

Code of recommendation for the welfare of farmed deer

Introduction

1. The Code relates to all farmed deer but, bearing in mind that the majority of species farmed are red or fallow deer, the recommendations have been drafted with these species particularly in mind.
2. The welfare of deer can be safeguarded and their behavioural needs met under a variety of management systems. The system and the number and stocking rate of deer kept at any one time should depend on the suitability of the condition and the skill of the stockman. All stockmen should be familiar with the behaviour of deer and must be competent in their handling and management to safeguard the welfare of the herd and individual animals.
3. In general, deer are highly strung, nervous animals which can be easily excited or frightened. When accustomed to the sight and sound of man, wild deer can be tamed to a considerable degree. Hand-reared animals may become exceedingly tame. Nonetheless, they have different behavioural characteristics from other farmed animals.
4. Account should be taken of the different behavioural characteristics within the species most commonly 'domesticated', e.g. Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*, Sika *Cervus nippon*, Fallow *Dama dama*. Red deer can become relatively tame. Fallow deer are very flighty in behaviour and much less tractable than Red deer; this is an important consideration when deciding which species to farm.
5. Badly managed deer do not thrive and the stockman needs to watch for signs of disease or distress. The good stockman will be able to recognise trouble at its early stages and may be able to identify the cause and put matters right immediately. If the cause is not obvious, or if the stockman's immediate action is not effective, veterinary or other expert advice should be obtained as soon as possible.
6. The signs of ill-health may include listlessness, loss of appetite, (except natural seasonal inappetance), failure to cud, lameness, persistent coughing, swollen joints and discharge from the nostrils and / or eyes. Calves being

artificially reared indoors should be inspected twice daily for signs of scouring or respiratory disorders which may spread rapidly.

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Handling and inspection

7. Handling and movement of deer require special skills and they should be handled gently and never rushed. It is helpful to train deer, particularly as calves, to respond to a distinctive call or inducement, such as feed, and to continue this practice throughout their life.

8. It is best if there is a minimum of disturbance of hinds during the calving season and if the stockman is known to the hinds concerned. He should be experienced and competent in the techniques of calving and should pay particular attention to hygiene, especially at assisted calvings. If assistance at calving is deemed necessary, it must be realised that hinds so assisted may abandon their calves; facilities for artificial rearing should therefore be available.

9. For breeding, sires should be carefully selected taking into account breed, size, age and previous record, so as to reduce the likelihood of subsequent calving difficulties. Sires from larger breeds should not be used for hinds less than three years of age. Hinds should be managed so as to be in suitable bodily condition at the time of calving.

10. Adult stags must be considered as potentially dangerous at all times and their handling during the rut should be kept to a minimum (See paragraph [14 - 17](#) on darting).

11. The preferred method of handling small deer is to cradle them in the arms with hands positioned around the hind quarters and around the brisket. If of an appropriate size, deer can also be safely and effectively handled by restraining them against the wall of a handling pen by putting an arm around the neck, pressing as close to the animal as possible and using a leg to restrain the rear end just in front of the stifle.

12. Deer should be inspected daily when housed as well as in other special circumstances, e.g. at calving time.

13. For the safety of handlers and the welfare of animals, it may be necessary to remove antlers above the pedicle as soon as they are out of velvet.⁽²⁾

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Use of dart guns

14. Darting to sedate the deer will sometimes be necessary, subject to the provision of the Deer Act 1963. The use of dart guns should however be limited only to essential circumstances, e.g. when the transportation of a deer cannot be accomplished in safety for both the deer and the handler.⁽³⁾

The user of a dart gun will need to be familiar with all aspects of its use (including correct charges, etc.).

15. Drugs for use in dart guns can only be obtained from veterinary surgeons. Those drugs will be supplied with directions regarding use and safekeeping of the drugs and also advice on what to do in an emergency situation, for example if an unintended target is struck.⁽⁴⁾ Advice will also be given by the veterinary surgeon concerning the use of any drugs used for revival. These directions must be observed. It must be borne in mind that it can take several minutes after impact of the dart for the drug to take effect and that the darted deer can run for some distance.

16. Where a drug is used to reverse the effect of a sedative given by dart gun, recycling may occur in that the animal may pass in and out of the sedated state several times over a period of several hours. In these circumstances a responsible person should keep the animal under frequent observation until it is certain that it has recovered sufficiently from sedation to be left without supervision. With continued or prolonged sedation animals must be carefully handled.

17. Deer should not be darted in situations where they might injure or lose themselves e.g. near water or woodland, or on steep slopes.

Deer taken from the wild

18. Deer taken from the wild are likely to be very nervous and will therefore need very careful handling until they become acclimatised to the farm situation. ⁽⁵⁾

19. Newly-captured deer should be left in their new surroundings for a few days with the minimum of disturbance. It is preferable that they are released carefully into enclosures large enough to allow them to find cover and to become gradually familiar with human presence. It may be advantageous to include a few 'tame' deer in the enclosure who can 'teach' the others to take concentrates but careful supervision will be needed to ensure that the feral deer are not bullied and thereby prevented from feeding.



