

Deer Industry News

Customers returning to restaurants in Europe

Hawke's Bay AP day
FARM DEVELOPMENT,
REAL-WORLD EVIDENCE
OF HIGH-BV BENEFITS
AND A MOCK AUCTION

US retail activities
ALLIANCE GROUP AND
MOUNTAIN RIVER VENISON
ADAPT VENISON PRODUCTS
TO US CONSUMER TASTES

Next Generation
FOUR CONTRASTING
PROPERTIES SHOW DEER
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Deer Industry News

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF DEER INDUSTRY NEW ZEALAND AND THE NEW ZEALAND DEER FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

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Cover: Kiwi chef Shannon Campbell has adapted and thrived through the challenges of Covid in Europe and is upbeat about the future as new freedoms emerge. See page 13.

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EDITOR Phil Stewart, Words & Pictures

LAYOUT Rory Stewart

NZDFA thoughts on Groundswell protest

Groundswell represents a general discontent and alarm at the rate of change and amount of environmental legislation being thrust onto the agricultural sector in a very short time span.



John Somerville.

IN ANY RURAL community a majority of people, including most DFA members, support Groundswell and its nationwide protest. The problem for Groundswell is that it has captured popular support, but has no mandate to deal with the Government. Ministers know this and won't acknowledge it.

Farmers who support it pay levies to their industry organisations (Beef + Lamb NZ, DairyNZ, DINZ, etc). These organisations have been working with the Government on environmental legislation for a long time. Many Groundswell organisers and supporters think the organisations have been weak when working with and submitting to Government. I witnessed first-hand industry representatives being heckled by Groundswell supporters at a public meeting. This was uncalled for and mainly perpetrated by people who have never been part of any submission process.

For organisations like DINZ, it has been a long slow process but push-back has been achieved on some of the impractical rules. Dealing with the current Government is not easy. With their huge majority, they don't backtrack easily. Farming representatives have been working extremely hard to get the best results for their members, but any linkage to militant action sees them shut out of the negotiating table. Groundswell has to use its large following to constructively support our agricultural industries and not undermine the work being done on farmers' behalf.

Large-scale tractor protests have put farmers' concerns in front of the general public, but how far do we take that level of protest? In most regional centres there is strong sympathy for rural community concerns, but will more tractor protests in bigger centres achieve the desired aim, or could they just annoy people without them buying into what the protest is about?

Many Groundswell supporters think that all environmental change can be stopped overnight. This is never going to happen and the best we can achieve is sensible rules with time frames that are realistic financially and physically.

After the nation-wide protests in July, the response from some overseas markets was that it appeared New Zealand farmers were opting out of their environmental responsibilities. This is not the message that needs to come out. Instead, people need to realise that farmers do understand the public expectations of improving our environmental footprint. We just want a fairer and more consultative pathway to achieving this.

Groundswell can organise a crowd, but does it know how to make the Government take it seriously and use this support without undermining farming industry organisations. As farmer representatives we have to be aware of the forces driving Groundswell and harness them for our own industry's benefit.

For all deer farmers inspired by Groundswell, direct some of your energy towards your local DFA branch, get more involved and play your part as we help give our farmers a better deal on these and other issues. ■

– John Somerville, Chair NZDFA Executive Committee

EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING ENQUIRIES

Words & Pictures, 89 Mills Road, Wellington
Ph 021 620 399, email phil@wordpict.co.nz

CIRCULATION ENQUIRIES

Deer Industry New Zealand, PO Box 10-702
Wellington, Ph 04 471 6114, info@deernz.org

Genetics update, guess-the-weight and an auction at Hawke's Bay AP day

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The gods smiled on the Hawke's Bay Originals Advance Party (AP) for once on 16 August, turning on a sunny calm day and putting a hold on the Level 4 lockdown that plunged New Zealand back into paralysis just a day later. It was the AP's 29th meeting but the group's interest and cohesiveness remain strong.

Integrated farm business

The day was hosted by Richard Hilson (the AP's facilitator) and Karen Middelberg on their two farms, starting at the hilly Clovelly (563 hectares effective, 243 effective deer fenced) before moving a few kilometres to Jedburgh (208 hectares effective, 133 hectares effective deer fenced). Jedburgh is a flat property and home base for the couple.

Following purchase of another family member's share in Clovelly, the two farms are being run together with an integrated system that makes best use of the contrasting land types.

At Clovelly the AP members were shown the results of a major infrastructure investment. This includes a generous deer lane through the centre of the main basin and some subdivision that creates a riparian protection area. Other AP members had some input into the design of the lane and paddock layout, a real strength of the P2P Advance Party setup that sees crowdsourcing of experience and advice.



The new central lane in the main basin at Clovelly. Other AP members chipped in with ideas on layout.

Deer and cattle will be kept out of the more sensitive areas. The lane has simplified much of the mustering and access at the back of the block. There's also been some money spent on outriggers and Enviro wands to protect fences from the velvetting stags.

The ideal paddock size for deer was discussed, with consensus

that 7–8 hectares is about right. The paddocks at Clovelly average 10ha and are up to 16ha so there's plenty of scope for further subdivision.

Some existing plantations have been re-fenced for deer and 20 hectares of pines are scheduled to be planted next year in blocks big enough to qualify for the ETS if desired. About 150 poplar poles have also gone in this year.



From left: New Jedburgh Farms shepherd Jamiee Gillingham, Karen Middelberg and Richard Hilson at Clovelly.

They have also invested heavily in water supply, with three new 30,000 litre water tanks, two solar pumps, 4.5km of pipe and 20 new troughs so far. With an eye to further subdivision down the line, a trough has been put at each end of some of the bigger paddocks. Water is sourced from the springs dotted around the property. The new water system includes a remote monitor, which proved its worth just three days after installation, when it detected a leaking trough and empty tank.

Karen said having the solar-powered pumps was “transformational”, saving a huge amount of time and maintenance. She noted the solar panels do need to be kept clean. “Even small spots of lichen or shading from a fence can cut their efficiency.”

Richard has used some crafty technology adaptation to keep tabs on buried water pipes by using GPS coordinates to record

continued on page 6



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HBOAP: continued

location and burying battens with EID tags attached that can be used to pinpoint them via a wand reader if needed.

Stock balance shifting

While they love farming deer like everyone does, Richard and Karen are staying realistic and clear-eyed about the contribution deer are making alongside the sheep and cattle. This year they wintered nearly 360 hinds at Jedburgh and 320 at Clovelly. The all-up total for both farms is about 1600 deer, but they're likely to reduce their hind herds by about 50 on each property after a reduction at Clovelly by 80 earlier this year. Traditionally the breeding focus has been for velvet at Jedburgh, where the stags stay as R1 and R2. The initial culling cutoff for about half the two-year-olds is 3.1kg. The mixed age velvetters are kept on more suitable summer-dry country at Clovelly, where the breeding focus has been more on venison. Richard said it was a shame to be cutting back after a long commitment to improving venison genetics, "but the numbers just don't stack up any more". Hinds whose male progeny don't perform as velvetters might be repurposed for venison production.

Their reduction in hind numbers is mirrored in the wider AP group. Collectively, members are cutting their breeding herd by 930, although some are growing their stag numbers. Not all are put off by the current tough patch in the venison sector. One in the group said they were happy to "ride it out" but would be looking more closely at genetic improvement in their breeding hinds.

Genetics and weight gain

The group moved to the deer shed on the Jedburgh property, where Richard and Karen had penned up three lots of weaners bred to contrasting sire types. While they were just samples from bigger mobs, the daily weight gain records on display for each pen revealed the strong influence of genetics on growth. All had been drenched, vaccinated and weighed before weaning in late February ("Aitken technique").

Richard said the weaners had been fed Mohaka ryegrass with a bit of maize this year. (This species was a bit staggers-prone, so weaners had to be taken off "when they got a bit wobbly".) They also had some plantain in their rotation.

He noted that last year's drought had led to a lighter and later (by about 10 days) crop of fawns from first fawners this summer,

but targeted use of PK, maize and a new plantain paddock (aimed at keeping the first fawners in better condition) had helped the fawns catch up to the point where they were 8kg on average heavier than the previous year's 2020 drought-affected crop.

While venison animals could probably be finished to better weights on Jedburgh, that didn't really fit the system and Richard and Karen were still happy with the carcass weights of about 54kg reached at Clovelly by October. The best animals were reaching liveweights of about 112kg by slaughter.

So to the three pens of weaner stags. They comprised progeny from:

- A high-BV Wilkins European terminal sire (+23.5kg W12) over Jedburgh velvet hinds (ave. weight of sample group: 88.5kg)



- A Peel Forest Estate Forrester maternal sire (+17kg W12) over Clovelly venison hinds (ave. weight of sample group: 85.5kg)



- Jedburgh velvet sires (low growth BVs) over Jedburgh velvet hinds (ave. weight of sample group: 72.3kg*)



*The scrappy little weaner 056 in the foreground wasn't included in the figures for this group. AP members were invited to guess his weight in return for beer. Winner with the correct guess of 45kg was Karen Middelberg (Yes, well, exactly! For the record, your editor guessed a respectable 47kg, not bad for an amateur. Ed.)

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The weights and growth rates over winter were quite variable (see photos on previous page) but the influence of the venison sires on performance was plain to see.

