



Deer ²²² Red Deer Rearing Calves

The high price of red deer for farming makes rearing orphaned deer calves economically attractive. On milk replacer diets, growth rates fairly close to natural growth rates can be achieved.

Housing

New born calves must be housed in warm, draught-free conditions. After 1–2 weeks, access to an outside run-off gives calves the chance to graze and exercise.

Pens and floors should be cleaned and disinfected about once a week and hay bedding replaced every few days. Feeding equipment must be cleaned thoroughly after each feed.

Training

It can take several days to train calves to drink from a bottle or drum. Initially they can be fed from the bottle – once they are used to this they will feed at teats immersed in milk in a drum.

Using a milk covered finger is a good way to train more sensitive calves to suck at a teat. Light squeezing across the muzzle stimulates sucking.

Calves which refuse to suck must have milk fed through a lamb feeding tube, but it may not be worth the time involved in this operation with such calves.

Since deer are flighty animals a lot of time and patience must be invested in the calves early on. If possible, one person should be responsible for calf rearing.

Milk

Red deer milk consists of 22% lactose, 33% protein and 40% fat. This is a high-fat, low-lactose milk in comparison with ewe or cow milk (Table 1).

Farmers should use milk substitutes which are as similar as possible in composition to deer milk. Ewe milk replacers are preferable to cow milk replacers which are high in lactose.

If fresh cow milk has to be used, Jersey milk is better than Friesian milk. Addition of an egg yolk and 5 mls codliver oil/litre of cow's milk has been a successful hind milk replacer.

Calves should have access to solid foods (e.g. pasture,

Table 1: Milk composition (% dry matter).

	Fat	Lactose	Protein
Red deer hind	40	22	33
Ewe	35	25	35
Jersey cow	35	33	26
Goat	30	36	29
A bovine milk replacer	10	49	34

hay) from a few weeks of age, even though they may only eat small amounts.

Colostrum: New-born calves may not have had colostrum from their mothers. Colostrum early on is essential for long-term healthy calf development, so a store of frozen ewe or hind colostrum should be maintained. Colostrum need only be fed for 1–2 days.

Feeding

Calves seem to drink better from 5 cm teats with a 1 cm slit rather than a hole.

Calves should be grouped by size and perhaps sex so all calves within a group get their fair share of milk and grow at the same rate.

A suspended 4 litre bucket with four teats inserted around the base is suitable for feeding groups. Calves tend to spill and waste milk if it is presented in bowls on the ground.

Initially, warm milk (about 30°C) should be fed to the calves. But once they are trained on to the bucket feeding system, milk can be offered cold. This saves time.

For the first week calves should be fed at least 4 times daily and then 3 times daily for the following 7 weeks.

Calves 2 or 3 days old will drink about 400–800 mls/day. This increases to about 2 litres/day which is the recommended intake for calves from weeks 2–8. Fallow deer fawns need about half this quantity daily.

Weaning

Calves can be weaned at 30–35 kg live weight. Healthy calves will attain this weight after about 8 weeks.

At Invermay, reared female calves grew, on average, at 1.8 kg/week, about 30% slower than naturally reared calves.

Males grew at 2.3 kg/week, about 20% slower than naturally reared males.

Defecation

Young, naturally reared calves are stimulated to defecate by the hind licking their perianal region during suckling. This can be mimicked by wiping the anal region of young calves with a moist cloth. Eventually calves will defecate without stimulation.

High-lactose diets may cause scouring. Bacterial infection can also cause diarrhoea. Scouring calves should be separated, and treated promptly. In severe cases, dehydration may occur and an electrolyte-glucose solution may have to be fed.

Summary

- Red deer calf rearing requires care and patience.
- Initially calves are bottle-fed and then trained on to bucket feeding.
- Use milk substitutes which are as similar to red deer milk as possible.
- Wean calves at 30–35 kg.
- Despite all precautions and efforts, some temperamental calves will not grow well.



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