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Handling pens

20. Where deer are to be handled, properly constructed handling pens should be provided. There is a wide range of satisfactory designs and layouts and it is recommended that specialist advice is sought before constructing new facilities.

21. Where deer are to be confined, pens should have solid sides with no projections so as to minimise the risk of injury to the deer. It is essential that they are of an adequate height, not only to prevent escape but also to discourage any attempt to escape, thereby preventing possible injury. Walls need to be higher for Fallow deer than for Red deer.

22. All species of deer handle better in subdued light. It is strongly recommended that close handling pens be covered to achieve this effect.

23. Provision for segregation should be made but it is desirable that segregated animals are able to see their fellows otherwise they may panic.

24. There is a tendency for deer to rush at any open fences in the handling area. To avoid the risk of injury, the approach fences to pens should be of close mesh or covered with a suitable material such as hessian.

25. Properly designed and constructed loading facilities should be incorporated in the handling pens where possible.

Stocking rates

26. Most types of land can be used and the number of stock held will relate to such factors as the type and quality of the vegetation, the season, disease risks, etc.

27. Stocking rates on hill grazings need to be adjusted so as to ensure that animals will maintain an adequate body condition in winter, otherwise supplementary feeding should be offered.

28. Overstocking, particularly during the calving period, may lead to behavioural vices, e.g. hinds beating and trampling calves.



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Provision of shelter

29. Deer, not being well insulated, are particularly sensitive to weather conditions and, if adequate topographic or vegetative shelter is not available, the provision of suitable artificial shelter is recommended.

30. Calving hinds and calves tend to seek solitude in natural cover, for example in patches of bracken. Where this is absent, suitable cover should be provided well in advance of calving so that the hind is used to her surroundings.

Fencing

31. To prevent escape, a high standard of perimeter fencing, of around 2.0m (6ft 6in.) high is essential. A wide range of fence types is available and advice should be sought as to the most appropriate type for specific conditions.

32. When deer are driven alongside fences, leading towards handling pens, they may seek to escape and injure themselves. Such fences therefore need to be of a suitable mesh, covered with hessian or other suitable material to prevent the deer seeing through the fence, and be free of projections.

33. Deer which have not been used to electric fencing are best run in a non-electrified enclosure until they have settled down.



Feed and water

34. In all systems, deer must receive a daily diet which is adequate to maintain health and well-being.

35. Feeds used for other ruminant livestock are generally suitable for adult deer but care must be taken to ensure that the content of compound feeds does not include any substance harmful to deer. Because of winter inappetence, special care is required to ensure that deer do not lose excessive condition before and during this period.

36. Deer must have access to a plentiful supply of fresh, clean water.

37. Deer calves should receive colostrum from their dams, and should therefore have suckled before weaning. Calves can subsequently be artificially reared. During the first five to eight weeks of life calves should receive liquid food, of a type suitable for this species, for example sheep or goat milk or milk substitute. (Calf food substances formulated for bovines are not suitable.) Such calves should have access to a palatable feed compound and clean water and also have access to roughage from an early age.

38. Changes in diet need to be introduced gradually; sudden changes may cause digestive problems and even death.

39. Arrangements should be made in advance to ensure that adequate supplies of suitable food are made available to deer in emergencies (e.g. in heavy snow).

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Housing

40. Adult deer are normally not required to be housed but provision should be made for bullied, injured or sick animals to be protected and separated - preferably where they can still see other animals. Adult deer may also be housed temporarily just before or after transport.

41. On farms prone to severe climatic conditions or where competition for grazing or food may occur, consideration should be given to housing calves in particular, and also for winter housing of all classes of deer.

42. Most conventional farm buildings can be used for deer but may require modification. Advice on welfare aspects should be sought before housing deer.

43. Pen sides should be of sufficient height to discourage escape, without projections or sharp edges and with fittings arranged so as to avoid injury. It is preferable for side partitions to be of solid construction to limit the spread of disease or vice and minimise the possibility of broken limbs.

44. Floors should be designed, constructed and maintained to avoid discomfort and injury and be adequately drained. The use of clean, dry bedding is desirable but part of the floor area may be kept free of bedding as a hard surface will contribute to maintaining sound feet.

45. Adequate ventilation should be provided with particular care being taken to avoid draughts.

46. Orphaned or hand reared calves may be housed in pens or kept in outside runs with adequate shelter. It is helpful when housing any deer for them to be

able to see deer or general farm activity to prevent boredom and encourage tameness.

47. If for any reason deer are continuously housed, they should be kept in small groups of 10 - 15 and balanced for size and weight. Housed, mature stags (three years or over) in antler must be penned individually.

48. The floor space allowance should take into account the age, sex, weight and the environmental conditions. There should be sufficient trough space or feeding and water points to avoid undue competition for food, especially when foods are rationed.