Further evidence of the influence of genetics on growth was provided for Richard and Karen by DINZ Deer Select manager Sharon McIntyre, who also attended and spoke at the meeting. In the graph below, the growth rates of some of their 2020-born fawns are tracked by sire. The top two lines are for fawns of stags with W12 BVs of +20kg and +23kg. The remaining four groups at the lower part of the graph were born to velvet sires, whose W12 BVs were mainly in the -5kg to +5kg range.



Group experience

The Hawke’s Bay Originals AP members have achieved high conception rates in recent seasons, managing to outperform the wider Hawke’s Bay district and largely shrugging off the effects of last year’s serious drought (Table 1). There has been the odd exception due to local challenges, but AP members have achieved

Table 1: Hawke’s Bay Originals AP average scanning results 2019–21 for MA and R2 hinds. (Hawke’s Bay district averages follow in brackets)

Year	Mixed age average and (District average)	R2 average and (District average)
2019	98.6% (96%)	92.3% (88%)
2020*	93.3% (89%)	93.8% (86%)
2021	97.4% (95%)	89.4% (79%)

*Severe drought year

consistently good results within the group, with 100 percent scanned in fawn results popping up occasionally for both MA and R2 hinds.

- Individuals in the group shared some of their experience too:
- Richard Hilson used fetal ageing to check the performance of one bought-in sire and found that while he did the business, he’d taken a while to get going.
 - Grant Charteris said he’d only had 9 late conceivers out of 510 hinds, but culled them so he could keep condensing conception dates and getting them earlier.
 - George Williams, who has cut hind numbers by one-third, said he’d hired the Smart Shepherd collars to pair his hinds and fawns. At a cost of \$12 per hind/fawn pair it was cheaper than doing DNA and could be done in 24–48 hours. He synchronised the exercise with tagging to streamline it. (See August/September *Deer Industry News*, p25, for more on the technology).

Deer Select update

Deer Select manager Sharon McIntyre talked to the group about new developments with the programme, including a recap on the

continued on page 8

Wilkins Farming Co. achieves liveweight record!

Wilkins Farming Co. continually strives to kick goals, so it comes as no surprise that with their investment in top-end genetics combined with their expert management, they have once again achieved a record liveweight result!

THE STUD’S CONSISTENT 15-month liveweight gains in recent years are impressive. Previously recording top-end liveweights of 188kg at 15 months, Wilkins Farming Co. were excited to breed their first “over 200kg” animal. In February 2021 at 15 months it weighed in at a massive 219kg. This outstanding animal was 31kg better than their previous 15-month weight, and it comes as no surprise that he has been retained by the stud as a future sire by the name of “Jameson”. Not only did Jameson achieve a first for the stud, but Wilkins Farming Co. recorded eleven animals that achieved 188kg or better this year, with two over a whopping 200kg! With liveweights up to 125kg in early June 2021 (2020 born animals), Wilkins Farming Co. looks set to achieve even more industry-leading results for European red deer. Their upcoming sales in both the North and South Islands provide you your opportunity to secure one of these outstanding animals.



Jameson shown at 15 months.

- Article Supplied

HBOAP: continued

“BV Proof” exercise carried out on three commercial farms last year. On one of the farms, the first cut of progeny from a high-BV stag was off the works by August – an excellent result for that farm and proof that growth BVs can have an impact on a commercial operation.

Conception date is emerging as a significant breeding value also. Sharon noted that hinds that have the potential to conceive earlier tend to have higher conception rates and can be weaned earlier, allowing more recovery time prior to next mating in dry conditions. She cautioned that while early conception is great for those wanting progeny to grow quickly, it doesn't suit all farm systems. “Some need that spring growth for lambs in October so they're OK if the fawns come a little later.”

She noted that when selecting for growth you also need to think about meat. Ultimately it was about choosing the right-sized animals for your system and environment.

The CARLA BV was strongly supported by studs from the start, meaning that some Deer Select herds now had four or five years of good data and buyers of sires had some choices. They are usually measured in October as yearlings after a period on grass to expose them to parasites.

“Any CARLA breeding value 25–50 is good – over 100 is *really* good.”



Grant Charteris gets into a BV-driven Helmsman-style bidding war in a mock auction exercise.

Sharon cautioned that in other species, single trait selection has resulted in reduced fertility. Two new fertility BVs, one for first fawners and one for mixed age hinds, are in development.

“There are always local environmental effects. These, and the management decisions you make, can act as an accelerator or handbrake on reproductive performance.”

Velvet production features strongly in this AP and Sharon noted that selection for exceptionally early velvet growth (e.g. starting in July) may not be helpful; farmers had commented to her that these animals don't cut any regrowth.

She added that latest AgResearch work on velvet heritability based on more than 40,000 records from progeny of 1,200 sires had shown that heritability was about 45 percent, not the 70–85 percent that is often talked about.

While a lot of energy is still going into getting the Deer Select cross-breed evaluation operating, there won't be much more immediate development of velvet BVs. There is definitely potential for more in this space, however. Sharon noted that accuracy for the 2-year velvet weight increases with successive years for individual hinds, until she's had four or more fawns. “Deer Select can add real value for hind selection in velvet herds, using all measurements on male relatives to estimate a hind's merit.”

She said new technology for measurement and analysis could be used to support new quality-focused velvet BVs. For example digital imaging might be employed for measuring beam circumference or shape, or ionisation knives for detecting levels of bioactives.

The day ended with a hard-fought mock auction. AP members each splashed up to a \$30k play money budget for three stags from a selection of sires with a range of BVs. It didn't take long for the group to spot animals that tickled their fancy, with some good-natured bidding wars breaking out. Animals with good genetics for velvet, growth and CARLA attracted the hottest action. ■

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Cervidae Oral article: Correction

THE ARTICLE “First triple active oral drench for deer” pertaining to the launch of Cervidae Oral, published in *Deer Industry News* issue 109, August/September 2021, pp20–21 contained an error regarding the efficacy of Cervidae Oral against lungworm.

Regarding the pre-registration farm trials for Cervidae Oral, Veterinarian Mr Dave Lawrence was misquoted.

The article stated: “According to Mr Lawrence, Cervidae Oral proved 98.5% effective in targeting lungworm and gut worm *Ostertagia* (the two parasites killing deer) on both farms.”

In fact, the trials only investigated efficacy against gut worm *Ostertagia*, not lungworm. Cervidae Oral was proven 98.5% effective against gut worm only.

Although the macrocyclic lactone component of Cervidae Oral

is known to be effective against lungworm in deer when used in other products, its efficacy against lungworm was not tested with Cervidae Oral in these trials. Therefore, no label claim against lungworm in deer is made for Cervidae Oral.

The correct statement was: “According to Mr Lawrence, lungworm and gutworm (*Ostertagia*) are the two parasites killing deer. Moxidectin, the ML in Cervidae Oral has long been known to be highly effective against lungworm and on both trial farms Cervidae Oral proved 98.5% effective against gut worm (*Ostertagia*).”

The error is deeply regretted, and we apologise to Mr Lawrence for the misquote and to the deer industry for any confusion this may have caused. ■

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US potential still to be tapped

by Richard Rennie, *Deer Industry News* contributing writer

In the final in our series about United States retail efforts by New Zealand venison companies, Alliance Group Ltd and Mountain River Venison provide an overview of the challenges and successes they are enjoying in this vast red meat market.

Ground product opens door for Alliance in US

Alliance Group efforts to tap into the enormous United States protein juggernaut have been leveraging off the long-established contacts already enjoyed at a retail level through The Lamb Company with venison products marketed under its Four Seasons brand.

Alliance Group sales manager **Terry O’Connell** says the company’s efforts are initially focusing on a premium and standard ground venison product, providing an ideal entry point for familiarising consumers with a relatively new red meat. It competes in the “exotic meats” section of the supermarket meat department, alongside the likes of bison, another niche low-fat red meat with an annual market value of about US\$160 million.

The company has also started marketing a venison loin grilling steak.

O’Connell says while the market in the United States has been small, its growth has been exceptionally strong in recent years.

Marketing for the venison is in retail outlets in both western and eastern United States.

O’Connell says the targeted shopper is the “conscious consumer” who is looking for a higher-value product that has a lower environmental footprint.

“Of course, the usual strengths of New Zealand farm-raised venison are highlighted – that it is free range, grass fed and non-GMO, key points with US consumers.”

The biggest challenge in the past few months to developing the United States market has been shipping, with erratic schedules and timing proving challenging for the marketing team.

The upside of the ground product has been that it is frozen, giving some flexibility in delivery.

Meantime the promotion of steaks at retail level has also been hampered by difficulties accessing stores under Covid conditions, making taste testing and demonstrations a tougher ask. However, sales have benefitted from the pivot to online purchases in the past 12 months.



Alliance is pitching ground venison as a great alternative to beef or bison.

“We have had a bit of food fatigue in the market, where consumers have grown tired of their usual range of food and are keen to try something new,” says O’Connell.

As with any new market it takes time to develop, but he is confident that given US consumers’ passion for red meat, prospects are positive.

“We have been surprised at how quick it has been getting established in retail off such a low base. It gives us a lot of confidence we are going to enjoy a solid platform.

“When you consider consumption of red meat in the United States is 40 percent higher per capita than in China, and the density of high-wealth individuals, there remains a lot of untapped potential in that market.”

