

## INTRODUCTION

As with any successful livestock system, attention to the health & welfare of farmed deer is essential. Deer are generally very healthy animals. However with the intensification and higher stocking densities associated with deer farming, the risk of disease affecting the herd is increased. Diseases that are common in other areas of livestock production are now found in farmed deer. This means good management and care are vital throughout the year to protect the health and welfare of the deer.

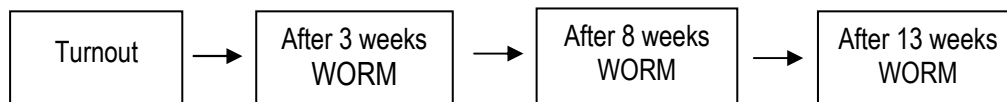
## SPRING & SUMMER MANAGEMENT

Calves are born in late May/June and are usually delivered naturally with little assistance required. Calving difficulties are rare and usually only occur in around 1% of calvings. Care must be taken to ensure that the hinds do not become overfat by late May when given access to high quality feed or grazed on early pasture. Overfat hinds are at risk of having difficulty during calving.

Parasites are a threat to all farmed deer, especially lung and gut worms, which deer pick up whilst grazing infested pasture. Lungworm still causes the majority of deaths on deer farms and hence the only routine treatment carried out for farmed deer is worming of the youngstock. A recommended worming program with an anthelmintic such as Ivermectin is as follows:



**Fig 1: Red deer calf**



In addition to the treatment of the yearlings, young calves must be wormed at weaning and adult hinds and stags should be wormed at housing, which usually occurs in late December.

## AUTUMN & WINTER MANAGEMENT

Weaning of the calves usually takes place between 12 and 14 weeks of age. This can be a very stressful time for the young calves, which also has the potential to predispose them to disease. It may help to reduce the stress on the calves by introducing concentrates into their diet before weaning; spreading concentrates over a wide area on the pasture can achieve this.

Management of the deer herd is of crucial importance over the winter period. Unlike sheep, deer do not cope well with the cold and are especially vulnerable to wet and cold conditions as they have poor insulation. Poor management or preparation for this period can lead to losses and poor breeding performance. To avoid this, youngstock should be housed before the onset of winter. Plenty of shelter should be provided for the hinds or they too can be housed, depending on the conditions on each farm. Hinds should be in good condition at the start of winter. This can be achieved through grazing grass although supplementary feed can be provided if necessary.

## MINERAL DEFICIENCIES

Copper deficiency is the most significant trace element deficiency in farmed deer impacting on both health and performance. A copper deficiency will most commonly show itself when the animal develops a swayback gait due to partial paralysis of the hind legs. Prevention is straightforward with the administration of a bolus or vitamin/mineral drench.

## SPECIFIC DISEASES

As well as the problems associated with general production there are an increasing number of specific diseases that affect deer. Yersiniosis, Johne's, Tuberculosis and MCF (malignant catarrhal fever) are all diseases that can have severe consequences for the health & welfare of all farmed deer.

- Yersiniosis is thought to be stress related. It affects deer that are in poor condition and have been subject to stress during handling, transport or after a diet change. The disease causes diarrhoea and death in the weakest animals.
- Johne's disease is a chronic wasting disease of deer. Young calves pick up the disease whilst grazing contaminated pasture but show no immediate symptoms. It is again during periods of stress that the disease develops to the point where symptoms are seen. There is no cure for Johne's and affected animals must be culled. However, herds can be vaccinated against the disease.
- Tuberculosis is increasing in farmed deer and is classed as a notifiable disease, which means discovery of the disease must be reported to Defra. The disease is spread from animal to animal through direct contact, contaminated feed or faeces. The disease is chronic and symptoms develop slowly, with the first signs being a lack of thrift and progressive wasting. There is no cure for this disease and affected animals are culled.
- Malignant catarrhal fever (MCF) is a disease that is fatal to deer. At the moment its occurrence in the UK is sporadic but the incidence of the disease has increased over the past three years. The disease is spread by sheep, especially ewes at and around lambing, which show no clinical signs of the disease but excrete the virus. This poses problems when deer are grazed on the same pasture as sheep.



Fig 2: Red deer hind

## IMPROVING HEALTH & WELFARE ON DEER FARMS

### 1. Good stockmanship

A good stockman must be able to identify the signs of ill health and distress in his herd. Early detection of signs such as listlessness, loss of appetite (except natural seasonal inappetance), failure to cud and discharge from the nose or eyes can speed up the detection and treatment of any disease. Well-fed, healthy, low stress animals are less susceptible to disease – good herd management is vital in achieving high standards of health & welfare.

### 2. Herd Health Plans

A herd health plan must play a vital role in protecting the health & welfare of farmed deer, and should be compiled in partnership with your vet. A herd health plan should identify the risks of the introduction and spread of diseases to your farm and put in place measures to manage risks, and improve overall disease prevention and control. It may also include a testing programme for various diseases.

### 3. Bio-security

Good bio-security, including simple measures such as knowing the health status of any deer you are buying or moving, and isolating any incoming / returning deer from the main herd, will help prevent the introduction of disease into the herd.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

British Deer Farmers Association – [www.bdfa.co.uk](http://www.bdfa.co.uk)

Veterinary Deer Society - [www.vetweb.co.uk/site/deer](http://www.vetweb.co.uk/site/deer)