

▷ year, several of them at least will be showing signs of wear. Michael believes this is the result of making the deer clean out pasture, so that they crop close to the ground and pick up dirt on the grass which causes increased wear of teeth. Giving them access to fresh grass should reduce that possible problem.

At this stage, Michael has two objectives – to build up herd numbers, but to maintain cash flow by selling herd sires. He's been selecting single-sire



Michael Atkinson with the best of this season's crop of velvet.

mating stags since he started, on the basis of body weight, velvet weight and temperament. He has full records of these factors for his top stags for the past three years. Anything that is offered for sale is four years old or more, because in Michael's view, it's not possible to see how a stag is really going to turn out, or to produce meaningful records, at less than that age.

There are some big animals in this herd, most of them 'lake' stags. Top weight is 470 lb live. The average velvet yield for all adult stags is just over 5 lb but many farmers know of the captured stag which, when it arrived on Michael's farm, yielded 15 lb of A grade velvet. It has never repeated that, although its head has started to improve again in recent years.

Disease hasn't been a major problem, total deaths in a year being about four per cent over the whole herd. Hinds are drenched twice a year, once before mating and once before fawning. Young stock are drenched every three weeks from weaning through to yearling age, and stags get a couple of drenches in the year.

Hinds are also vaccinated with a five in one vaccine as an insurance – Michael isn't convinced they need it but can't quite bring himself to risk giving it up. At the outset of the deer operation Michael was worried about Tb, as there are pockets of high incidence among cattle in the Wairarapa. At first test there were only three reactors in

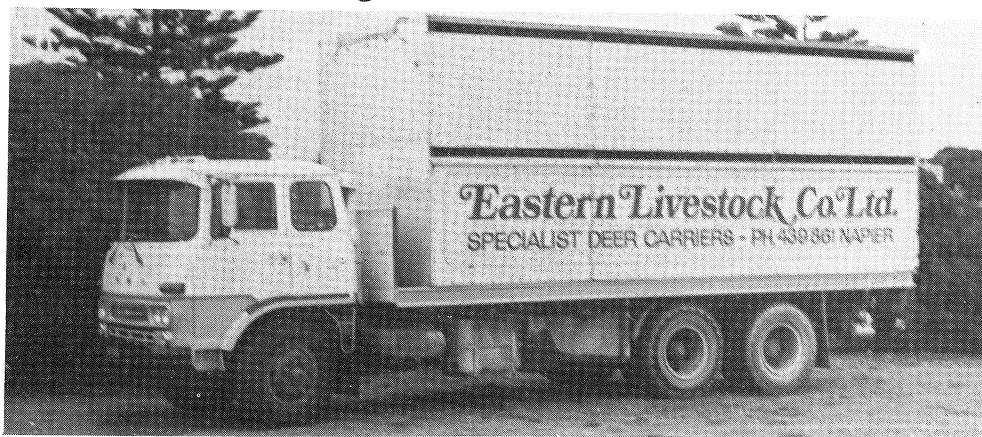
the herd of 150 deer, and since then one or two have showed up each year, but by culling ruthlessly he is ensuring no increase and hopes eventually to eliminate it altogether and establish a safe herd.

'Wharerata' at present runs, in addition to the deer, 1500 ewes and 1000 hoggies, so there's plenty of scope for increasing the deer herd. But in the short-term Michael will get rid of some of his stags – selling sires and sending the poorer-quality stock to the DSP – which will allow scope within the fenced deer area to increase hind numbers to about 300.

The first DFA sub-group in the country was established in the Wairarapa; it started as a discussion group with Michael Atkinson as chairman. Today, though it has adopted a somewhat formal nature, it still meets regularly on members' farms and has made a major contribution to the expansion of deer farming in the area, providing help to newcomers and wider awareness of improved techniques among the established farmers. Margaret Atkinson, as the group's secretary, has made an equally valuable contribution to the group's success.

Kerry Giles, who is overseas at present, will be back next issue with his regular deer management column.

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