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DEER FACTS . . . CHINESE WATER DEER



Water Deer are believed to be one of the most primitive members of the Cervidae family, primarily because just like the Musk deer, the males do not grow antlers but have large canine teeth which average 2.5 inches in length. There are two subspecies of Water Deer, *Hydropotes inermis inermis*, also known as Chinese Water Deer and *Hydropotes inermis argyropus*, known as Korean Water Deer.

Although the line of demarcation between the subspecies it is unknown the Korean subspecies is only found in Korea and is in plentiful numbers. The Chinese subspecies were first introduced to the UK in 1873 and after some escapes and some releases from parks, they are now doing well in the wild.

In China, their population numbers are believed to be quite low, with the British population accounting for 10% of the world's numbers. It was estimated that in China in 1990 less than 16,000 individual animals were present with numbers dropping considerably since. Current classification on the Chinese Red List rates them as vulnerable.

Water Deer stand at 50-55cm at shoulder height and weigh anywhere between 11 and 18kg. There is little size variation between males and females. Their coloration varies with the seasons. Their summer coats are reddish brown and quite sleek. In winter they are more peppery grey-brown and can have a silvery appearance on their backs. The hind legs on Water Deer seem to be quite muscular and are longer than their front legs, which actually makes their hindquarters higher than the shoulders. Fawns are very dark brown with white spots which disappear after 2 months and they only weigh 0.6-1.0 kg at birth.

Gestation length estimates vary between 165 days and 210 days and litter sizes of 2-3 fawns are common and as many as 7 fetuses have been recorded in a doe in China.

Water Deer prefer to eat tender, easily digested herbs, shoots, young leaves, grasses and reeds because their four-chambered stomach is and stays under-developed. They are solitary by nature except in the breeding season, but it is not uncommon for them to form pairs or small groups. As their name suggests, they are found around well vegetated river valleys, lake shores, wetlands and coastal plains.

One of the reasons they are classified as vulnerable is the threat from poaching for its meat and semi-digested milk found in the rumen of unweaned fawns – this has been used in traditional Chinese Medicine as a cure for indigestion in children. The colostrum from females just given birth is also highly sought after and is another reason they have been heavily hunted.

Recently, special reserves in China have been created to protect this species and ensure their future survival.

Did you know.....

- Their tusks are controlled by facial muscles: they are pulled back when eating and thrust forward and together when fighting;

- The Latin name for this small deer means “unarmed water-drinker” because of the male’s lack of antlers;

- They are strong swimmers and can swim between islands in search of food and shelter.

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