

Effective deer handling

Where a capable deer handler comes into their own

A capable stockperson who is an experienced deer handler will be able to muster and yard deer without causing stress to the deer and without putting the safety of the deer, themselves or other people at risk.

The deer handler is crucial in assuring deer welfare. Farms prevent deer from responding naturally to changes in the weather, the availability of food and water and the ability to flee from danger. So it depends on the deer handler to 'read' the needs of the deer and to respond appropriately, whether in the paddock or in handling facilities.

Several issues have a bearing on how deer respond to handling. These include the age of the deer, the species, stocking rates, the purpose for which they are being handled, the environment they are being handled in and how they have been handled in the past.

This *Deer Fact* mainly focuses on the effective handling of red and crossbred deer in existing yards and sheds. It includes advice drawn from the Deer Code of Welfare that was based on the expertise of people with many years' experience. For advice on handling elk/wapiti, there is a useful video (see the back of this *Deer Fact*).

To effectively farm deer...

You need:

- To be located in a region where deer farming is permitted (most of New Zealand).
- To comply with Department of Conservation fencing and escape regulations that apply north of a line running roughly from Whanganui in the west to Tauranga in the east.
- Well-constructed fences that are designed specifically for deer.
- Good paddock layout and well-positioned races to make it easy to move deer.

Key points

- Deer should be mustered and handled by a skilled deer handler, or by someone under their supervision.
 - A skilled deer handler will act to minimise stress, protect animal welfare, ensure the safety of people and the deer, and aid in the efficient operation of the farm.
 - They will be patient, confident, firm and consistent in the way they handle deer.
 - Deer held for long periods tend to become restless and stressed. So work should be planned so that deer are held in the yards or shed for short periods only.
 - As soon as the deer have moved into the yards or the shed, check there is no overcrowding in the pens. Overcrowding is the biggest single cause of stress, aggression and injury.
 - Try to keep deer in groups of similar weight. Avoid mixing unfamiliar deer in a pen, especially stags.
 - Be very patient and careful when handling newly-weaned fawns.
 - Avoid yarding stags during the roar (from mid-March until late-May). Even in the paddock, handle them with extreme care at this time.
- Well-designed sheds and yards, with good ventilation, that allow for safe and efficient movement and handling of deer with a minimum of stress.
 - Facilities within the shed for restraining deer, so they can be treated and handled without risk to the deer or their handlers.



Aim to move deer in a controlled way, as a single group, without the mob splitting or individual deer breaking away

- To be confident in your actions.
- Enough experience to recognise when deer are becoming too stressed or 'stirred up', whether it's in the paddock, on the way to handling facilities or within the facilities themselves.
- The ability to manage that stress appropriately.

Moving deer in the paddock

When mustering deer in the paddock you need to be calm, firm, confident, patient and consistent over time in how you do this.

Aim to stay in control of the mob at all times. To ensure this, you should ideally not be under any critical time pressure. If you are racing against the clock to have them in the yards, your behaviour and the reactions of the deer to the increasing urgency will inevitably compromise your control of the mob.

When deer are being shifted they will, as a rule, move, stop, reassess the situation and the mustering pressure, and then move again. Try to move when they move, and stop and maintain quiet pressure when they stop.

Deer have a clear flight distance response. This is the distance from which a handler can comfortably exert pressure on the group, so it moves in a controlled way, without splitting or individual deer breaking away. This flight distance will vary from farm to farm, the breed type, group size, stock class and time of year and sometimes the weather conditions.

Typically the flight distance starts at 40-60 metres; but with quiet, calm and predictable handling, that distance will reduce.

If dogs (huntaways or heading dogs) are used, they should be well-trained, obedient and under strict control at all times. If in doubt, consider using a drone to assist with mustering large blocks.

Mustering deer is not a time to take spectators along for the ride, or to ask inexperienced visitors to lend a hand.

Bringing the deer in from the paddock

Avoid trying to yard in bad weather (particularly strong winds), or to run deer directly into low sun. These conditions can be demanding for both deer and handler.

Deer are highly sensitive to movement and unfamiliar noises. Where practical, stop any movement and noise in the direction you wish the deer to move, before running them into the yards.

Make sure dogs and people are quiet and out of sight. Turn off generators, compressors and other noisy machinery.

Strong well-maintained raceways designed with simple

and obvious gateways, turns, curves and flow are keys to successful deer movement towards and into the deer yards.

Check the race

Check the raceway and remove anything that might injure or spook the deer.

