

## ***RegenVen: How Landscape Scale Deer Management can Recover Nature and Produce Sustainable, Healthy Food***

**Facilitator:** Sam Hanks, Suffolk Wildlife Trust

### **Panel:**

- Esther Rosewarne, Suffolk Wildlife Trust
- Greg Strolenberg, Lavenham Butchers
- Lucy Manthorpe, Kiln Farm

Esther introduced the session by explaining she works for the Suffolk Wildlife Trust on their new Landscape Recovery Project (LRP). There are two LRPs in Suffolk, Connecting Constable and Gainsborough Country (CCGC). LRPs is a gov funded scheme which is part of wider package of agricultural schemes in England. LRPs present an opportunity to transform landscapes for the better long term. This is one of 56 projects across the UK. There is a cluster of LRPs in East Anglia. Each one brings something different, ranging from creating and improving habitats at landscape scale, to restoring rivers and floodplain function, to tackling invasive species and introducing regenerative farming techniques.

CCGC covers South Suffolk and a little of North Essex and was formed from the two existing farming cluster groups, who came together to look for a way to restore nature, sequester carbon, benefit local communities and become more resilient as a whole. The project has over 60 farmers involved and is one of the biggest in the country, covering 18 and a half thousand acres. We have quite a lot of woodland in this part of the county, one of the most important terrestrial habitats we have. There is just under 1500 hectares of wooded areas with around a third ancient woodland, and just under 500 hectares are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Managing woodlands and increasing their biodiversity and resilience is a big priority for this project. Over a series of decades and for a variety of reasons, woodlands have become very isolated, undermanaged, dark and biodiversity has reduced.

The Lawton Principles: Bigger, better, more joined up habitats:

Woodland connectivity is really important to improve their biodiversity and condition. The overarching aim of the CCGC project is to create a vast network of green corridors, all way across South Suffolk. This will be done by creating 50 metres wide strips of scrubby mosaic habitat.

The biggest challenge to this is there are far too many deer in our landscape. The number exactly is unknown due to the nature of the animal – very mobile and good at hiding - but what can be measured is the impact of the deer which they have been doing for a number of years. The data shows the condition of wooded habitats has taken a nosedive and biodiversity along with it. The deer are eating all the trees, plants and habitats. They'll browse off young trees, regenerating saplings in young woodland and they'll eat the woodland floor, including bluebells. They'll strip bark off trees and get in the way of planting new hedgerows.

Ideally they would let nature take its course to create the corridors, but with the level of browsing from deer, that's not possible.

One way of getting an idea of deer browsing impact, is if you can see all the way through your woodland, that's not good. The deer will take out a layer of woodland habitat, up to where they can reach, which over time along with trampling the soil will really impact the ecosystem. If we don't do anything about it, given that deer don't have any natural predators we could be looking at an entire collapse of our woodlands.

Through carefully managed culling, we could deal with this issue.

Deer management at the moment is so far very patchy and is not at a level to make a real difference to ecosystems as a whole. There is not a financial incentive to cull deer due to lack money per deer and there is a limited market, particularly like small deer like muntjac. Most people who do hunt deer are hobbyists and do it in their spare time. But it's not very thorough and is leading to a patchwork effect where herds of deer are thriving. We need to get more people eating it and to do this, we need infrastructure to get the product out to the consumer.

There is a lack of abattoirs and butchers which deal with deer. Finally there is a lack of coordination, There are lots of people, farmers and deer managers, who want to tackle this issue but there isn't a way of getting everyone working together collaboratively. Which is where this project comes in.

1. Looking to add value to deer carcasses at source, by creating these processing hubs and tackling the infrastructure issue for culling the meat. Creating a better environment to sell the venison.
2. Get more people in Suffolk eating venison.
3. Coordination – farmer led LPR which is long term with sustainable funding will hopefully be a way to help people work together on this.
4. Improve standards of deer management

### **Lucy Manthorpe, Kiln Farm**

In 2021 Lucy bought a 400 acre arable, organic farm with 5 ancient woods, 3 of which are SSSIs.

She had no previous experience but knew she wanted to restore the habitat and biodiversity on the farm.

