



Deer farming

Agriculture Information Sheet No 7(rev)

Introduction

Deer farming involves some techniques which are not normally used anywhere else. In particular, deer are temperamentally different from other farmed animals and need special handling. It is important that stock handlers are suitably instructed and specifically trained in deer husbandry.

This information sheet provides practical advice on health and safety matters relating to deer farming. Following this guidance will assist deer farmers in meeting their duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

The main areas covered in this sheet are:

- personal injury to stock handlers during handling and routine husbandry tasks;
- risks to stock handlers who use veterinary products;
- risks to stock handlers and the public from deer slaughter;
- risks to the general public from public access.

These are assessed for farming red deer. Similar considerations will apply to farming fallow or other gregarious species of deer.

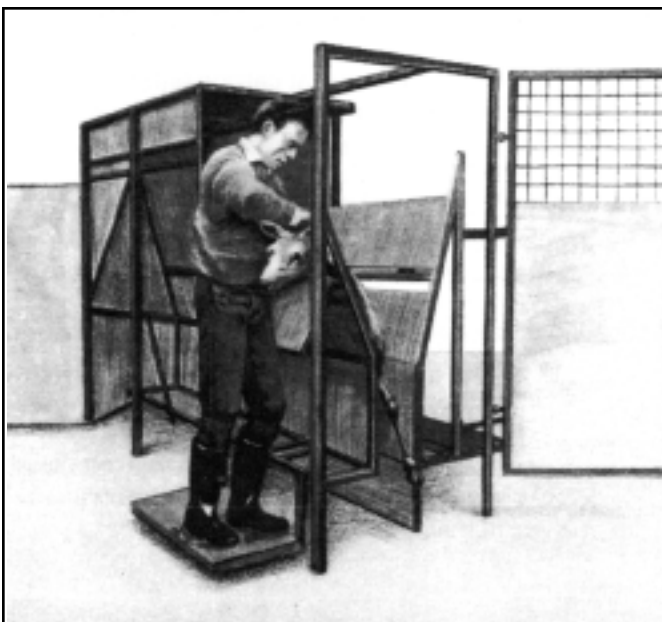


Figure 1 Deer restraint: drop floor crush

Deer handling

A well designed system for herding and handling deer will enable the task to be carried out in a safe and efficient manner with minimal stress to the deer.

Deer will need to be collected into a handling area for certain husbandry tasks. During this operation there is a risk of stock handlers being injured - either by being kicked or gored, so precautions need to be taken to avoid this. Such precautions will also generally be beneficial to efficient, low-stress animal handling.

Where possible, arrange paddocks to open on to a raceway system leading to the handling area. This will avoid the need to move the deer through a series of gates and paddocks.

Make sure the raceway is flanked by suitable fencing at least 1.8 m high. Mask this area with timber or similar material to give a solid appearance.

In the close confines of the handling area stock handlers risk being butted or kicked by stags and large hinds. Deer may also rear up and strike downwards with their front hooves in a scissor-type kick. Design the handling system so that large mature stags can move through without direct contact with the stock handlers. Provide body shields and safety helmets for the stock handlers when handling small stags and known aggressive hinds. Safety footwear with steel toecaps will also be required where there is a risk of injury to the feet.

Shields need to protect most of the body below the neck and be made from 12 mm plywood, polycarbonate or an equivalent material. Safety helmets made to BS EN 397 or BS 6658 are suitable.

The handling area can be a permanent facility or consist of portable equipment. In either case, design it carefully so that the animals are handled safely and efficiently. Make sure walls are solidly built without projections.

Deer tend to move to higher ground when disturbed, so the handling area should be located to take advantage of this trait.

Where subdued lighting is used to calm deer, it needs to be sufficient to allow stock handlers to work safely.

Housed deer should be able to see animals in neighbouring pens. Failure to do this may result in unnecessary stress and handling difficulties.

Deer restraint

The collecting area will need to have a properly designed deer crush. Design the pen so that animals are easily encouraged to enter the crush. Both 'drop floor' crushes (see Figure 1) and 'squeeze crates' (with collapsing padded sides) are suitable. If possible the crush facilities ought to be able to deal with all types of deer including mature stags with full antlers.

The deer crush needs to protect the stock handlers from being hurt and also allow good access to the deer. A simple form of head restraint is recommended.

Using veterinary products

Many veterinary products are hazardous substances as defined in the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002. Under these Regulations, deer farmers must carry out an assessment to evaluate the health risks associated with these products. If the risks to health from exposure to a particular substance is high, the assessment will need to justify that it is not reasonably practicable to prevent the risk by either stopping use of the substance or else substituting one which is safer (regulation 7).

Using tranquillisers

Tranquillisers containing the active ingredient etorphine hydrochloride are highly toxic to humans. Only use them in cases of genuine veterinary intervention and in situations where it is essential to safely transport stags. Do not use them for routine management purposes, eg moving stags from one part of a farm to another.

In special cases where use of etorphine hydrochloride tranquillisers is justified, it should only be administered by properly trained staff who have been authorised by a qualified vet.

Make sure an assistant who is fully trained in administering the antidote is at hand. Deer farmers who want to use etorphine hydrochloride tranquillisers for other reasons will have to justify their use in accordance with regulation 7 of the COSHH Regulations.

This justification will need to take account of husbandry regimes which do not rely on sedation, and also on the existence of less hazardous drugs.