Latch side gates securely so they don't bang or move in the wind. Latch lane gates securely against the laneway fences so deer (especially fawns) cannot get trapped behind them.

Avoid having groups of deer on adjacent fence lines (where these allow deer-to-deer contact), as this can interfere with the flow of deer down the race.

Bring only as many deer into the yards or shed as you can handle in (say) up to four hours. A sensible option is to hold the balance of deer in a small paddock near the yards until you are ready to handle them. Ideally the paddock should have a good water supply and shade/shelter, and should not contain any wallows or potential wallow sites.

Prepare the yards and shed

- Set the gates up to allow the mob to enter and spread quietly throughout the yards rather than all piling into one final receiving pen (see the final bullet point in this list).
- Get all equipment you will be using in the shed ready for use.
- Remove any objects that may spook deer. Deer will react to anything that is unfamiliar, such as a jacket or towel hanging on a wall.
- Discourage birds from nesting in the shed – apart from the mess they create, birds can spook deer when they fly off at critical times.
- Strangers, unusual activity or loud noise in the yards or shed can cause stress and unsettle deer. Keep visitors out of sight and the area quiet until the deer are penned up.
- Plan work so that deer are held in the yards or shed for only short periods. When they are held in confinement for long periods they are liable to become restless and stressed. As a result, there is an increase in the injury risk to handlers and deer.
- As soon as the deer have moved into the yards, check the pens are not overloaded. Spread them out among the pens if necessary.

In the yards

Overcrowding is the biggest single cause of stress, aggression and injury in the yards and shed. Deer and handlers are at their greatest safety risk when too many deer are kept in one pen.

Playing chess with deer

Lindsay Cunningham, manager of Landcorp's 3000 ha Thornicroft Station, likens handling deer to a game of chess. The station is south-west of Dunedin on the high, windswept Eldorado Plateau that overlooks Lake Mahinerangi.

He says you can encourage deer to make a certain move but they won't be forced and you shouldn't try.

"Deer must be respected and treated smartly. Have a clear plan and let them think you are in control. But if things aren't going to plan, take a breather and reduce the stress," Cunningham says.

In his experience, the calmer deer are, the faster they grow.

Photo: Tim Fulton



Draft large mobs in the holding yards into smaller groups (5-15 deer at a time – depending on internal pen size) before they enter the shed. If you see deer piling into pens, climbing on one another and seeking to come back, there are too many deer in the group.

In the shed

Sort deer in the shed quietly and calmly. Use gates/doors to slow and draft them. Talk to the deer in a quiet voice.

Deer try to move as a group, often in a circling pattern and are constantly watching. They quickly learn a calm quiet routine if your actions and approaches are consistent.

To avoid confrontation, work the deer by moving around the walls, rather than approaching groups head on. To prevent kick injuries, stay close to (or well away from) the deer. Always try to approach them from the side rather than from directly behind.

Steer the deer by gently pushing their hip with your hip or by turning their necks in the direction you want them to move. If you put a hand over one eye of a deer, it will encourage them to move in the direction of the uncovered eye.



Sort deer in the shed quietly and calmly. Talk to the deer in a quiet voice

Do not use electric prodders or goads. Their use is inhumane and is banned by regulation.

Do not try to steer or force deer to move by grabbing their tails. Tail bones break easily, rupturing blood vessels. This is inhumane, can be fatal for the deer and will spark an welfare abuse investigation if found at the Deer Slaughter Plant (DSP).

Use body shields and wear safety helmets when handling stags and aggressive hinds. The shields need to protect most of the body below the neck and be made from 12 mm plywood, polycarbonate or an equivalent material. See 'Handling stags' on the next page and the *Deer Fact*, 'Staying safe'.

Aggressive and agitated deer

Deer that are overly aggressive or agitated are a safety risk, plus they stir-up other animals in the pen. These animals should be culled but, as a courtesy, advise both the truck driver and the DSP before sending them for processing.

Pen management

Don't overcrowd deer pens – ideally the deer should occupy between one-third and two-thirds of the pen area.

As a guide, provide deer with a minimum space as recommended in the Deer Code of Welfare:

- 1.2 sq m per 50 kg weaner increasing to 1.8 sq m for deer up to 80 kg
- 2.1 sq m per adult female deer up to 120 kg
- 2.8 sq m per adult male deer up to 200 kg



Deer not budging?

If a mob is proving hard to move into the shed, from pen to pen, or down a race, you might like to try shaking a plastic bag in your hand or on the end of a stick.

The bags are best used sparingly. If they are used all the time, they are likely to become less effective.

