

Staying safe

Manage for the deer difference

Deer are very different to sheep and cattle when it comes to temperament and behaviour. It is part of what makes them such interesting animals to farm.

Good deer managers understand deer behaviour and reactions, and how to minimise stress on the farm and in the yards.

Handling deer as if they were sheep and cattle is a recipe for disaster.

Poor management techniques can result in injuries or the loss of an animal. If they result in aggressive reactions from an animal, the handler could be seriously injured. If they result in stress in the herd, farm productivity and income may suffer.

Risks are posed by the speed, rapid reactions and sometimes unpredictable movements of deer. This can become extreme if one or two deer become separated from the group, as deer are strongly group-oriented.

The potential for injury is greatest when the handler does not have the experience or ability to assess the risks. Note that children are at particular risk.

Risks are also heightened when deer are not used to being handled, are exposed to strangers, are placed in an unfamiliar environment, are handled at close quarters in a race or crush, or are being loaded or unloaded for transport.

Adult stags pose a particular danger, especially during the 'roar' (the mating season) – as do bad-tempered and aggressive deer.

If the deer are getting stressed and agitated, don't battle on – have a cup of tea and allow yourself and the deer to calm. If you think a job can't be done safely, don't risk it. Don't work alone in this situation. Seek advice or help from an experienced deer farmer.

This Deer Fact is about safety. For more information on deer handling, see *Effective deer handling*, a Deer Fact that explains how to handle deer effectively, with the minimum of stress for animals and their handlers.

Spot the signs

Deer will let you know when they are getting stressed or aggressive. Learn to recognise these signs so you can act on the warnings.

These signals can vary between species, the time of year, the gender/age of the deer, the environment (yards or the climate) or with different people handling them (see panel).

Stressed deer will ...

- Pant
- Climb on top of each other
- Bleat, roar and bark
- Show signs of nervousness
- Have ears flopped down
- Shake, sit or lie down
- Bite/chew on walls
- Dribble
- Urinate
- Become flighty and agitated

Also, the glands in the front of the eyes may open.

Key points

- Deer behave differently to other livestock; handle them accordingly
- *Always* take special care around stags
- Hard antlers should be removed before the roar
- Wear the proper personal protective gear
- Practise good personal hygiene
- If you think a job can't be done safely, don't risk it. Seek advice or help.

Hinds tend to be more aggressive around fawning. Stags can be dangerous, unpredictable and aggressive at any time. This aggression is heightened during the roar, particularly towards other stags. This increases with age. Pet stags are especially dangerous, as they lack any fear of humans

At all times stags should be handled with care by experienced handlers. Novice handlers (who may include your veterinarian) must be accompanied by someone who is experienced.

How to calm deer

- Talk in a calm, soothing manner.
- Display total confidence.
- Work in calm, smooth and steady movements.
- Let deer know you are there before entering a pen or yard.
- Remove or minimise other distractions such as visitors, vehicles, farm dogs, children, and mechanical noises.
- Separate out agitated deer into another pen, if required. Bear in mind that these deer will need extra care.
- Let the animals settle into the yards, where possible.
- Walk away from the deer, if needed – to calm you and them down.
- Switch on a radio.
- If hot and humid, lightly spray the deer with water.
- Give deer more space in yards if tight.
- Never allow unsupervised children into the yards.

Remove hard antlers

Remove hard antlers/re-growth from all stags and spikers by 1 March each year, to prevent them from injuring other stags and handlers. Use a deer crush with suitable head and antler restraint to do this.

Aggressive deer will ...

- Have their tongue hanging out
- Grind their teeth
- Have hair raised on the rump patch
- Have pricked ears
- Have the gland in the front of their eyes open
- Probably raise their heads in dominant stance and lift a front leg
- Back into the corner of the pen
- Bite other deer
- Lower their heads to charge (stags)
- Rear on back legs (especially hinds)
- Lash out with front legs or kick with back legs.

Hard antlers can be removed without tranquillisers safely and without causing the deer any pain, once the velvet has shed and the antlers have calcified. However the use of tranquillisers is recommended to minimise stress to the animals and to reduce the risk of injury to handlers.

Legally, tranquillisers must be administered by a veterinarian or an experienced person under the supervision of a veterinarian. If tranquillisers are used, be mindful of any withholding periods that may apply before sending the animals for slaughter.

WORKSAFE CHECKLIST

This personal protective equipment (PPE) checklist is based on one devised by WorkSafe New Zealand.

While some farmers will see this list as overly cautious, the legal and ethical importance of protecting others from harm cannot be overstated. The PPE that needs to be worn on any given day will depend on many factors, including the experience of the person involved, the season, the class of deer and their temperament.

The person in charge of the workplace has a duty to offer additional PPE to those that may want extra protection. This will often simply increase their confidence, thereby promoting a better working attitude with the deer.

Basic

- Leather boots with steel toe-caps (preferred)
- Close-fitting overalls or a strong pair of trousers eg leather chaps with leggings. Don't tuck them in!
- Long sleeves
- No loose jewellery or other potential entanglements

Medium risk

- Hard hat (meeting NZ Standard NZS 1801)
- Cricket box
- Cricket pads
- Thick coat or jacket
- Gloves

High risk

A shield can be useful if the season, or individual deer, demand a more forceful, but safer, presence. Bear in mind that a shield will not make you invincible – stags in the rut may still challenge the shield.

Shields should protect most of the body from the head down and should be made from 12 mm plywood, polycarbonate or similar material.

Shields should not be needed for routine deer handling. If they are, seek advice from an experienced deer farmer.

Protect everyone in the workplace

Many experienced deer farmers routinely work with deer in the yards while wearing normal farm clothing. They know the deer and the deer know them, and only minimal personal protective equipment (PPE) is worn – typically boots and overalls or leggings.

However, for people who are inexperienced in deer handling or who are new to the herd, wearing PPE can prevent injuries and potentially save lives.

This is important legally. The person in charge of a workplace is required to take "all practicable steps" to ensure that everyone in the workplace is protected from harm.

In addition, a length of alkathene pipe, a piece of polythene sheet or a plastic shopping bag on a stick can be used as a goad or attention director, especially when working with larger groups of deer.

Animal health and personal hygiene

Deer can be a source of a number of human health risks, through zoonoses – serious diseases that can be spread from animals to humans, such as bovine tuberculosis, leptospirosis and yersiniosis.

By having a planned animal health programme and by practising good personal hygiene, health risks will be reduced both for the deer and those who handle them.

- Maintain an active vaccination programme.
- Keep the yards clean, drain wet patches and reduce manure build-up.
- Wear PPE such as masks, overalls and gloves to avoid splashes with blood, urine or faeces.
- Provide running water, liquid soap and hand-drying facilities.
- Wash and dry hands thoroughly after handling animals or removing PPE, especially before eating, drinking or smoking.
- Supervise children's hand washing.
- Keep eating, drinking and smoking areas away from animal areas.

More >>

Animal Welfare (Deer) Code of Welfare, National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) 2007, www.deernz.org/welfare

Animal Welfare (Transport within New Zealand) Code of Welfare, NAWAC 2011, www.mpi.govt.nz

Deer QA Quality Assurance Programme, Deer Industry NZ, www.deernz.org/quality

Herd management, handling, DINZ Deer Hub web page, www.deernz.org/handling

Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992

Best Practice Guideline for Handling Deer Safely (Draft), www.business.govt.nz/worksafe