He says as a pioneering product the ground venison fits well with both United States consumers’ familiarity with the product type, and the need for a good baseline product from a production perspective.

“A quality ground product is essential to help establish a way to not only introduce consumers to a relatively new red meat, but to also help underpin returns longer term as a steady, accessible product. It is essential in order to ensure stable schedule returns to farmers.”

Niche opportunities for Mountain River

Despite a year of ongoing shipping challenges that have tended to worsen in recent months, Mountain River Venison remains committed to building on its US retail programme.

The company has enjoyed a lengthy relationship with Epic Provisions as a supplier of quality venison to the company that specialises in meat-based protein snacks.

Founded by fitness enthusiasts who swore by the value of high protein meat-based supplements to their sporting performance, the company was responsible for single-handedly recreating the dried meat snack market as a value-add supplement sector.

“Epic grew very quickly and successfully, and was a big customer of New Zealand venison, including our own,” says Mountain River Venison founder **John Sadler**.

The company was bought out by food giant General Mills, with the founders going on to create a new company, Force of Nature.

Founded on retailing meat produced largely through regenerative agriculture principles, Force of Nature aims to supply customers with sustainably reared, high-quality cuts that include bison, venison, pork, elk and chicken.

The company’s strong land stewardship ethos resonates well with Mountain River’s own values of sustainable quality venison, reared in a free-range, antibiotic-free farming system.

Mountain River is supplying venison as a ground and steak medallion product, and a venison rib “tomahawk.” It’s a challenging product to process, requiring a specific carcass size to achieve the right-sized final product.

“We are also sourcing wapiti for their ground elk product. US consumers understand elk better than they understand venison.

“The Passion2Profit funding from the retail project has meant we are able to give our work with Force of Nature more of a push along, and lift the work with venison,” says Sadler.

The company’s promotions are heavily focused on social media, targeting ardent red meat fans who want to consume red meat raised in an environmentally conscious way.

“They work hard on building awareness of regenerative agriculture. That fits well with New Zealand farm systems which are often close to that, as well as being free range, antibiotic free and grass fed.

“The challenge with venison is not so much the inability to cook it – they are usually familiar with most meats – but a lack of familiarity with the cuts.

The company also sells its tomahawk rib as a single item, something that US consumers know from beef.

“The reason we are particularly keen to build our range with Force of Nature is because their values-based strategy targets a market prepared to pay for the values encapsulated by regenerative agriculture. We need to capture a higher value for the product to keep venison viable and sustainable for farmers to continue farming deer. For that reason, and being small, we are particularly keen to focus on these sorts of niche markets.”

This also includes working with foodservice and on-line high-

end food retail company D’Artagnan.

The New Jersey-based company was initially focused on foodservice products, but given Covid’s impact has pivoted to more consumer-focused on-line retail sales.

“We have worked with them for more than 20 years and the consumer retail business has grown significantly with steaks, ground meat, chops and tenderloins sold through them.”

Mountain River is in high-end company in the D’Artagnan outlet, with the retailers’ products including truffles, foie gras and high-quality seafood.

“With Force of Nature the future lies in venison retailing. Costs are going up throughout the entire supply line, including 50 percent on sea freight. For farmers, land competition now includes carbon returns that blow sheep and venison away. A focus on high-value products is the only way to counter these challenges.” ■



Some innovative venison products tailored to US consumer tastes are being marketed through Force of Nature.

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European season preview

by Richard Rennie, *Deer Industry News* contributing writer

As the game meat season kicks off in Europe in October, New Zealand venison companies are putting the finishing touches to their seasonal marketing campaigns there.

Alliance Group Ltd

Alliance Group sales manager **Terry O'Connell** says expectations are this season will be a good one for the European market after the impacts of Covid-19 restrictions on foodservice trade last winter.

"These countries are also looking less inclined to lock down again, so that gives importers and food service outlets that level of certainty when it comes to ordering that they just did not have last year."

Alliance Group has been working closely with on-line retailer Hello Fresh on the continent. The home delivery food ingredients company includes a venison steak product in its premium offering, and ground mince product in the standard ingredients offering.

"The beauty of being included in a home delivery ingredients pack is that they come with very precise cooking instructions; it helps us educate consumers in their own time about how to cook venison well, giving them confidence to make future purchases."

The time Covid-19 has provided consumers has also meant they are prepared to try new meat items, and face less time pressure to experiment to get it right.

The historical dominance of Germany in the game meat market has diluted somewhat in recent years, with product dispersed across Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

Social media marketing has also been ramped up for the season, particularly alongside German importers.

Not surprisingly after the past year's chaos, shipping is proving the major challenge, with delays impacting on shelf-life windows once instore.

"You could usually push your shelf life out to eight weeks on arrival in market, but that is now down to four weeks. It is not a lot of time, and this has also impacted on our processing window here in New Zealand."

Silver Fern Farms

Silver Fern Farms group sales manager **Peter Robinson** says this year's European campaign will be re-focusing back to foodservice outlets, as more open after the lockdowns of last year.

He sees the European market in something of a recovery phase

as more food outlets open, while hoping to see some stability in prices which had started to slide pre-Covid due to a drop in United States manufacturing demand rippling through the sector.

But he says Silver Fern Farms is conscious that it can't rely solely on the recovery of foodservice in Europe to drive a sustainable recovery in venison returns.

"Our biggest concern for Europe is that the industry risks taking a 'business as usual' approach, with the usual seasonality and lack of market options that brings."

He says Silver Fern is doubling down on its efforts in both China and the United States, focusing on a range of products and channels.

"More sales to both those markets will do much to help underpin greater stability. While Europe is still important, we know farmers need more surety around schedule returns. These efforts will help deliver that."

Duncan New Zealand

Rob Kidd, general manager of operations and marketing at Duncan New Zealand reports that, as with past seasons, promotions for the 2021 European game season will be run with their in-market partners.

With the market having evolved towards more added-value cuts, these campaigns will be focused at the distribution and retail level.

Promotions will run in conjunction with the arrival of the chilled product to Europe across France, Germany, Scandinavia and the Benelux countries.

"With shipping schedules and delays an issue, the excellent shelf life of New Zealand venison is meaning the five-week sea voyage to market is possible. This leaves time for some delays, as well as time in market for product to be marketed and sold."

However, he noted company executives are mindful of the unprecedented shipping chaos.

"If delays do increase the risk of product not getting to market in time, then airfreight will be used to keep options available for customers." ■



Kiwi chef welcoming European freedoms

by Richard Rennie, *Deer Industry News* contributing writer

With national vaccination rates now heading north of 70%, German citizens are starting to see some return to normal life. It is a return that brings some shifts in venison consumption with it.

SHANNON CAMPBELL IS a Kiwi chef working in Germany on behalf of DINZ and he welcomes seeing more customers returning to restaurants as Europe enters its traditionally busy period for venison consumption.

“Last year of course we saw the foodservice business really drop away; everyone moving to on-line ordering for home consumption.

“It brought quite a shift in my role here, as distributors started seeking out online material like recipes, photos and content to promote at-home venison meals or takeout ideas,” says Shannon.

It prompted him to move from the physical contact of trade shows, cooking demonstrations and being alongside distributors, to developing a new suite of skills in videoing and presenting venison dishes for online ‘consumption’.

“We had the double whammy of a product that is largely consumed in winter here, being hit by lockdowns over the same period.”

The type of cuts demanded by consumers shifted with the change in consumption patterns. High-end, higher-price restaurant cuts were replaced by more diced product, used in the likes of goulash which would previously have gone to large canteen clients.

Inventive promotion ideas he developed included an online cooking class for 50 chefs in their final year of culinary school with each sent a box with the ingredients ahead of class.

“It was very labour intensive, compared with what we may have done before, but it went down very well with this young generation of chefs.”

During the long lockdown period the most successful business models were quick and easy take-out meals, and Shannon has worked with the likes of burger outlets, developing lean healthy burger patty options to market alongside traditional beef-based offerings.

Shannon maintains the silver lining from the Covid crisis has been the pivot to retailing online among distributors, and how it has opened consumers’ minds to venison as an option beyond the traditional winter foodservice market.

Capitalising on that as he headed into summer, he worked with Villa Maria in a wine and venison matching seminar.

In August an opening gala for fine food dining in Cologne included two days of seminars. A closing gala dinner opened up the opportunity to work with chefs in the city.

“We have started a competition with them to come up with their best venison recipes.

“We are also really looking to keep pushing that retail support now we have more certainty there will be no more lockdowns, and putting together as much material as possible for that.”

He says he has enjoyed the challenge of building his videoing, editing and presenting skills in the locked-down social media promotional environment.

“When a distributor calls now they get the whole package – a chef who can come up with the recipes, present them, video them and teach them.”

Shannon is looking forward to a busy pre-winter period traversing Europe and the United Kingdom, boosting links with retailers and distributors and capitalising on the new-found retail interest in venison.

“Everyone here is really looking forward to more certainty, and Covid has certainly prompted us to look harder at these other opportunities for venison here.” ■



Shannon Campbell developed a new set of skills in adapting to the restrictions caused by Covid.

STOP PRESS

2021 North Island Velvet Competition has been
CANCELLED

China efforts continue

by Richard Rennie, *Deer Industry News* contributing writer

To reduce reliance on the highly seasonal European game meat market, Silver Fern Farms (SFF) has for the past two years been focusing on building new demand for venison in China.