Administering drugs with hypodermic darts should only be carried out by individuals who hold the appropriate firearms certificate and Home Office permit for using a prohibited weapon. They will also need to be familiar with all aspects of using the equipment.

Removing antlers

As a general rule the antlers of every stag should be removed after the velvet has been shed. Antlers can be safely removed without using tranquillisers - providing the operation is carried out as soon as possible after the velvet has been shed and the antlers have hardened. The stags will be easier to handle at this stage. When removing antlers, use a deer crush with suitable head and antler restraint.

Once the stag's temperament has been affected by the onset of the rut, the above technique will not be safe without using a tranquilliser. This can be administered to the stag while it is restrained in the deer crush. Alternatively the stag can be darted in the field. However, tranquillisers containing etorphine hydrochloride should only be used when such use can be properly justified.

Disbudding of male calves at a research institute shows that this is an effective and safe alternative to antler removal.

Managing stock stags

Stags become very aggressive during the rut so handling needs to be kept to a minimum. Only enter their paddocks when it is essential for feeding, examination by the vet, or if they must be moved to another group of hinds.

When stock handlers enter a paddock which has a rutting stag inside, use a vehicle which will provide protection from an attack, eg a cabbed tractor. Two people should be on hand.

Outside the rut stags generally become less aggressive. However, some can be unpredictably aggressive so stock handlers have to be vigilant at all times. Remember, hand reared deer can be the most dangerous.

Managing hinds

Hinds can become aggressive at calving time and should be disturbed as little as possible. Any hinds with young and which have become so tame as to permit close approach should be regarded as possible sources of danger to anyone handling their calves. Take special care if calves are going to be tagged at birth.

Use a vehicle which provides suitable protection when carrying out routine herd inspection at calving time. When leaving the vehicle to inspect or tag a calf, park the vehicle so that the hind cannot approach from behind.

Outside the calving season most hinds are reasonably docile if handled properly. However, some individuals,

especially hand reared animals, can show aggression. Make sure stock handlers are aware of these hinds and take special precautions as appropriate. If possible, cull these animals at the earliest opportunity.

Slaughter

Only permit trained marksmen/women who are proficient in the use of firearms and who hold an appropriate firearms certificate to carry out field slaughter with rifles. Wear suitable hearing protection, since the noise from both repetitive and infrequent firing can cause instantaneous damage to hearing. Seek specialist advice on the type of hearing protection required. If people are going to speak during shooting, use non-linear pressure-sensitive/level-dependent hearing protectors. Muzzle silencers should be used wherever there is repetitive shooting.

Shoot deer when they are quiet so that the marksman/woman can take careful aim and is not likely to be startled by sudden movements of non-target animals.

The choice of area and timing of the slaughter is important. Make sure the slaughter happens when members of the public are least likely to be in the area. Thoroughly inspect the site to ensure that all is clear before shooting.

Choose the shooting position so that there is a safe back stop of solid earth, eg by shooting from a high position such as a high seat or trailer.

The use of firearms inside buildings is potentially very dangerous and should only be carried out after taking specialist advice. The general presumption is that slaughter other than that in the field should be carried out by a competent person who uses a captive bolt pistol.

Precautions against disease

Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis may be present in deer herds, so stock handlers should be encouraged to take the appropriate inoculation.

Lyme disease

Deer are known to be carriers of Lyme Disease. This is a bacterial infection transmissible to humans by the bite of infected ticks. The disease starts with intermittent flu-like symptoms or enlarged glands in the groin, armpit or neck. Sometimes there is a skin rash in the bite area. A serious condition can develop if it is not treated. In cases where there is a problem, carry out routine treatment of all deer for external parasites.

Keep exposed skin to a minimum when handling deer, working in woodland, moorland and heath. The risk of infection is reduced if an infected tick is removed within 24 hours.

General infection

When handling deer entrails or any infected tissues wear disposable protective gloves. Consult the local vet for a safe way of submitting samples for analysis.

Risks to the public

Individual male deer of any species which are known to have lost their fear of humans and which are readily approachable should always be regarded as potentially hazardous once they have cleaned the velvet from their antlers.

Regardless of age, once they are in hard antler, these animals should not be kept in fields with a public right of way or which are known to be used by children, the elderly or disabled.

In other situations when public access may reasonably be expected, display safety signs at access points to the fields. These signs need to be in accordance with British Standard BS 5378 and carry a supplementary text, eg 'Warning - Stags in Field.'



Figure 2 Safety sign

Similarly, deer farmers should avoid pasturing hinds which have recently calved, or are about to calve in these fields. If this is not possible, choose the stocking rate so that hinds can easily occupy positions where they will not feel threatened. In addition, display safety signs to BS 5378 at access points bearing a suitable supplementary text, eg 'Calving Deer - Keep to Path'.

Further reading

Veterinary medicines: Safe use by farmers and other animal handlers AS31 HSE Books 1998

Control of substances hazardous to health. The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L5 (Fourth edition) HSE Books 2002 ISBN 0 7176 2534 6

COSHH a brief guide to the regulations: What you need to know about the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) Leaflet INDG136(rev2) HSE Books 2003 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 2677 6)

The occupational zoonoses HSE Books 1993
ISBN 0 11 886397 5

Health and safety guide for gamekeepers INDG177
HSE Books 1994

Further information

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<p>This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.</p>

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