



Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

In the wild, hinds may not calve until aged 3 years and sometimes a high proportion of the hinds in a herd may not calve each year. On farms, good nutrition can overcome these problems.

Red deer can achieve up to 95–100% calving under good conditions. If 2-year old hinds are over 65 kg live weight at mating, 90% calving can be achieved (Fig. 1). Older hinds need to be at least about 80 kg to achieve a good calving percentage.

Calving season normally starts in late November and lasts for 3–4 weeks. Calves can be born as late as March or April if the hinds are run with a stag over winter.

Hinds on farms will often fence pace prior to calving. This may be an attempt to seek shelter or isolation to calve as is reported to occur in the wild. Natural or artificial shelter should be available for new-born calves because of their natural shelter-seeking behaviour. Rank grass or dead branches are adequate.

Calves weigh 7–9 kg at birth. Calving problems are rare and the calf death rate from birth to weaning is normally 5–10%; most deaths occur within a few days of birth.

Up to 10–15 days old, calves like to hide most of the day, normally in a sheltered site near the camp of the hinds. After about 2 weeks, calves associate openly with the herd.

Sucking behaviour: Calves stand to their first suckle within 30 minutes of birth. Sucking occurs throughout the day, with peaks in early morning and evening.

Sucking can be initiated by the calf going to the grazing hind, or the hind going to the calf in its hiding place. Sucking usually finishes when the hind moves away. Hinds lick the peri-anal region of young calves during sucking, to stimulate the calves to defaecate. The faeces from young calves are eaten by the hind.

Stress at calving: Excessive stress and human interference can have disastrous effects on calving. Multiple suckling, mismothering and rogue behaviour by hinds which attack and kill calves are signs of stress.

When establishing a farm, particularly with wilder hinds, the first calving season is important. Disturbance must be minimised; use low stocking rates, provide shelter and handle calves as little as possible. If calves have to be weighed or eartagged, wear gloves to avoid transferring human scent to the calves.

Weaning

In the wild, red deer calves are naturally weaned over winter at about 7–8 months. On farms the benefits of weaning before or after mating depends on the size of the herd, tameness of stock and the type of farm management.

Early weaning: Weaning before mating has advantages, particularly on intensive farms.

Flushing: Providing there is sufficient feed, weaning before mating allows the hind to increase live weight and level of condition because she no longer has to divert energy into lactation.

Lungworm control: Early weaning allows easier yarding of calves every 3 weeks over autumn for drenching and shifting to "clean" pasture. Yarding of mixed groups is dangerous because calves can be killed by belligerent stags.

Single sire mating: Early weaning is obviously necessary if the hinds in large calving groups are to be split into smaller herds for single sire mating.

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Deer Red Deer *Calving and Weaning*

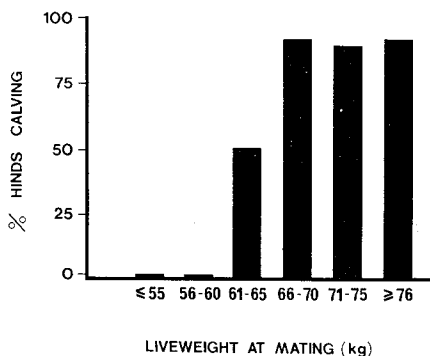


Fig. 1: Effect of yearling hind liveweight at mating on calving performance of red deer.

Taming: Weaning early makes it easier to tame and hand feed young stock. It removes them from the influence of the nervous, flighty hinds, allows preferential feeding, and with hand feeding quieter farm-bred stock can be produced.

Late weaning: It can be difficult to successfully muster hinds and calves off extensive hill blocks for earlier weaning. Often it is easier to leave weaning until after mating, then the deer can be lured into smaller paddocks in early winter using supplements.

Young stags: On a small deer farm, it may be best to leave the hind calves with their mothers, but the young stags should be weaned or at least separated after natural weaning over winter. Otherwise, they will be victimised by other stags at the next mating.

Similarly, if young stags are to be velvetted as spikers after calving starts, they should be run separately so yarding them does not disturb hinds and calves at calving.

How to wean

Yarding hinds with calves for weaning needs as much care as yarding stags for velvetting. Races must be calf-

proof and calves should not be able to break back on their own – they panic and become virtually impossible to yard. If this happens, let a few hinds back to join them before trying to yard them again.

Once yarded, leave them to quieten down for 5–10 minutes; they are then easier to handle. Draft the calves off as soon as the hinds have settled, and leave ear tagging and drenching of calves, and udder checking of hinds till after hinds and calves have been separated.

Yard pens must not allow weaned calves to see their mothers or other calf groups next door. They will only try to get through and may injure themselves. Similarly, the weaning paddock should be at least one paddock

away from any hinds. Ideally before release into the weaning paddock, the calves should be kept in the yards for several days. This will prevent considerable fence pacing and helps calves become used to humans.

If possible, wean calves from the tame hinds first. This provides a nucleus of quieter calves in the weaning paddock, which other weaners will join, rather than try to escape or fence pace.



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