THIS HAS BEEN partly aided by having access to a DINZ contestable marketing fund, one of a range of initiatives designed to support transformational projects that may otherwise have been limited by a lack of funding.

“Typically, in the past the belief has been that there is an aversion to eating venison in China and that as a ‘rare’ eaten meat venison it is not that well suited to Chinese cuisine. However, our research and work since is indicating this is not necessarily the case,” says SFF group sales manager Peter Robinson.

He says initial research included real-time visits to consumers as they prepared venison products, with video diaries logging purchasing and cooking habits.

Calling on social media and digital platforms has played a bit part in drawing in tech-savvy Chinese consumers and SFF has aligned with digital e-commerce platform Newdodo to market three new venison products.

A premium petfood product is also being developed for retail, with pet ownership cited as one of the big growth areas in a country where single occupancy households are on the rise among increasingly affluent wage and salary earners keen for the companionship of a pet.

In addition, Silver Fern Farms has been undertaking chef workshops and showcasing venison at food shows. At this year’s SIAL Food Service Fair in Shanghai, SFF displayed two new products: Venison Ribs and Cubes. Both products claimed a spot in the “Top 50” selection of the SIAL Innovation Competition.

Peter Robinson sees China playing a critical role in venison’s recovery after the hits taken by the pre-Covid slump in US manufacturing, followed by Covid’s impact on European restaurant sales.

“Covid made us realise how reliant we really were on the European foodservice sector, and the need to diversify away from that.”

He says the company’s move to establish its own stand-alone office in China speaks volumes to the level of commitment being taken to the market, after an initial affiliation with Primary Collaboration New Zealand. The office includes a country manager

and a sales and marketing team and SFF has jumped over two years’ worth of assorted hurdles to become a Wholly Foreign Owned Enterprise.

“This has enabled us to be on the ground, working closely with customers on instore, digital and e-commerce promotions. We are that much closer to customers and getting good customer feedback.”

He likens the venison sector to where New Zealand’s sheepmeat market was a decade ago, with a concentrated reliance on one (Europe) market before China ramped up demand.

“China turned around the lamb business in terms of returns, and continues to do so. The year-on-year growth in Chinese demand for lamb should give the venison sector hope.”

Like lamb, he envisages the sector kicking off with lower value, even ground products, then moving up the value chain.

“With lamb they started with flaps, moved to forequarters and are now buying legs and even French racks.” ■



An event for chefs in China hosted by Silver Fern Farms. Efforts like this have been made possible through a contestable DINZ promotion fund.

Water, feed and shade reminder

A TRAGIC CASE earlier this year, involving the loss of 12 stags in a paddock through water deprivation, serves as a powerful reminder of the need to take extra precautions if you need to leave stock unattended for any reason.

The stags had only been left for two days, but a water trough failure, combined with unusually hot weather, had fatal consequences for the animals concerned.

The need for all animals to have access to sufficient food,

water and proper shade/shelter while left unattended cannot be emphasised strongly enough.

If you do need to be away, even for a relatively short time, double checking the food and water supply before you leave, as well as ensuring that the animals are kept in a sheltered location, could help avoid another tragic loss like this. ■

– Rob Gregory, general manager quality assurance, DINZ

Overseer: Still a useful tool

A report on the efficacy of Overseer for measuring nutrient loss cast doubt on how useful or accurate it is. Overseer is widely used on farms and a key part of Farm Environment Plans.

THE REPORT WAS commissioned by the Ministry for Primary Industries and Ministry for the Environment in response to a 2018 report by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment and carried out by an eight-member science advisory panel.

Their conclusions were not unexpected – Overseer has been criticised in the past – but were still hard hitting. The panel said:

Our core concerns are that Overseer:

- is a steady state model attempting to simulate a dynamic, continually varying system;
- uses monthly time-steps;
- uses average climate data and, therefore, cannot model episodic events, or capture responses to climate variation;
- does not balance mass;
- does not account for variation in water and nutrient distribution in the soil profile;
- does not adequately accommodate deep-rooting plants;
- focuses on nitrate and omits ammoniacal nitrogen and organic matter dynamics; and
- lacks consideration of surface water and nutrient transport, as well as critical landscape factors.

As a result of these concerns, we do not have confidence that Overseer’s modelled outputs tell us whether changes in farm management reduce or increase the losses of nutrients, or what the magnitude or error of these losses might be.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Simon Upton, described the findings of the Science Advisory Panel as “devastating”. He noted that the Government had committed to

develop best practice guidance for models used in environmental regulation.

“Rural communities and environmentalists are entitled to know exactly what this model can and cannot do. If farmers are to trust the model, they also need a transparent understanding of how local and central government will use data from the model to enforce regulations.”

So is there a future for Overseer? Deer Industry New Zealand says that although the model used has its limitations, it still has a role. Chief Executive Innes Moffat said that in DINZ’s view:

- OverseerFM is an extremely useful tool for monitoring the impact of farming activity and does provide guidance to land users. It is based on assumptions and, like all models, will have some room for error.
- DINZ welcomes the Government’s signal that it would be providing funding for improvements to the tools that farmers can use to measure and manage their environmental impacts.
- While being mindful that it might not provide a precise measure of nitrogen leaching, farmers can continue to use OverseerFM as a monitoring tool. It will provide guidance on the direction of travel for nutrient management.
- Overseer can be used to estimate a farm’s greenhouse gas emissions, an important step that all farmers have to take towards monitoring and managing agricultural emissions via our He Waka Eke Noa partnership.

For the science advisory group’s report:

<https://bit.ly/3uHBE1X> ■

Former DFA stalwart passes away

Earle Wells, who served on the NZDFA Executive Committee from 2008–2012 in the finance portfolio, passed away on 1 October at the age of 87.

EARLE, WHO RAN a small venison breeding and finishing operation near Whakatane, warned against a loss of critical mass in the industry at the time of his joining the committee. In 2008 there had been several years of significant downsizing in the national deer herd – a situation that’s being echoed today.

He was also concerned about the then government’s climate change policy – another issue that has picked up steam since then.

DINZ producer manager Tony Pearse recalled Earle as “a very staunch supporter of the current DFA and DINZ structures, and a great advocate for Whakatane and the Bay of Plenty branch”. Former DFA Executive Committee chair Edmund Noonan said Earle was a very supportive member of the committee and always a team player. “He was a true gentleman and although he was not a large deer farmer he always appreciated the wider industry perspective. He was always happy to support the industry however he could.”

Outside deer farming, Earle is best known as a former Kiwi sailing great, becoming a gold medallist at the 1964 Tokyo

Olympics in the Flying Dutchman class. He was also a rower and narrowly missed selection for the 1960 Rome Olympics.

He took up ocean racing in the late 1960s, sailing in five Sydney to Hobart races, the Clipper Cup Series off Honolulu and other races. In 1990 he and Flying Dutchman partner Helmer Pedersen were inducted into the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame.

DINZ and the NZDFA extend their condolences to Earle’s friends and family. ■



Earle Welles during his deer farming days.

Lindsay Fung appointed producer manager

DINZ is pleased to announce the appointment of Dr Lindsay Fung to the role of producer manager. He replaces the long-serving Tony Pearse, who retires from the role this month.

ADVOCACY ON BEHALF of deer farmers is becoming increasingly important as societal expectations of land users continue to grow. This will be reflected in the producer manager role, which helps connect deer farmers, through the NZDFA, with DINZ and the wider community.

Lindsay has proven his ability to represent deer farmers' needs at regional and central government levels through his role as DINZ environmental stewardship manager. He will now be tasked with representing producers' interests across a wider portfolio of farm issues, and working with his DINZ colleagues on policy and productivity matters.

He originally worked for DINZ in a newly created role of science manager from 2006 to 2010. After a short period with Horticulture NZ he rejoined DINZ in 2014 and since then has been focused on environmental policy and stewardship.

Building stronger links between local NZDFA branches and regional government has been a vital part of his role to date, where he's shown that giving voice to farmer interests can make a significant difference to regulatory changes affecting their ability to operate their farm enterprises.

He took up the DINZ producer manager role on 15 October. ■



Lindsay Fung.

www.deernz.org

Visited our website lately? If not, come and have a look – we hope you'll like what we've done with the place!

THE FORMER WEBSITE was starting to get very tired with a complicated structure and a number of broken links. Also the platform we were using was no longer supported: it was time for an update.

You will still be able to find most of the content from the former site but it's better organised, tighter, easier to find and up to date. And it looks better too, with plenty of scope to use great images of our farms and products.

The site is still in three main sections.

The Deer Industry New Zealand section is our most outward facing, with lots of good information about the industry and its products, news and events and of course DINZ itself.

The Deer Hub is the beating heart of our information resources for deer farmers and others with an interest in the industry. Information is organised under the familiar headings of Breeding, Feeding, Health and so on. There's also an extensive Support Services section in here, where you'll find the invaluable Deer Fact series along with information about Passion2Profit and much more.