*“Beautiful though the farm is, I quickly discovered the woods... (were) eerily silent and bereft of life. The hedges, or rather, shattered plastic tubes, were so stunted, I thought they'd been recently planted. In fact, they were 10 years old. Everywhere, the woods, the hedges, the fields, were scarred by heavy trampling. The clue to all this was the large herds of deer, who it turned out, had made the farm their home... it became apparent, that if we had deer in such numbers, we would have nothing else.”*

In winter 2022 work was done to control the deer population, which had an “*instant and exploding effect*” on the woods, the crops, including increasing their yield by £10.5k in the first harvest year.

When they first moved there, all but one woods had bluebells. The one that didn't had lots of conifers. She was told there would never be any ground cover due to the acidity of the needles. She was also told it would take 10 years at least for the woods to shift into recovery mode. She believed both these things. But in just one year of deer control, carpets of bluebells emerged in the conifer wood, and a cluster of early purple orchids.

They began to get wildlife surveys. Birds, moths, butterflies, dragonflies, crickets, bats, as many things as possible were surveyed. They have logged an amazing rise in numbers of species in the last two years, showing that what they are doing is working. For example, they have had an increase from 301 breeding pairs of birds to 407. And from 436 to 557 species of moth. And she now knows that if the plants been eaten by the deer, you don't have that moth.

*"If you can't measure it, you can't manage it, and you can't change it"*

When she started this project, she thought she'd be protecting things, not killing them. But she can now say with some degree of certainty that 95% of their success in restoring habitat can be accounted for by decreasing the deer population. They have also introduced various environmental measures, but she does not believe they would have been as successful had it not been for the deer control. The silent woods are now alive with bird song, seeing an increase in tawny owls, blue tits and great tits everywhere, spotted fly catchers, barn owls, wood peckers, wren, black cap, white throat, marsh tit and a brood of 7 grey partridge chicks this year.

There are blue bells and early purple orchids in every woods now. Primroses and wood anemones.

Whilst she was discovering the realities of deer damage, the LRP was making it obvious that you can't control the landscape if you can't control the deer. A main pillar of their scheme is the problem of deer, which also poses the greatest risk to the success of the scheme.

Deer management and stalking is complicated. There are no easy solutions. One area, is looking at the food chain. With this aim they're proposing to roll out state of the art, fully kitted-out butchery units, a total of 4, 2 in each farming cluster. Going forward, there will be facilities to train the next generation of stalkers. These units will help get the product to market with full traceability. They hope to pay stalkers more pounds per kilo to incentivise them to shoot more deer, and on top of the cull value they hope to pay stalkers a per carcass bonus, enabling them to target certain smaller species such as muntjac. Landowners will also be incentivised too.

In 1977 the number of deer in England was around 70000 – it was thought to be a problem at that time. Today the estimate is 2.5 million.

The deer act of 1963 primarily promoted the welfare of deer which demoted the killing of deer and access to venison meat. People today don't know how to cook it or what to do with it. It has led to the unmanageable situation we have today. We need to bring back complete behavioural and cultural change on those managing the deer with complete legislative revision, including adding venison to the public procurement protocol. As things stand, protection of deer trumps recovery of habitat and the species that depend on it. We must break this cycle. We need to get more venison into the market and into the supply chain. No more imported venison from New Zealand which is the only venison you seem to be able to find in the supermarkets.

*“We need everyone here, and everyone else, to eat more of this wonderful, natural product...It’s good for you, good for the deer, good for the environment and can help us to transform our landscape.”*

### **Greg Strolenberg, Lavenham butchers**

Gregg grew up in the country side and learnt butchery from the age of 13. In 2009 he started managing deer on small parcels of land, but found that there was a problem with what to do with the product. No one would sell it, which meant they were unable to continue culling the deer and managing the population.

At the time he ran a wholesale butchery unit just outside Stowmarket, supplying 16 counties with beef, chicken and lamb. He started supplying some of the butchers with deer carcasses but they couldn’t sell it. No one knew what to do with it and it was coming to the point where he couldn’t shoot more deer.

He went for a grant from the [Wild Venison Project](#), and set up a cutting unit in his garage. In his spare time he would butcher deer and sell it at farmers markets. However, he found there was negative perceptions from people, with some expressing the sentiment that he was "*killing Bambi*." Greg focused on engaging with people to help them understand the health benefits of venison, such as its high iron content. He also emphasized the environmental impact of deer overpopulation, explaining that an average fallow deer consumes 5kg of vegetation a day. With 100 fallow deer, that amounts to 500kg of vegetation being stripped from the land daily, contributing to habitat destruction.

