

YZC Animal of the Month, December 2012

Giant Deer

Megaloceros giganteus

The Young Zoologists' Animal of the Month this month is one of the giants in the museum, the Giant Deer, sometimes referred to as Giant Irish Deer or Irish Elk. The skull and antlers on display are from Ireland and are around 12,000 years old. Giant Deer are not just Irish: they have been found across Europe, north Asia and north Africa. Recent studies suggest it to be closely related to Fallow Deer, so they are not Elk either.

In the museum you will find a skull and antlers on display. The antlers are ENORMOUS! Antlers can measure up to 3.7m from tip to tip in this species, and could weigh as much as 45kg. The deer holding up these antlers would have been pretty big, standing up to 2.1m at the shoulder. The antlers are bigger in relation to their body size than any deer

alive today. However, it is unlikely that these huge antlers are to blame for these animals going extinct. Yes, it is unfortunate but there are no Giant Deer alive today. They are first seen in the fossil record some 400,000 years ago, but are thought to have gone extinct about 5000 years ago. It seems likely that this was caused by the change in climate and its effect upon the plants that made up the deer's diet. There were also people farming, changing habitats around this time, and a whole host of other factors that could have led to its downfall. The species as a whole went extinct 5000 years ago, but in Ireland it went extinct far earlier, around 10,000 years ago. This was a time when there were no people on Ireland, so climate change and change in food plants are likely causes of extinction here.