

## *Nature Note (conservation politics)*

I see that Chris Packham has raised the controversial question of whether we should cull deer to help protect nightingales. What – do deer attack nightingales and kill them? No, not directly, of course. What's true is that the deer population in Britain has exploded in recent years. There are now an estimated two million deer at large in Britain's countryside – the highest numbers for over a thousand years. There are now no natural predators here like bears, wolves or lynx to keep them in check and the numbers of our native roe, red and fallow deer have been augmented by various introduced species like muntjacs and Chinese water deer in recent years. And all these deer are eating away the understorey of trees and bushes in our woodlands on which nightingales and other songbirds crucially depend for cover. Nightingale numbers are in free-fall anyway. We have already lost over 90% of their population from various causes and the deer may be finally pushing them over the edge. Surely we couldn't bear to lose this iconic species, that 'singest of summer in full-throated ease', as Keats put it? On the other hand, could you look into Bambi's soft brown eyes and pull that trigger?



Contributed

*A nightingale sang*

Nature presents us with many such dilemmas and choices. We know that badgers and hedgehogs can't coexist. They are both favourite characters in countless children's books, but I'm afraid Mr Brock kills and eats Mrs Tiggy-Winkle whenever he can catch her. Whose side do we take and why? We prefer red squirrels (*Squirrel Nutkin*) to the grey ones (aka *tree rats*) that were introduced into Britain from North America in the 1800s and have progressively displaced all 'our' red ones by a combination of brute force and pox ('oversized, oversexed and over here' again). So, should we perhaps re-introduce some lovely pine martens from Scotland to predate the greys, which the martens find easier to catch than the reds? But, whoops, hang on – pine martens kill young chickens and pheasants too and take all manner of wild birds' eggs, so perhaps they are best left up North? Introductions can go badly wrong anyway – just think of the disaster of taking rabbits to Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. They bred – well, like rabbits – and caused millions of dollars of damage to crops. And are the Americans glad to have the two hundred million starlings that derive from the eighty pairs from England released in Central Park in 1890?

How do we decide such questions anyway? Is it a matter of sentimental human preferences, charisma, perceived beauty, economic interests, nationalism or what? Someone should write a book about it ...

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