If you walk through a woods and it’s quite, that’s not a wood! These deer are destroying their own environments and so it’s not good for them either. Deer is a natural resource: it’s ethical, it’s sustainable and has a low carbon footprint. It’s being shot in the woods, butchered locally and supplied into the local food chain.

Greg has been winning people over with these benefits. The paybacks are, they get good sustainable meat which should be much cheaper than other meat. The average fallow will generate 30-50kg of usable meat. At their shop in Lavenham, they shoot 200 deer a year. People love the minced venison, the steak is less popular. Last week they sold twice as much venison as they did lamb.

There’s a huge range of products they do with venison. Pies, sausage rolls. They also end up with surplus which they give to foodbanks and charities. It’s hard to get this stuff out into the market.

The butchery unit that Lucy mentioned would be a great way of benefitting the food chain for venison and encouraging stalkers to get into the profession.

We are now moving into the deer season. There are 6 species of deer in the UK and we will have around 4/5 species in Suffolk now. There will be Fallow Deer, Muntjac, Roe Deer, Chinese Water Deer, Sika Deer migrating into our area. They bring litters with them so their numbers explode really quickly. We need an outlet for it. With the unit we speak off, there’s no reason we can’t offset 20% to charities – free food!. *“It’s one of the healthiest foods we can eat. It should be on every table, every school, everyone should be eating this!”*

It's easy to cook in a slow cooker, and they're looking at doing boxes and working with chefs to promote this. They are working to try and engage with a broader audience.

From their perspective, the more people interested, the more they can sell, the more deer can be shot and environment will benefit. Vegetarians and vegans will come into the butchers shop asking for venison because they know it's not been farmed, transported, it's benefitting the environment and it's a good source of iron.

Encouraging supermarkets to sell the meat will cause more issues as they will manipulate the market and drive prices up.

### Questions/Comments from the Audience:

- Carrie Pheonix, Natural Habitat

Education is key, as the main challenge lies in changing public preconceptions about this highly nutritious and delicious food source. It's essential to share these messages with schools, young people, and communities. She requested key facts and figures from the panel to incorporate into their education sessions and expressed interest in sharing this information at the Assett Education Food Summit.

- Justin Fairhall, Lunchtime Company

He founded the Lunchtime Company, based in Cambridge, which provides school meals and currently works with 20-30 schools in Suffolk, aiming to expand to 50-60 by next year. They also serve 60 schools in Cambridge and 60-70 in London. He expressed a strong desire to collaborate with RegenVen to include venison on school menus, highlighting it as an ideal meat for children and a great opportunity to connect their meals to habitat restoration, creating a win-win situation.

- Sara Azeem, Community Action Suffolk

How much can you scale this before it stops being a sustainable source of meat?

Sam answered, we don't want to get to a point where you're managing the environment for that product. We need to understand where the balance is. At the moment we have so much deer, but there will come a point where we'll need to find a balance.

Lucy said, it's really important that we carry on trialling new monitoring techniques so we can get a handle on the numbers of each sex, each woodland. We aren't there yet. We don't have a handle on that data and we don't know exactly how big the problem is. Working with the data scientist and ecologists is something they really do need to be doing in this project. Mentioned the danger of involving supermarkets.

Greg followed on by expressing that supermarkets have destroyed almost every industry they've touched. If they then make it part of the supermarket system which would be a farmed industry. It would be a terrible thing for supermarkets to be involve in wild meat because they need full control in how everything is run, and with that you give up your input. What's good about the unit they are looking at, is that it's set up in a way that everything that comes in is recorded, from

weight to sex, to size, to where it's shot. So you can control what's coming out of the areas by the price. You can control the people who are doing it and monitor everything, which means a greater understanding the deer populations in the landscapes.

- Estelle Gray, project manager for HAF (Holiday Activities and Food Programme)

Estelle runs the HAF project for Suffolk and can introduce people to the food providers and her teams. They also do a lot of work in forests so it would be really interesting to explain to people about this issue.