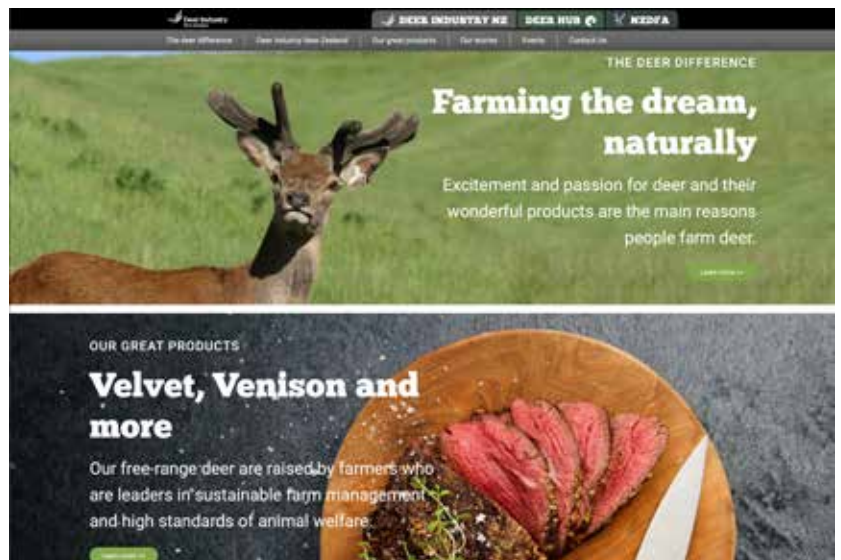
And there's a section for **NZDFA**, which has had a major update and refresh.

Updating the site has been a big team effort

managed by DINZ venison marketing manager Nick Taylor. Special thanks also go to Rebecca Norling, who has been doing all the nuts and bolts work on site building and design, and Trevor Walton, who helped coordinate updating of content.

So come and have a play at www.deernz.org

If you have any questions or suggestions, leave a message on the contact page at: www.deernz.org/home/contact-us/ ■



Come on down – it's our 40th!

The red carpet is booked, bubbles will be chilled and hopefully the country will hit Level 1 and be able to celebrate the 40th year the Velvet and Hard Antler Competition has been run in the Deep South.

THE FIRST COMPETITION was held in 1981 at the old Wrightsons Wool store in Invercargill with Clive Jermy and Bob Swann as judges. It then moved to the Show grounds where it was a massive competition, including public watching the judging. In 1989 the competition and the first awards night moved to the Ascot Park Hotel and have been held there ever since. If you come down and join in the celebration there will be more history and photos from over the 40 years shared at the awards night.

This year the competition includes a 3 year old hard antler section, with 3 year old stag heads grown out in 2020 due to the Rising Stars awards which was not run this year.

All the usual velvet and hard antler classes will be in the competition again and for the first time all first place velvet class winners will be put forward to the Champion of Champions award.

The awards night will be a celebration of the 40 years with many of the pioneers being asked to speak and contribute to the evening. I have also been working closely with Simon Henry, the chef from Ascot Park, to create a menu that celebrates the whole animal. There will be velvet, venison and deer milk on the menu, so I'm pretty excited about that.

The main guest speaker will be none other than Tony Pearse who has made a major contribution to the industry, the competition and the awards night over many years, so you can look forward to his tales. Gerry Forde will be the MC on the night and a band will play till the end of the celebration.

As they have been for so many of the 40 years, PGG Wrightson will be the main sponsor of the competition and awards. Without sponsors we wouldn't have a competition.

I plan to have a display of memorabilia and photos from 40 years ago. If you have anything you could lend us for the night please contact me.

There is a block booking at the Ascot Park Hotel and this year attendees can book accommodation online though the Ascot Park website (www.ascotparkhotel.co.nz) if they wish using the promo code DEER221. This will give them access to the discounted rates.

On behalf of the National Velvet and Hard Antler Competition Committee:

Jane Campbell - Event Coordinator 027 347 8926
Southland Deer Branch Secretary/Treasurer ■



SAVE THE DATE!

40th NATIONAL VELVET AND TROPHY ANTLER COMPETITION

Judging: 6 December

**Awards & 40th Anniversary
Celebration:** 7 December

Contact:

Jane Campbell – Event Coordinator
027 347 8926
southlanddeerbranch@gmail.com

Bruce Paterson – Competition Committee
Chairman 027 344 3629

Venison companies express positive views for future

In response to growing concerns from members that venison producers were losing confidence in the industry as we enter a second spring of depressed prices, NZDFA chair John Somerville wrote to CEOs of the five main venison marketers, copied also to the DINZ Board. Here are extracts from the NZDFA letter, followed by extracts from the letters received in response. Most of these were written in early August. Full versions of all letters are on the DINZ website.

Dear sirs,

On behalf of members of the New Zealand Deer Farmers Association (NZDFA) I am writing to all the venison processing companies to convey the high level of concern with the current price levels for the upcoming chilled season and beyond that post-chilled crucial market opportunity.

In advance the NZDFA would like to place on record our thanks and recognition that the companies went to in really challenging times at the onset of Covid, in clearing farms of late season stock and avoiding the challenges we would have in overwintering surplus stock.

While we fully understand the effect that the Covid-19 lockdowns have subsequently had on our traditional foodservice markets, our NZDFA members are telling us there is an increasingly expressed frustration and feeling that alternative markets have been slow to develop. To express these concerns bluntly, compared with other meat proteins post Covid-19 in 2020, and to date in 2021, venison's market performance and financial return to the producers has been abysmal.

There is great concern among the deer farming community at all levels that large numbers will start leaving the industry if the prices don't improve considerably over this upcoming [2021] season and that will also continue to erode the breeding herd and sales of weaners to specialist finishers.

It's inevitable that this risks a huge impact on industry critical mass with breeding hinds that will be killed in large numbers as pressure builds on breeding farms' viability. We are concerned that our processing companies' investment in slaughter capacity and markets could also be put in jeopardy.

I cannot overemphasise how low farmer sentiment is. When we hear that some of the weaner breeders are genuinely considering not putting stags out in 2022, the circumstances and future implications for industry confidence and viability needs to be taken seriously. Given recent examples of change in the central North Island as some deer farmers transition away from breeding herds, for finishing weaners for venison, there have been a few farms in that area that have been sold and planted for carbon farming in pine trees or in manuka for the bee industry. So this land use change may not necessarily result in those animals being replaced by sheep and beef.

On behalf of the NZDFA members we welcome your response and suggest that there will be some open discussion at the DINZ Board meeting this week.

John Somerville NZDFA Executive Committee Chair

Extracts from company responses and DINZ

Alliance Group: David Surveyor

"The traditional bias of venison to foodservice certainly magnified the impact of Covid upon its performance when compared with lamb and beef.

"We have also been investing to diversify our markets and channels. Although this work started prior to the challenges of Covid, given the timeline for benefits from such initiatives to be realised they unfortunately didn't shield demand from the downturn experienced in traditional markets.

"We are confident we are starting to see the rewards of our efforts. We are now seeing demand from both an increasingly diverse market and channel base. As inventory across extended supply chains gradually return[s] to more traditional (and desirable) levels, it is hoped, combined with the improved market diversity, this will manifest itself in improved market prices and in turn farm-gate returns.

"We currently have a minimum price contract in the field, the aim of which is to give suppliers surety of pricing. You can be assured the prices tabled [reflect] where we believe the market is/will be. Being a minimum price, the contract guarantees the minimum price suppliers will receive, but still allows them to realise further upside if the schedule was to improve beyond the price we are currently forecasting."

Duncan NZ Ltd Venison: Andrew Duncan

"Venison schedules over time need to be significantly better than lamb or beef schedules for deer to justify their place on farm.

I'd be surprised if the companies that are in sheep and beef are not also concerned about venison.

"A huge percentage of the 2020 venison kill, that was enabled by [government] measures, effectively went straight into cold storage. Moving that 2020 product through to consumption, in addition to 2021 production, is not an overnight job.

"The multispecies companies are more qualified to comment, but my understanding is that as significant volumes of sheep meat and beef are sold at retail, those retail items benefitted from the Covid-induced surge in retail spending, so it's hardly surprising that market demand for lamb and beef is much greater than venison demand at present.

"I'd caution against drawing conclusions about the current prices for venison, by just examining export tonnages, as there are many other drivers of the current market prices.

“Another large hind kill, such as we saw in the early 2000s, would be hugely concerning for the entire deer sector.

“We’d agree absolutely that there is a very high level of concern around the current venison returns. What we also see, is a very wide range of attitudes to these low prices. While some are seriously contemplating exiting the industry, others see the current low prices as an excellent opportunity to expand, based on their faith in the longer-term venison outlook.

“The current season’s venison price of around \$5.50 through the off season, to the over \$7.00 level of the recently released base price contracts fully prices venison on today’s market levels [but] these ‘tramlines’ are not sustainable ... beyond 2021.”

“Venison markets could ultimately end up stronger ... as the market diversification that Covid has forced on the industry will mean venison markets will be broader based.”

First Light: Gerard Hickey

“With the aim of maintaining confidence ... we released a minimum price contract in April for deer to be processed August to October. This was a gamble on our part that restaurants will be open and shipping space will be available to get the product to market but we recognised that something needed to be done to instil confidence.

“Sheep and beef have benefitted from a number of macro factors which venison does not have in its favour.

“Buoyed by a Covid-led explosion in eating at home, both beef and sheepmeat have benefitted from being produced and consumed globally and predominantly sold through retail channels. In comparison, high-value cuts of venison have been designed for fine dining restaurants in Europe and the USA, which have struggled to open and operate. This was particularly harmful when restaurants were shut during the peak consumption period of September 2020 to March 2021. Another factor has been China, where New Zealand sheep and beef exports are at record highs.