Because deer are herd animals, isolation is a major cause of stress. Don't leave a deer alone in a pen for any length of time. Well-designed sheds will have eye-level 'windows' so deer can see other groups of deer in the shed.

Water

Provide clean drinking water when deer are held in yards or sheds for longer than 6 hours, delivered at a height that's appropriate for the size of the deer. The waterers need to provide deer with easy access to the water while ensuring their legs/feet don't foul the water or get trapped in the framework.

Mixing groups of deer

Deer are highly social and hierarchical. To minimise confrontation and potential injury, try to keep deer in groups of similar weight and avoid mixing unfamiliar deer in a pen, especially stags.

Holding deer overnight

If deer are held in yards or sheds overnight or longer, the pens should be at least 9 sq m in area – ideally, greater than 36 sq m. Do not exceed the maximum number of deer recommended for the pen area. Provide them with enough dry bedding, such as sawdust or straw, to allow them to lie down, as hard surfaces will quickly be soiled by urine and dung. Do not hold deer in yards for more than 24 hours.

Handling young deer

Handle newly-weaned young deer with care to avoid deaths through misadventure and the onset of stress-related diseases.

- Be patient, very patient.
- Let the mob do a couple of laps around the paddock, to let off some steam, before moving them toward the shed. Try and keep them moving as one group by working at the comfort flight distance.
- Sometimes individual animals will break away. Rather than trying to deal with these individuals, it's better to take the pressure off so the breakaways can rejoin the group. Then start the process again. Try and note the tag numbers of the breakaways as invariably they will offend again in the future. Culling them is a wise option.



Young deer will become comfortable with being yarded if the stock person is patient, careful and ideally someone they know

- Consider running a few older animals with the weaners. 'Auntie' hinds are ideal. These animals will help settle the mob and act as guides when moving weaners through the yards and raceways.
- Move the weaners through the raceway and yards a couple of times before doing any hands-on work with them. This allows them to become used to both being moved and to the facilities.
- Sometimes young deer will not go where you want them to go, causing elevated stress levels in the animal and handler! Sometimes it is better to walk away until the deer and the handler have settled. Perhaps you can leave gates open for them to find their own way.
- If you plan to transport deer (hinds or fawns) to another farm after weaning, do it within six hours, or wait at least 10 days before doing so. This is a DeerQA Transport Standard requirement to minimise the impact of stress on their welfare, health and productivity.
- If weaning and transporting the deer at the same time be very aware of the weather conditions. Do not attempt to wean and transport in cold wet weather.
- Deer are creatures of habit and prefer routine and familiar surroundings. Keep the number of staff used to handle weaner deer to a minimum so the weaners become familiar with their handler(s), and their dogs (if used). Any dogs used must be well-controlled.

Handling stags

Stags must be handled only by people who have adequate experience and are confident in their deer handling skills.

While some experienced farmers wear minimal personal protective equipment (PPE) when handling their deer, all employees working with stags should wear PPE in order to ensure they are safe and for the farm to comply with its obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. See the *Deer Fact*, 'Staying safe'.

Outside the roar, stags can be handled safely so long as you take care to read their mood and temperament, and are using facilities with good pen layout and backing doors. The doors make it easier to move and draft deer and provide you with a measure of protection from an aggressive or nervous animal.

Avoid leaving doors open behind you as an escape route.

A nervous stag may see the gap and injure you as he attempts to escape.

Management tips

- Stags tend to be aggressive when pressured and put in a confined space. During handling or transport do not mix them with hinds and fawns, or stags of different ages, or stags from different mobs.



This historic photo shows why you should not yard stags during the roar. Remove hard antler from all except trophy stags once it has begun to strip (by 1 March at the latest) to reduce the risk of injury to people and other deer

- To reduce the risk of injury to people and other deer remove hard antler, including regrowth, from all except trophy stags once it has begun to strip (by 1 March at the latest).
- Avoid yarding stags during the roar (from mid-March until late-May). Even in the paddock, handle them with extreme care at this time. Adult stags can show aggression right through until button drop (generally in August).
- **Do not** transport stags 2 years of age and older to a DSP during the roar.
- Stags in hard antler should not be held in paddocks with other males because of the risk of fighting and injury. They should only ever be yarded with extreme care.

The warning signs of aggression in deer are detailed in the *Deer Fact*: 'Staying safe'.

More >>

Deer Code of Welfare

Deer Facts

Staying safe

Preparing deer for transport

Transporting deer within New Zealand

Videos

Handling Elk/Wapiti, David Lawrence (2016) <https://tinyurl.com/p2pvideos>



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