

Endangered Milu Deer Saved

Around 1900, when the troops of the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded Beijing, Milu deer, native to China, were carried off by the invaders, making the animal extinct in its home country. Luckily, those once taken to Europe were well protected, with some of them finally returning to China. Under the joint efforts of both Chinese and foreign workers in the field of animal protection, the captive population of Milu has increased substantially and as such, the Milu deer is no longer listed as an endangered species.

By JIANG FUMEI

MILU deer, also known as *Elaphurus davidianus* or Père David's deer, has been classified under China's first-class state protection. The animal has giant antlers, a head shaped like a horse, a donkey's tail, and hooves like a cow. Therefore, the Chinese call it *Sibuxiang*, literally meaning "like none of the four."

Such deer was recorded in Chinese historical documents in ancient times; however, it has been extinct in China for nearly 100 years. It was once even

included on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Under the joint efforts of both Chinese and foreign workers in the field of animal protection, the Milu deer has finally returned to China from Europe. Since 1985, the deer has been tentatively kept in nature reserves or parks. With its captive population increasing, it is no longer listed as an endangered species.

Milu deer is a large mammal that grazes mainly on grass and aquatic plants. It is native to the marshland along the lower reaches of both the Yel-

low River and the Yangtze River. The deer has a thick and strong neck and back, as well as thick and large legs. Its coat is reddish tan in summer and becomes brown and gray in autumn. The fur color is darker along the spine and lighter underside. Its hooves are large and spread out, so that it can walk very fast even in marshland.

Its tail has a tassel at the end and is the longest of any deer. A male adult Milu deer has a head-and-body length of about two meters and stands about 1.3 meters tall at the shoulder. It has about 80-centimeter long antlers that

fork shortly above the base, with the points extending backwards. The female Milu deer doesn't bear antlers and are smaller in size.

The Milu deer has poor fertility without human interventions. The gestation period is more than nine and a half months, longer than that of any other species of deer, after which a single fawn is usually born. A male deer sees its antlers grow and start forking at the age of two and the antlers are fully grown when it turns six. Males engage in real fights during the rut and only the winner can join a group of females.

Archaeological studies found that Milu deer first appeared in China about two million years ago, and they were widely dispersed in the land. The total amount of Milu deer bones unearthed in archaeological sites in today's Anyang City, Henan Province date back between 10,000 and 4,000 years ago is similar to that of farm pigs. The oracle-bone inscriptions recorded that 348 Milu deer were captured during one hunt, showing the great number of the deer back then.

There are many historical records about Milu deer in China. In the mythology about the establishment of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1100 - c. 771 BC), Jiang Ziya, a Chinese noble who helped King Wu of Zhou overthrow the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600 - c. 1100 BC), was riding a Milu deer. Since the Western Zhou, the royal court started to build an imperial zoo for free-ranging rare birds and animals, with Milu deer included.

Within about 1,000 years from Western Zhou Dynasty to Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), the number of Milu deer decreased sharply. The reasons include climate change and human hunting. But the most important is the development of agriculture transformed a large area of the marshland into farmland, resulting in decreasing living space for the Milu deer.

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), soldiers herded a large number of Milu deer to Dadu, the capital of Yuan and today's Beijing, for royal members to hunt for sport. By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Emperor Yongle (1360-1424) re-established Beiping (today's Beijing) as the new imperial capital and established an imperial hunting ground in the southern suburb. At that time, the over 200-square-kilometers hunting ground, known as Nanhaizi, featured a large area of water and grassland; therefore, an ideal home to a few hundred Milu deer. However, the Milu deer was on the brink of extinction in the wild of southern China.

In 1865, French missionary Père David, who was working in Beijing, discovered the deer. He obtained furs and a deer skull and transported them back to Paris, where a biologist named it Père David's Deer. That was how the deer was first made known to the West. As the deer was exotic, the demand was high. Ambassadors and missionaries from the U.K., France, Germany, Belgium, and Japan obtained, through various means, tens of deer in total and transported them back to their home countries for exhibition.

The late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) was a turbulent time. In 1894, one of the walls of the Nanhaizi hunting ground was destroyed by a heavy flood of the Yongding River. Most of the animals escaped but were soon killed and eaten by starving people. In 1900, troops of the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded Beijing and the remaining deer were carried off. So the Milu deer, a species native to China, could no longer be found in its home country. Luckily, those that had been transported to Europe were well protected. Herbrand Russell, Duke of Bedford, saved the species from extinction by acquiring the last of the world's 18 captive deer from zoos in Paris, Berlin, Cologne, and Antwerp, and breeding

them on his estate, the Woburn Abbey, in the north of London, which constituted a 3,000-acre land with rich water and grass resources from 1898. The 18 deer have since become the ancestors of today's Milu deer.

In 1956, two pairs of deer selected by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) were sent to the Beijing Zoo. However, only two male deer survived. In 1973, the ZSL sent two more pairs to Beijing. By 1984 there were nine Milu deer at the Beijing Zoo. At that time, advocated by zoologists such as Tan Bangjie, the Chinese government launched a program to welcome more Milu deer home and received support from the owner of the Woburn Abbey. In 1985, the Chinese government established a Milu Park in the Nanhaizi area of the capital. The owner of Woburn Abbey sent a herd of 20 to Beijing to start their new life at Nanhaizi Milu Park. In 1986, another 39 Milu deer came from London to Dafeng County in Jiangsu Province, the original habitat of the animal. In 1993, a Milu nature reserve was established in Shishou City, Hubei Province, with some Milu deer shipped from Beijing. In 1998, a big flood broke out and a small group of deer escaped from the Shishou reserve to the Dongting Lake area in Hunan Province, starting to adapt to life in the wild.

Today, there are four nature reserves for Milu deer in China and they are located in Beijing, Dafeng County of Jiangsu Province, Shishou City of Hubei Province, and Yuanyang County of Henan Province. The Nanhaizi Milu Park has been expanded into a wetland park with an area of over 1,000 hectares. The reserve in Jiangsu occupies an area of more than 7,800 hectares. Today there are over 4,000 Milu deer in China, with nearly 1,000 of them roaming in the wild. ■

JIANG FUMEI is a Beijing-based freelance writer.