“We have invested heavily during the past year in our US and New Zealand venison retail business as consumers used their new-found time to experiment with new products in the kitchen. It has been pleasing to see venison retail sales continue to grow, indicating the venison consumers we recruited over the past 12 months now have venison in their portfolio.

“We have also invested in growing our online sales ... unfortunately there is no shortcut to ... educating and recruiting venison consumers to these channels.

“We expect to have to deal with aftershocks from Covid and compromised global logistics. However, restaurants in our main markets are steadily reopening and niche markets are recovering so we are starting to see the release of pent up demand.”

Mountain River Venison: John Sadler

“We have confidence in the future for New Zealand farmed venison.

“The evidence over the years is that our product works in the specialty meat category. We have been developing niche markets for Mountain River Venison for many years. We have shared some of our programmes with the industry and with our community. Our programmes are showing overwhelmingly positive results.

“The market has had a few bad seasons. We entered the 2018 season with prices too high induced by the pet food bubble and made worse by warm weather in the autumn. That was followed in

2019 by low premium protein prices (apparently linked to demand from China for lower value cuts). Then came Covid in 2020.

“A bad sales season, whether by misjudgement or bad luck, can’t be recovered until the following one in an annual cycle. That is why venison prices have not bounced back quickly like other proteins. The venison market does not have the same dynamics as lamb or beef.

“Prices are also impacted by weaknesses in transport infrastructure and high rates, particularly for airfreight.

“The future is bright for NZ venison to be positioned at the top end of the protein market. More focus in this direction is the strategy the industry needs to pursue.”

Silver Fern Farms: Simon Limmer and Dave Courtney

“Silver Fern Farms has been working hard on new market and channel diversification options. As New Zealand’s largest venison exporter Silver Fern Farms needs to reduce its reliance upon the European foodservice sector to create [options] for the recovery of venison pricing and provide some resilience into the future.

“Covid halted this progress and we found ourselves more focused on being able to service our farmer clients’ needs to process stock, despite sales demand becoming non-existent.

“This strategy is a long-term investment that will take time to deliver positive results. Venison is not a well-recognised product in retail and in the Covid environment retailers have looked to narrow their product base, rather than launch new ones.

“Despite this, we have managed to launch our Silver Fern Farms branded venison brick which is now the number one selling venison grocery item in the USA. In recent weeks we have expanded into another 240 stores nationwide and launched a new medallion product.

“If we are to break our traditional reliance on EU and US food service, new markets and channels will be the key. We have been working hard in China to resurrect the interest we were starting to create prior to Covid and believe we are seeing ... progress.

“As we progress these two key markets, we also see options for our venison products in retailer, E-Commerce, high-end petfood and a restaurant presence, which we believe we can grow towards a more robust and profitable future, but it will take time and effort.

“Any new customers and new channels we develop to spread our market footprint will be unforgiving if we drop them overnight to return [to] traditional channels.”

Deer Industry New Zealand Board: Innes Moffat

“The company representatives are acutely aware of the stress that venison breeders are under and noted they are passing through the return from the sale of venison.

“The DINZ Board recommended an increase in the venison promotion budget [and reiterates that] DINZ had increased venison funding this year [and] coordinated marketing companies are focusing additional resources on China and the US retail markets.

“With the scale of the disruption to the international food service trade, and the carry-over of frozen venison from 2020 ... a rebound in the venison schedule is unlikely to occur this year.”

• To see the full text of responses by companies and DINZ: www.deernz.org/nzdfa/nzdfa-news/issue-169-special-edition-response-from-venison-marketing-companies/ ■

Velvet signals sound promising

by Richard Rennie, *Deer Industry News* contributing writer

Market signals from New Zealand's main export destinations for velvet are sounding positive early in the season, with both buyers and exporters expressing cautious optimism.

AT THE TIME of writing (late September), DINZ manager markets Rhys Griffiths said things were starting to crystalise.

"Reports are coming back indicating enquiry has been strong out of South Korea and China. There have also been more health-focused food products launched in South Korea in recent months that contain velvet," Griffiths says.

As a result, he anticipates the underlying demand for New Zealand-sourced velvet will remain solid.

"The big challenge is getting product to market. It is a fundamental problem for all exporters right now. We are letting our biggest customers know that product is available, but that disruptions may occur at any time during the season ahead, so please be well planned," he says.

Risks of Covid detection in overseas ports have caused significant delays in the past year, in one case putting a three-month hold on delivery.

As a result, he is urging farmers, velvet buyers and packhouses

to minimise time between harvest and exporting product, to help compensate for any delays that may occur further down the supply chain.

"This time next year we hope to have a very different logistics story to tell, but there will be a few headaches between now and then."

He is also heartened by the continuing reduction in tariff charges on velvet to South Korea still flowing through.

"From 1 January 2022, the tariff rate goes to 9.3 percent, compared with the 20 percent tariff imposed on competitors."

This season also marks the inauguration of VelTrak, the velvet identification and tracing programme that ensures transparency throughout the supply chain.

"Buyers have all been trained and we are just seeking a bit of patience for those first pickups around the country as people get used to the technology." ■

Updated NZDFA contact list

Executive Committee

John Somerville (Chair)

Arawata Deer Farm
Pine Bush
RD 1, Wyndham 9891
03 246 9803/027 447 5437
johnandmelsomerville@gmail.com

Mark McCoard

Sunny Hollow
Kawhatau Valley Road
RD 7, Mangaweka
021 848 335/06 382 5582
m.mccoard@hotmail.com

Justin Stevens

Marldene Estate
20 Marldene Avenue
Seddon 7210
027 403 7131/03 575 7180
jrstevens@actrix.co.nz

Karen Middelberg

Jedburgh Farm
PO Box 503
Waipukurau 4242
027 518 5442
karen@clovellyfarm.co.nz

North Island Chairs

Northland (in recess)

Richard Broughton
puruadeer@xtra.co.nz
Ph: 09 433 5702/027 220 9301

Kaipara

Ian Bristow
p9wood@xtra.co.nz
Ph: 09 420 2852/027 497 9876

Waikato (co-chairs)

Catherine Morrow
catherine@farmside.co.nz
Ph: 07 827 3787/027 272 3151
Barry Mackintosh
barrymack08@gmail.com
027 472 1974

Waipa

Leith Chick
leithchick@gmail.com
Ph: 07 872 5551/027 256 3551

Bay of Plenty

Ali Talbot
alicat.talbot@gmail.com
Ph: 027 594 4447

Poverty Bay

Tom Sanson
goldcreek@gisborne.net.nz
Ph: 06 863 1444/027 248 9098

Hawke's Bay

Evan Potter
waipapax@gmail.com
Ph: 06 835 0094/027 352 8874

Taranaki

Rex Cowley
r.cowley@xtra.co.nz
Ph: 06 755 2551/027 495 7729

Central Regions

Mike Humphrey
mickhumphrey@farmside.co.nz
Ph: 06 328 8860/021 886 065

Taihape Ruapehu

Sean de Lacy
kiwiboy72@hotmail.com
Ph: 027 778 1669

Wairarapa

Philip Gray
gray124@xtra.co.nz
Ph: 06 377 1422/027 474 0717

South Island Chairs

Nelson

Tony Peacock
tony.sarah@farmside.co.nz
Ph: 03 523 9544/027 429 6551

Marlborough

Jason Rentoul
wyejase@hotmail.co.nz
Ph: 03 572 2804/027 712 1064

Canterbury/West Coast

Stu Stokes
julie.stu@scorch.co.nz
021 2883633

South Canterbury/North Otago

Graham Peck
empeckfarms@gmail.com
Ph: 03 614 8006/021 022 18948

Otago

Richard Currie
richard@blackforest.co.nz
Ph: 03 205 8166/027 276 0664

Southland

Bruce Allan
grandviewdeer@gmail.com
Ph: 03 208 8091/027 824 5898

Society Chairs

Elk & Wapiti Society

Grant Hasse
elkwapitinz@gmail.com
Ph: 027 224 5542

NZ Fallow Deer Society (in recess)

Ian Bristow
p9wood@xtra.co.nz
Ph: 09 420 2852/027 497 9876

Selection and Appointments Panel

Paddy Boyd (Chairman)

Haldon Station, Fairlie
Ph: 03 680 6637

Donald Whyte

Mount Somers, Ashburton
Ph: 03 614 7131

Leith Chick

Te Awamutu, Waikato
Ph: 07 872 5551

Steve Borland

Oparau, Hamilton
Ph: 07 870 1363 ■

Provelco – proudly independent

PRODUCER-OWNED COOPERATIVE PROVELCO is proud to be playing an important role in New Zealand's deer velvet industry and helping keep velvet exports flowing through these challenging times.

Strengthening the path to market has long been the number one priority for Provelco, which was launched nearly 20 years ago by a group of deer farmers sharing a determination to act co-operatively.

Creating an independent producers' co-operative wasn't easy, says General Manager Ross Chambers. Its success owes much to the tenacity of leading deer farmers like James Guild, of High Peak Station, who were determined to build a marketing company that put farmers first.

"There was no welcome mat laid out for us; we had to start from scratch, earning respect through solid performance and tangible results," says Ross.

Today, Provelco is New Zealand's third-largest exporter of deer velvet and growth trends are positive.

