning pale-coloured rump by Native Americans; note this same species is called red deer in Europe) and North American moose (confusingly called elk in the Old World) occur circumpolar. That being said, the first chapter does a good job of introducing the cast of characters of the book, with red deer being the species most often referred to throughout the text.

In the introduction, Fletcher noted that the book is a cross fertilization between science and the arts. That was certainly the case as the book mostly focussed on human uses of and interactions with deer. I learned some interesting things such as: (1) grazers are generally gregarious and are adapted to resist high infestations of parasites whereas browsers concentrate their food and have little ability to combat them; (2) deer are strongly linked to human symbolism such as regeneration (i.e., males re-growing a set of antlers each year), renewal, power, longevity, royalty, and justice; (3) many of the early "noble" people of the Old World (e.g., kings/queens) were associated with romantic images of deer, such as putting collars on wild red deer stags with inscriptions like the date and person putting the collar on the deer (those collars would later be retrieved by others who saw the message from the royalty that inscribed them); (4) there is a close association between the legends of Robin Hood and deer such that he and his comrades would steal/poach deer from the rich to feed the poor, and this scene is in every movie on the subject; (5) red deer imported to New Zealand have become the first domesticated livestock in 5,000 years; and (6) many deer species will eat meat if given the chance. My favourite quote from the book came on page 61 when Fletcher referred to the image of deer as "ephemeral wild animals briefly glimpsed which contributes to their mystery and allure, fuelling their symbolic role."

John Fletcher lives in Scotland where he runs a deer farm, which is a private estate with an enclosed deer herd living within its confines. His background and location clearly influenced the book as it was heavily biased toward Old World (Europe) deer species. In fact, in chapter 1, where he provided an introduction to the family of deer, the Old World species were discussed three times more than the New World deer (about 15 versus 5 pages). Furthermore, many of his accounts of cultural symbolism, such as converting deer into sha-

mans, came from Old World examples and much less from the New World. At times I had difficulty following the many places and names (especially kings, queens, and other royalty) to which Fletcher discussed. This probably isn't too surprising since I have lived in the United States my entire life and find the whole concept of nobility and classification of different classes of people bizarre, and almost imaginative (e.g., "George Walpole, third Earl of Orford"). On page 142, Fletcher even acknowledged the complexity of symbolism by noting, "For us in the twenty-first century, the world of medieval and Renaissance symbolism seems esoteric and confusing." Even though many of the passages from the book were intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest, the thoroughly illustrated book really helped bring some of the images that he discussed to life. For me, the pictures made the difference in enjoying, rather than struggling to finish, the book. Finally, Fletcher's use of British terms such as hind and hart (for female and male red deer) is confusing and takes a little adjusting to. I actually had to Google "hind" (and other terms) to understand what he was referring to.

Fletcher did attempt to make up the Old World bias by devoting an entire chapter to North America deer. However, the one issue I had with that chapter and with the rest of the book in general, was that the book was overwhelmingly about human utilization of deer and less on deer biology and ecology. The author mentioned numerous times about hunting being a very necessary thing in today's world and sort of belittled the "urban population" that is against such things – little mention was made of society's evolving relationship with nature from utilization and romance to coexisting with and aesthetically enjoying wildlife among us. While I certainly agree that deer can become overabundant and human hunting is a necessary tool in certain instances, I felt that the book was too preachy on that topic. His quote on page 182 was probably accurate but sounded much like state wildlife departments here in North America, "As human urbanization and commuting become the norm, deer numbers grow (due to lack of hunters) and the image of deer as rare and precious mystical creatures risks being gradually displaced by perceptions of deer as suburban nuisances." Why not recognize that many people enjoy seeing them on a

daily basis and that it enriches our lives even if they can pose a hazard to us? That isn't to say that deer hunting is not a major influence of societies from historical to present times, but it would have been refreshing to not view deer only as a game animal and commodity.

Fletcher had many chances to draw attention to other aspects of the Cervid family. For instance, there was essentially no discussion of predators. In fact, carnivores were mentioned a mere eight times in the book with most being in reference to wolves. Yet all of these were in passing and did not describe the importance of predators to both the evolution and management of deer species. It is well noted that even though humans have relied on deer over the course of our species' relative short existence, predators and prey have co-evolved with each other over a much longer period of time and the reason we see the fleetness of white-tailed deer, the robustness of bison and moose, and the regalness of wapiti is in part due to evolving defenses from predators such as wolves. I found it wrong that there would be no chapter devoted to the need to restore predators to landscapes where deer numbers are rising due to declines in human hunting. As the book currently stands, I think a better title would have been "Of Deer and Men", to steal the adage from Barry Lopez's famous 1978 book on wolves. To my point, at the end of the book Fletcher lists some associates and websites and all are related to deer farms and venison partnerships (i.e., to be used as food); no sources were given on deer ecology and biology.

Deer is an interesting and well written book that details the symbolism and the close association that humans and deer have had over centuries. Anywhere that people have lived, humans have made use of some of the 40 species of deer found worldwide. There are definitely things in this book that everyone will learn for the first time and that alone makes the book worthy of reading. And there are also many wonderful images that really bring the chapters to life. As long as one accepts the Old World (European) bias of the author, and the relative lack of description of deer biology versus the focus on deer folklore, symbolism, and human utilization of deer, this will be an enjoyable book to read.

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