

EUROPEAN DEER IMPORTS

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We started deer farming before it was legal so just getting some deer behind fences was a major undertaking and breeding did not enter into it for several years

Starting in the Lilburn Valley in Western Southland had major advantages as we bordered a large feral population of deer that was overstocked for the natural environment making trapping very easy. Although these deer had a reputation of being small (I carried out three hinds and one fawn shot for meat on my back at one time) it was the feeding and not the breeding that was the cause of that as we were to find out later. One of the largest Red stags in New Zealand, currently advertised as "Commodore", but known to us as "135", was bred from an animal out of the Lilburn area.

In the late 1960's deer in New Zealand had bred so well and had become a pest. The Government gave you a pat on the back and three rounds of .303 ammunition for every set of ears you turned in. It was impossible and not practical for the average Kiwi sportsman or deer culler to leave any potential sires so the biggest stags and hinds were shot first leaving the breeding to the inferior animals. This, of course, is not good practice as far as farming deer is concerned and so the animals became smaller and lighter.

We eventually wound up owning a Hughes 300 and a 500 and set about sourcing our deer legally from South Canterbury and were able to gather up a sizable herd. We still could not find sires with the velvet potential the Koreans wanted. At that time they regarded the Maral antler from Siberia as the best and the closest we could come to this was with the Wapiti type animals. We started a small herd of these but decided to stick with the Red deer.

After a trip to the USSR in 1983 we had the opportunity of inspecting a large number of different herds in Europe. Poland was the first stop and there we were able to witness stags being ejaculated into dummies. It was a pity that with a herd of 1000 odd stags, funds and motivation were not in place for these experiments to have been taken further, so capitalising on the genetic potential. We noted the size of the heads and bodies of these Polish stags but did not see anything worth bringing home to New Zealand. It was strongly suspected the Polish herds had taken a fair hammering by Hitler's crew and the Russians during the Second World War.

The next stop was Germany and here we were very impressed; though their herds, too, had had a hammering during the War. However, with a more controlled breeding programme the best stags were kept to maturity before being shot but only in a few isolated cases was any single sire mating done. Deer farming in Germany was mainly restricted to Fallow deer,

and Red deer were held in "Wild Parks" often only with a ring fence

This may seem strange practice to New Zealand deer farmers but one must realise that these parks are usually near large centres of population and it is a popular pastime for people to pay approximately a \$5 entry fee to walk in these parks. Up to 300,000 visitors can visit these parks a year and they often buy nuts etc to feed the animals. The owners usually have a shooting season to cull and get rid of surplus stock and shooters pay big money to shoot animals with the big heads. We had to pay \$80,000 to outbid a shooter for our master stag, King Richard.

Not all German deer were seen to suit our breeding requirements as we were concentrating on velvet production. I was looking for a Red deer with good body size, good temperament (this was hard to judge) with a type of antler more similar to the Maral. I would estimate approximately 65% of German deer were carrying English blood for the seasonal shooters. The first thing most people ask about a particular animal is - how many points does it have? This is fine if you are selling trophy heads but it is not the type of antler the Koreans indicated they require.

We then visited the Danish Royal Park near Copenhagen and there we were impressed with the deer and their temperament but again they did not single sire mate their animals. The deer were not quite as large in general as the German deer but they fawned in May, being a month earlier than their neighbouring counterparts. We were not able to substantiate this with our herd in New Zealand and with the advances in bringing hinds to cycle early did not see it as an advantage to persevere with.

We also managed to inspect some Austrian deer and found these usually to be a mixture of European deer with German bloodlines predominating. The Hungarian deer were different again being a larger, more nervous animal. We purchased a herd of Hungarian hinds but were not able to obtain a suitable stag and had to resort to using a German stag over them. It was not that good stags did not exist; they were just not for sale! This was one of the biggest problems in trying to select animals from most of the European deer parks - no-one wanted to sell their best animals and you had to take fawns, which first had to be tranquillized using darts or blow-guns, from their mothers. The first two were easy but after that it became very time consuming. We initially thought that fawns would adapt to quarantine, transportation, etc better than older animals but this was not necessarily so. We found the Hungarian animals not to be suitable for our requirements even though they had good weights and antler production but our herd was very nervous and required a lot more fibre than other Reds.

Importation:

In 1983 before any importing could take place a protocol had to be established in selecting herds that had some herd history and no recent movement restrictions. We went about it in

typical Kiwi fashion and asked straight out and did not get many answers. We then found out that we got far better results over a handle of beer and saying we had a problem with suc' and such, or had they ever heard of this or that, or we had one die of this, had they? It came as quite a shock to find out that many diseases in different countries are not notifiable

Another of our very early problems were the Vets. Just about 100% of vets have a love for animals and can handle them competently if they do it every day. Unfortunately the average Government Vet we struck turned up with an assistant and a secretary all decked out in white coats. They had on the whole never handled deer before let alone be expected to get in with them. The nervous deer could sense this and then had to be tranquillized by a dart gun, or blow-pipe, be relieved of large quantity of blood for tests and then given a great syringe full of antibiotics in the bum, a hangover and all this repeated in a couple more days made them less and less fond of these men in white coats. We actually found it much quicker and easier to take our own vets over to the Continent from England and help them ourselves.

Naturally TB was a major criteria and one problem we had was that deer would test clear in Germany and then we would get at times massive avian problems in the United Kingdom. Q-Fever was another hassle that seemed to be here today and gone tomorrow or sometimes a negative and a positive result from the same blood sample.

Moving with the Times:

With the advent of New Zealand Government's interference into the deer industry and the subsequent fall in prices for live animals, here the hiring of Jumbo Jets to bring animals out from the UK got too costly. All of a sudden it made more sense to bring out semen from top quality animals when one realises the potential of a good stag to cover thousands of hinds with the advent of AI. From our farm in England we collected semen from our top stags and our early attempts to keep the semen alive from collection to processing involved 130 mph dashes up the Motorway to the AI centre at Cambridge one and a half hours away. It was not until we consulted the London Zoo which had a lot of experience collecting semen from different endangered species, and a visit from a New Zealand Vet that we started to get results.

The Future:

Embryo transplant and AI, I am convinced, will be major tools for the improvement of the New Zealand deer herd and will be the safest and cheapest way to import/export animals in the future. Our operation is market orientated and one of the features of the deer industry is that it can change 100% each year. I have no doubt this will slow down as practices and techniques become more established. However, there is still a lot to learn. The one question we must ask is, are our 140kg German Red hinds more productive per hectare than a 60-70kg Scottish hill hind even though the latter certainly would not make as much mess of the pasture in winter. Invermay Research has indicated that this is the case. The main objective of our involvement in present day deer farming is to breed top weight hinds

producing good sized fawns every year and heavy bodied stags capable of cutting velvet of high quality and type required by the overseas importers There is the odd exception that a small stag produces large velvet but as a rule the higher the body weight the greater velvet return.

I hope we are on the right track to achieve these objectives