"We're pleased with the progress we're making. Over the past six years our volume has grown by 25%. That's been no accident. A lot of hard work has gone into building our profile, our market connections and reputation for consistency and reliability; integrity is very important to us and of course it helps having a strong core group of supporters."



General Manager Ross Chambers outside Provelco's new coldstore.

The cooperative is entirely independent and since 2010 has operated from its Wigram base. The 2020/21 season saw an upgrade of the plant and the addition of a new coldstore.

Straddling the space between delivering consistently competitive returns and maintaining a reputation for quality with buyers is a balancing act. Rather than taking risks through spot selling, Provelco has fostered strong relationships with select

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Ross Moore 022 059 9005
Ross Dyer 027 433 3381
Daniel Jenkins 027 856 3854
Shaun Tauti 027 321 8455

Ross Chambers | General Manager

ross@provelco.co.nz
03 348 5080

www.provelco.co.nz

Next Generation stays farmside

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The emphasis for the 2021 NZDFA Next Generation programme was more about on-farm experience and less about the seminar/workshop format than in previous years. The two-day programme on 4–5 August was based in Queenstown and the weather played ball with two dry, cool days taking in four contrasting and impressive properties.

Fairlight Station

The 2,500-hectare hill and high country Fairlight Station is earning a reputation for supporting young people in farming. Not only was this the second time it's hosted a Next Generation visit, but this year it's also started The Fairlight Foundation. This programme, funded by owners Doug and Mari Harpur and initiated by managers and shareholders Simon and Lou Wright, is designed to help young women prepare for a career in agriculture.

The first intake of three was selected at the end of last year and are now well through their one-year internship. They cover a broad curriculum including deer, sheep, beef, goats and forestry, integrating on-farm practical skills with study towards NZQA-recognised certificate or diploma qualifications.

The programme is facilitated by executive director Laura Koot. The foundation chair is Emeritus Professor Peter Wilson, a familiar figure in the deer industry. The Harpurs, along with Simon and Lou Wright, are trustees.

For more on the Fairlight Foundation: <https://bit.ly/39R9WGg>



Simon Wright (right foreground) talks to the Next Generation group about the place of deer at Fairlight Station.

The Fairlight banner covers two properties, Fairlight Station at Kingston and Forest Creek Station in Canterbury's Rangitata Gorge. Each runs a mix of sheep, beef and deer.

Unfortunately the tracks were too wet to get up onto the hill overlooking Fairlight but there was still plenty to see and talk about on the flat.

Simon Wright explained that genetic improvement has played a big part in the deer strategy at Fairlight since he and Lou arrived

Fairlight Station facts

Hill and high country	2,000 hectares
Arable	500 hectares
Winter crop	150 hectares, plus 80ha lucerne
Total staff (2 properties)	10, plus 3 Foundation interns (6 at Fairlight Station)
Stock units: Fairlight	18,000
Stock units: Forest Creek	18,000
Deer: Fairlight	2,300 red hinds and progeny including elite venison breeding programme; surplus stags sold
Deer: Forest Creek	550 velvetting stags
Hind scanning %	MA: 97–98%; R2: 92–93%
Deer survival to sale/keep	90–92% of scanned hinds

in 2003. They bought the best deer they could, making good use of Deer Improvement genetics.

He said the 8,000 deer stock units carried take a big share of total stock units, but they fit well with the other classes. For example the velvetting stags at Forest Creek Station in Canterbury occupy land over 500 metres and suit the environment there well.

At Fairlight an important rule is to feed young stock well through winter and that shows in the good growth rates they achieve. The smallest 150 weaners are wintered in sheds from late May to late September on lucerne baleage, where they stack on 50g/day more than their outdoors herdmates.

Provelco: continued

customers year in, year out. "All our customers are important, but with New Zealand's export tonnage increasing we need to work smarter to maximise the opportunities to sell deer velvet as a high-quality ingredient to health food manufacturers. To do that, we have to be achieving a premium price by developing premium specifications."

The steady opening up of China has contributed strongly to the market for New Zealand deer velvet but there is much more to do. "We have entered into a unique situation, working with two competitors to participate in the China Velvet Coalition (CVC). We're very pleased to be part of this initiative."

Provelco is proud of its independent status and ongoing commitment to offering a valuable farmer owned and governed option for New Zealand's deer velvet producers. ■



Housed weaners doing well at Fairlight. The deer are well sheltered and kept in square pens, which reduces stress and bullying.

They are hoping to reduce the total area in winter crops to help shrink their environmental footprint. Simon Wright explained that crops are often mainly just a step in the pasture renewal programme, but that might involve more grass-to-grass in future without a crop in between.

They prefer straight reds with good growth BVs rather than using elk/wapiti terminals, and still manage a respectable 6kg advantage over industry average carcass weights.

Wright said they have been working on conception date breeding values and cull any late fawners. Stags join in late February and are out by 20 April, but he added that feed is the key issue with getting hinds in fawn early. The first fawns are usually on the ground by mid to late October.

AgResearch's David Stevens chipped in with the advice that palm kernel can be a good balanced utility feed for weaners that has the bonus of added copper.

The stag fawns at Fairlight are kept in mobs of 600–700. Wright said they need shifting reasonably frequently as they're fussy eaters, not wanting dirty feed. Rotation length is usually 18–21 days with cattle cleaning up after them.

He said lungworm is the main animal health challenge for youngstock on pasture in autumn. Those in the shed aren't as susceptible. By using a low-stress weaning process, the risk of yersinia was reduced so vaccination is generally not used.

They also make good use of DeerPRO production data and

Simon shared data showing the carcass weights for young deer were tracking well above the industry average over the past five seasons. They are also tracking favourably in terms of kill date and growth rates.

Johne's disease has been an issue at times and they test strategically. Infection rates had been up to 2 percent but were currently very low as reported through DeerPRO. Aggressive culling for JD is a priority.

Eyre Creek Station, Pāmu

Ryan Thomson has been manager at Pāmu's Eyre Creek Station for four years after working at Thornicroft Station. He hosted the Next Generation visitors on an extensive tour of the 1,570-hectare property near Athol, in northern Southland.

The 2,000 red deer make up 70 percent of the stock units at Eyre Creek, with 2,300 Perendale cross ewes and 280 Angus cows accounting for the rest. For the deer it's mainly a breeding operation with only a few finished on the farm. Most of the weaners go to Pāmu's Otago farms such as Hindon and Dawson Downs. They're allowed to settle for 10 days or so after weaning, before they shift to their finishing farms. All are yersiniavaxed as per company policy.

The first fawners are pre-rut weaned to allow space to put condition on the hinds and get the generally smaller progeny up to speed. The mixed age hinds are either pre-rut or post-rut weaned depending on the season – there's no hard and fast rule. Fawns are habituated to grain fed in Advantage feeders, starting in January.



It'll cost *how much*? Pāmu South Island business manager Tim Lissaman (left) and Eyre Creek Station manager Ryan Thomson share a joke about budgets.

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FAIRLIGHT STATION

12th Annual Sire Stag Sale

Wednesday December 8th, 11am

Inspection welcome

- High growth rate venison stags
- 12mth BV +22–30
- Commercial spiker (over 800) averaging >64kg CW pre-Christmas
- Breed emphasis on temperament, growth, conformation & CARLA
- Johne's tested

Manager: Simon Wright 027 289 5054 • PGG Wrightson: Ben Beadle 027 728 1052

Next Generation: continued

Thomson said all but about 350 hectares is deer fenced. There's 380 hectares of improved hill country and 260 hectares of flats with the balance largely unimproved hill. Some of this has been oversown and there has been some fertiliser use also.

He said the stock policy has been variable over the years with up to 4,000 deer there at times. The cattle were a pasture improvement tool, year round, and apart from some young stock they never got to set foot in crop.

Fodder beet and kale are winter staples for the deer on the flatter country. Thomson explained that a lot of rough tag results from set stocking hinds for fawning on the higher country, but that sustains them through the following winter. After fawning, the hinds and fawns are gently brought down to the better country a paddock at a time, letting them come down at their own pace. Once all the lambs are gone, about 70 percent of the deer come down.

Eyre Creek Station sources its sire stags from within Pāmu, usually buying in 10 or 11 new sires each year. They're aiming for high-BV sires with a goal of getting 15-month replacement hinds to 102kg by 1 March. Their reproductive performance is pretty good in this deer-friendly environment. First-fawners regularly scan 92 percent and have got up to 95 percent.

There's been ongoing development at Eyre Creek and Pāmu



Looking down from the hill country to the flats and Eyre Creek catchment. The station is well suited to deer.

South Island business manager Tim Lissaman, who was also attending, said every project is considered case by case. Some of the bigger hill paddocks will be subdivided to allow better scope for grazing management and water infrastructure is also being progressively upgraded. Lissaman said environmental constraints rule out deer on some properties, "but here they do well".

Environmental issues also constrain pasture and crop development. With narrower scope for crops they aim for high-yielding varieties. Herbs can't be grown because of the spraying that's needed for thistle control. (HT swedes are a "no brainer" for this environment.) Wilding turnips are another nuisance weed. Renewed pasture is generally a ryegrass/cocksfoot/white clover mix and direct drilling is used wherever possible.

