



RED DEER IN A FARM SYSTEM

Handling

The main aim of efficient deer handling and management is to handle deer without causing undue stress to the animals.

Great stockmanship of deer is the most important aspect of good deer management. A capable stockperson will be able to muster and yard deer without causing stress at any time (within reason). A good understanding of deer's distinctive behaviours and traits when designing, planning or managing a deer farm will also optimise deer movement, and minimise deer stress.

Things to think about when designing a deer farm so as to minimise stress include:

- Well constructed fences that are designed specifically for deer.
- Good paddock layout and well positioned races to facilitate movement of deer, and maximise feed utilisation.
- Well designed sheds and yards that allow movement and handling of deer to occur efficiently and with minimum stress to handler and animals.
- Restraint systems that control animals safely to facilitate various deer treatments.

A successful handler of deer is one who is confident in their actions and has adequate experience to recognise when deer are becoming too stressed or 'stirred up', and manage stress risk accordingly. Other issues to be aware of when handling deer are related to: age, species, stocking rates and at various stages within a deer farm's management calendar of operations, such as preparing deer for transport.

Handling weaners & stags

Consideration of the age of the deer you are handling will impact on management and handling techniques.

Young deer

Young deer that have been freshly weaned are to be handled with care. Health related issues associated with stress can be common in weaned deer, and so it is vital for weaned animals to be handled with minimum stress. The main recommendations when moving young deer are:

- Considerable patience is required with young mobs of deer. Sometimes it is necessary to walk away and perhaps leave gates open for them to find their own way, rather than persist in stock movements that cause elevated stress levels in animal and handler!
- Let the mob do a couple of laps around the paddock, to let off some excessive steam. It is however important to keep these animals moving as one mob - do not let individual animals to break away, as invariably these animals will be the repeat offenders in subsequent mob movements.
- It may be necessary to run the young deer with a couple of older animals, and move them through the handling systems and raceways a couple of times. This allows the younger animals to become used to this handling, and the facilities.
- Transportation of freshly weaned deer is to be avoided. A minimum of 10 days is recommended before any transportation occurs to minimise impact on the health, welfare, and productivity of the weaned deer.
- Deer are creatures of habit and prefer routine and familiar surroundings. It is important that the young animals are familiar with their handler. Keep the number of staff used to handle weaned deer to a minimum.

Stags

- Stags are to be handled by people who have adequate experience, and are confident in their deer handling skills. The most important recommendations related to stag age are:
- Compatibility of individuals within a mob is key to reduce stress at handling. Mixing of different stag ages within a mob during handling activities or transportation is to be avoided. This is also true for combining stags that have been run in separate mobs in the paddock. Aggressive behaviour between stags becomes very likely in these situations, especially when they have been brought together in a confined space.
- Extreme care is required when handling stags in the rut.



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- Mature stags should not be in the same pen with fawns and hinds due to their aggressive behaviour in confined spaces.
- Males with hard antler should only ever be handled with extreme care, similarly stags with hard antler should not antlers removed once the velvet has begun to strip and they are in hard antler.

Stag warning signals of aggression

Male deer show warning behaviours before they become aggressive, the handler should be fully aware of these signs and act accordingly in case the stag attacks. The behavioural signs are:

- Grinding teeth
- Lolling tongue
- Rolling eyes
- Flattening their ears against their head

Never enter a pen containing stags unless you are confident they are of a placid nature (although this may change depending on the season). It is always safer to work with stags from the outside of the pen, or from above (on cat walks).

If you do need to enter a pen with stags then it is most important to have an escape route planned via escape doors, or have a shield to protect yourself. Deer are very unpredictable animals so forward planning of what happens with the animals once they are in the systems or shed, i.e. which animals go in which pens, before the stock enter the system. Also have contingency plans for all possible scenarios when handling stags within the sheds. The plan needs to be understood by all personnel working in the shed at that time, and can be implemented quickly to keep everyone in the system safe.

Never work with stags on your own!