49. Paints and wood preservatives which may be toxic to deer should not be used on surfaces accessible to them. Particular care is necessary to guard against the risk of lead poisoning from old paintwork in any part of a building or where second-hand building materials are used.

50. All electrical installations at mains voltage should be inaccessible to deer, well insulated, safeguarded from rodents, and properly earthed. ⁽⁶⁾

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Fire and other emergency precautions

51. Farmers should make advance plans for dealing with emergencies such as fire, flood or disruption of supplies, and should ensure that all staff are familiar with the appropriate emergency action. At least one responsible member of staff should always be available to take the necessary action.

52. Fire precautions should be a major priority for the good stockman. The provisions of Section 1.3 of British Standard BS5502 should therefore be followed. Expert advice on all fire precautions is obtainable from fire prevention officers of local fire brigades and from the Fire Prevention Association.

53. In the design of new buildings or alterations of existing ones, there should be provision for livestock to be released and evacuated quickly in case of

emergency. Materials used in construction should have sufficient fire resistance. Adequate doors and other escape routes should be provided to enable emergency procedures to be followed in the event of a fire.

54. All electrical, gas and oil services should be planned and fitted so that if there is overheating or flame is generated, the risk of flame spreading to equipment, bedding or the fabric of the building is minimal. It is advisable to site power supply controls outside buildings. Consideration should be given to installing fire alarm systems which can be heard and acted upon at any time of the day or night.

55. In case a 999 call has to be made, notices should be prominently displayed in all livestock buildings stating where the nearest telephone is located. Each telephone should have fixed by it a notice giving instructions for the Fire Brigade on the best route to the farm and a description of the location of the telephone.

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Field slaughter

56. Humane slaughter of deer can be achieved by accurate shooting using a suitable rifle and ammunition. ⁽⁷⁾

57. Where a rifle is used safety is of paramount importance and the marksman should be trained and proficient in the use of firearms. ⁽⁸⁾ Shooting at short range facilitates accuracy and safety.

58. A safe backstop for the bullet is needed and care must be taken in shooting one deer not to injure others. Shooting from an elevated position such as a high seat or trailer is often helpful in these respects.

59. Sensible precautions for public safety include shooting in the early morning when few people are around; walking the perimeter fence of small farms or paddocks on large farms to ensure all is clear; shooting away from roads, houses and gardens.

60. Where deer are so tame and quiet that they present a stationery target at close range (10 to 20m), a frontal head shot by an expert marksman is wholly effective. With semi-wild deer up to 40m range, a high neck shot (to break the spinal cord) is also suitable. Shooting at more distant targets in some excess of 40m on deer farms should be attempted only in exceptional circumstances by proven marksmen.

61. Shooting should be undertaken, preferably by the regular stockmen, when deer are quiet, as will occur at a selected regular feeding site when they are being hand fed. Under such circumstances it may be possible to shoot 10 or more deer from a large group before the remainder become unduly disturbed. Factors to take into account in assessing the effect shooting will have on the rest of the herd and deciding the number to shoot include the size of the original group, stocking density and the amount of cover. Care should be taken not to leave too few since small numbers become unsettled and try to escape. There is also a risk of panic if too small a paddock is used.

Note:

Additional guidance for the welfare of farmed deer during transport and at abattoirs is available in the *Guidelines for the Transport of Farmed Deer* and the *Code of Welfare Practice on Abattoir Slaughter of Farmed Deer*, produced by the Agriculture departments.



References

(1) Training courses which follow Code recommendations are arranged for stockmen by the Agriculture Training Board, Agriculture Colleges and local education authorities. Proficiency testing in relevant subjects is carried out in England and Wales by the National Proficiency Tests Council, and in Scotland by the Scottish Association of Young Farmers' Clubs.

(2) The removal of antlers in velvet is controlled by:

- (a) The Welfare of Livestock (Prohibited Operations) Regulations 1982.
- (b) The Veterinary Surgeons Act (Schedule 3 Amendment) Order 1988.
- (c) The Removal of Antlers in Velvet (Anaesthetics) Order 1980.
- (3) The possession of dart guns is controlled by the Firearms Act 1968.
- (4) The sale and supply of all immobilising drugs is controlled by the Medicines Act 1968. These drugs are highly dangerous and can be lethal.
- (5) In England and Wales, the taking of deer is controlled by the Deer Act 1963 as amended. In Scotland, the Deer (Scotland) Act 1959, as amended, controls the taking of deer from the wild.
- (6) Any installations or extension involving mains electricity should comply with the Regulations for Electrical Equipment of Buildings issued by the Institution of Electrical Engineers.
- (7) Firearms used to kill deer must comply with the Deer Act 1963 (England and Wales) or the Deer (Scotland) Act 1959, both as amended, and are subject to the Firearms Act 1968.
- (8) The British Deer Society runs courses which include instructions for marksmen who wish to shoot deer.



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