The Eyre Creek catchment provides most of the stock water, much of which is pumped up to header tanks. It's a small catchment – only 3.1km including tributaries – and is one of 10 catchments throughout New Zealand being monitored for AgResearch's hill and high country environmental monitoring project.

It's a very seasonal stream, with flows ranging from 2,800m³/day in spring to 50m³/day in autumn. AgResearch reports that monitoring in the catchment so far shows no recurring water quality issues despite heavy animal presence. Measurements indicate "a healthy stream with a good macroinvertebrate community population". There is also evidence of the rare native fish *Gollum galaxias* in the waterway.

Remarkables Station – a conservation oasis

The spectacular scenery quotient was cranked up a few notches on day two of the Next Generation tour, with a visit to the extraordinary Remarkables Station.

The property is highly visible from Queenstown and the highway as it skirts Lake Wakatipu. It's also been prominent in the public arena in recent times when it was announced that the Jardine family would be gifting all but 130 hectares of Remarkables Station to the QEII National Trust.

The transfer of about 900 hectares takes place midway through next year, exactly 100 years after the family first bought the property. Most of the land cared for by the QEII National Trust around New Zealand remains in private ownership but land use is



Annual 2yr sire stag sale Wednesday 8 December 1:30pm at 37 Pukenua Rd, Taihape

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covenanted. Gifting of a property to the trust, as Dick and Jillian Jardine have done, is rare.

Although the trust will take ownership of Remarkables Station, it will continue in the medium term to operate as a deer, sheep and beef enterprise. It's currently leased by David and Pam Nind's East Dome Farms operation, which comprises four properties, three running deer: East Dome, Bixter Road, Garston (sheep and beef only) and Remarkables Station.

The total business runs 3,300 hinds, with all deer finished at



From left: David Nind, who currently leases Remarkables Station, Mandy Bell, Dick Jardine, Remarkables Station manager Matt Little and QEII National Trust Otago representative, Rob Wardle.

the 270-hectare Bixter Road property. Manager at Remarkables Station is Matt Little. He explained that of the 1,400 red hinds on the property, 600 each are mated to elk/wapiti terminal sires and red maternal sires, with 200 going to retained spikers. Twelve hundred hinds are wintered on two feed pads.

QEII National Trust Otago regional representative Rob



Morning crew: Next Generation participants enjoying the spectacular scenery at Remarkables Station.

Wardle told the group that the trust, set up by Gordon and Celia Stephenson in 1977, now helps landowners to care for over 4,700 individual covenants nationwide. They include every type of land use including vineyards, lifestyle blocks and Crown pastoral leases. Collectively they add up to about 180,000 hectares, which is bigger than all but four of our 14 National Parks.

The covenants are often in the midst of productive farmland which is where a lot of species are under threat.

He said the area around Queenstown Lakes had been a bit of a desert for QEII National Trust covenants, making the Remarkables Station covenant even more significant. That was changing however and the number of covenants in Central Otago had increased from 17 to 60 in the past seven years, putting pressure on the trust's resources.

Wardle said the Central Otago landscape was hugely variable, with rainfall in the covenants ranging from an arid 300mm up to 3000mm in the western part of the region. Covenants are visited

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How widespread is this deformity?

DINZ AND AGRESEARCH have a learning phase project underway looking at a condition known as angular limb deformity syndrome. It is being led by Samantha Edgar, a veterinarian from Northern Southland Vets who has a special interest in deer. She is a member of the NZVA Deer branch committee and is on the DINZ research on-farm innovation steering group.

The syndrome occurs in spikers, and generally develops during summer when the animal is around 12 months of age. The front limbs at the carpus (knee), become bowed or take on a knock-kneed appearance. The two presentations are shown in the photo.

In the early stages, the animal may be lame, with the severity of the defect often getting worse over time. The condition can occur in both wapiti and red deer, and on venison and velvet farms.

"We would like to better understand the impact of the disease, from both welfare and economic points of view, and gauge its prevalence on New Zealand farms," Edgar says.

If you have seen this condition (any year) please email

samantha@nsvets.co.nz or phone her on 027 432 1045. All information and material collected will be treated in strict confidence. ■



Next Generation: continued

every two years and the trust operates a contestable fund to help pay for conservation work. Fencing establishment costs for new covenants are shared with landowners while the trust covers the full cost of survey.

The area around Queenstown Lakes was under a lot of pressure from urbanisation, making the Jardines' gift even more significant, Wardle said.

He said it's important that a farm like this is well managed and "Remarkables Station certainly is". There were some immediate challenges from exotic pest weeds such as sycamores, broom, buddleia and wilding pines but the trust was also commissioning a 50-year strategy for the station from AbacusBio and e3 Scientific.

The property is a very big acquisition for the trust and for the time being the farming operation will be needed to maintain an income. Longer term there could be scope for other income streams such as from carbon farming, Wardle said. For natural regeneration to store carbon, the sequence might be bracken to lemonwood and cabbage trees and eventually native beech and/or mountain totara.

Johne's battle recounted

Mandy Bell, who farms nearby at Criffel Station and was instrumental in the setting up of Johne's Management Ltd (now DeerPRO), talked to the group about her own challenges with



Solis Norton gets to know a local at Deer Park Heights.

Johne's disease (JD) in deer at her farm. Setting up a deer operation at Criffel Station 20 years ago they bought in about 2,000 hinds and – unfortunately – JD came with some of them.

"We were aware of JD but there was no test and the epidemiology wasn't well understood. We rejected any tailenders and skinny looking hinds but we still got caught out with a couple of animals and saw a rise in JD."

Bell, a veterinarian, started to get on top of JD on her own place but also helped out the Jardines, who were suffering big JD losses – 13 percent of their weaners at one point, with about 2 percent of the mixed age hinds infected.

"And using the Paralisa test we found 17.5 percent of the Jardines' R2s had JD as well," Bell said. "That's about 30 percent of the herd affected." It was a big problem.

She said the logistical challenge of finding and culling such a large proportion of the stock was huge, not to mention the financial impact and emotional toll on the people. But they went "hard and early" and by sticking to a programme of testing and culling, the incidence of JD in weaners was cut from 13 percent to 2 percent in just three years. "Teamwork and sticking to the plan did the job."

It took a big commitment amongst all the other stock work but by looking holistically at the environment, people, animals and the science, the plan worked. Bell said it would have been tempting to only cull the clinical cases, but they also removed the subclinical ones and that made the difference. "There were 10 subclinical animals for every clinical case."

A six-year control programme up to 2013 saw JD in yearlings drop to just 1–2 percent. David Nind has since taken over the herd and the legacy of that work has been so effective that the disease is rarely seen at all now. The bugs that cause JD are always there of course, but Bell said reducing stress meant that the disease was kept at bay. Animal health improvements like this have been rewarded at Remarkables Station. The carcass weights of progeny went up by 6kg over eight years, with average kill dates brought forward by over three months.

David Nind said the good management of JD at the station is what attracted him to it as a reliable source of healthy weaners.

DeerPRO manager Solis Norton, who was taking part, said it's important to keep an eye out for any "ratty" looking hinds. "Weed them out. They're the big shedders onto pasture and a key risk to young stock."

Benchmarked production and Johne's disease info on your deer

Season	Carcass weight
2013	52
2014	53
2015	55
2016	51
2017	60
2018	59
2019	61
2020	62
2021	63

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Deer Park Heights

Final stop on the four-farm Next Generation tour was Deer Park Heights. The main block of 600 hectares is on Peninsula Hill, Kelvin Heights, overlooking Queenstown. It gives the livestock and many tourist visitors a stunning perspective over the lake and town. The property has been owned by the Mee family since the 1960s.

It's been a popular location for movie makers over the years, providing a backdrop for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and others. As well as the farmed deer there's a big range of other animals wandering the farm, including tahr, fallow deer, miniature horses, donkeys, pigs, llamas, alpacas and goats, all a drawcard for the many visitors who self-drive around the property. It was closed to visitors in 2009, but reopened last year to cars of seven seats or less, with a streamlined online booking system providing access codes for visitors on specific days.

But this is not just for the tourists – it's a busy and successful working farm that has been running deer behind fences since 1966.

Today there's 800 hectares deer fenced (including a separate block under the Remarkables) with 800 red hinds and 100 Eastern/English R2 replacements. The area farmed also includes 50 hectares of k-line irrigated flats. Eight Eastern stags are put across some hinds for replacements and 20 elk/wapiti bulls are used over about 500 hinds as terminal sires. They've been getting good scanning percentages in the high 90s. Average carcass weight is 56kg.

The deer are complemented by 100 Angus x Hereford cows and 100 sheep. Development continues, with plans for more deer fencing and a water scheme, with a big push to control broom and gorse.

Crops of choice are fodder beet, kale/swedes and turnips with some ryecorn also grown. The farm produces 550 bales of baleage each year.

Manager John Blair hosted the visitors. He said the cow and hind numbers are due to be increased and the elk/wapiti terminals are being phased out in favour of an English/Eastern cross.

Proximity to Queenstown didn't really cause any problems he said, although he did give one lone visitor who was camping unseen under a rock shelter the fright of his life when he was



Deer Park Heights manager John Blair (inset) and hinds enjoying the view.

culling some goats. "We didn't know he was there. He took off very smartly."

Even the frequent sounds of helicopters coming in and out of the airport didn't bother the deer, which had become used to them, although they are still used to muster deer off the steeper blocks. ■



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