

Strip grazing for "even better"

Deer management at 'Wharerata' in the Wairarapa

WHEN A SMALL group of people, who had the temerity to call themselves deer farmers, got together in Christchurch back in 1975, Michael and Margaret Atkinson were there. Among those founder members, with their herds of 20 or 30 or perhaps even 100 deer, the Atkinson's felt a little out of place. They had one.

Today there are over 400 deer on the 110 acres fenced for deer on 'Wharerata', the farm which Michael and his sons Stewart and Ian, run in the south Wairarapa. There are bigger farms, and farms with fancier yards, and farms with more expensive deer. There is perhaps nothing very special about 'Wharerata'; in fact it's a perfect example of a typical, efficient New Zealand deer farm.

In June, 1978, one of Tim Wallis' capture crews came up to the Wairarapa from the south, and started to pick up deer that lived among the willows along the eastern shore of Lake Wairarapa. Within a few days, they had brought in 47 new deer to Michael Atkinson's farm. Since then, deer have been captured from other parts of the Wairarapa, more particularly from the coastal hills on the eastern side of the Haurangi Forest. The only other introductions were 16 stags from Gordon Branson's.

Those first deer from around the lake edge were the biggest, and the best in terms of temperament, and that characteristic is still evident in their progeny. In fact, temperament, which Michael considers so important, seems to vary with the different strains and it's something he is selecting for.

In the first year, fawning rate among captured deer was only 60 per cent, but once hinds have been on the farm for a year the rate goes up to 85 or 90 per cent, depending on the season. The fawns are brought into the yards at about six weeks, are tagged, and then observed when they're let out so that tag numbers of dam and progeny can be recorded. Over the next few days the hind-fawn pairings are checked out.

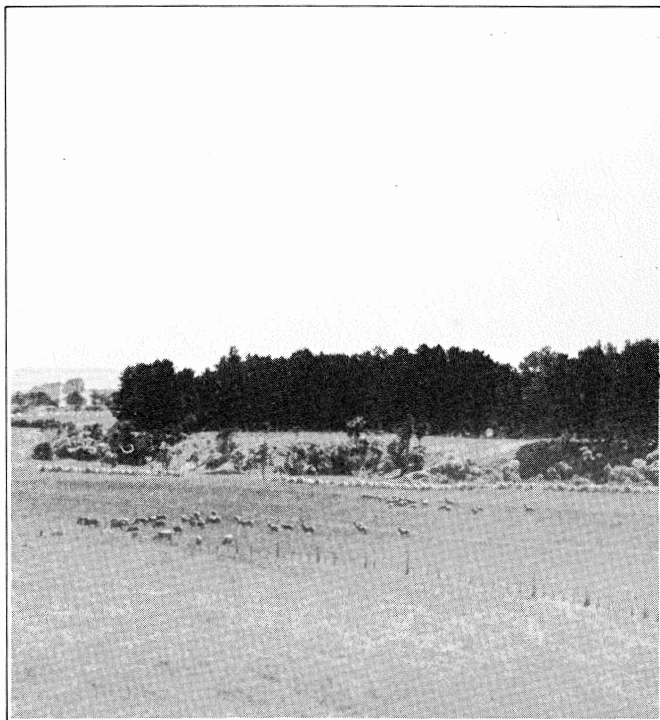
One year the fawns were left on the hinds, another they were weaned before the roar, and a third year they were weaned after mating. Out of that experience, Michael has come to the conclusion that although there are some benefits in leaving them on the hinds, they become much tamer and easier to handle if they're weaned early. And weaning before the roar is best if there is good feed about. If grass is in short supply in autumn, however, Michael may leave the fawns on until after mat-

ing, giving both hinds and fawns a good supplement.

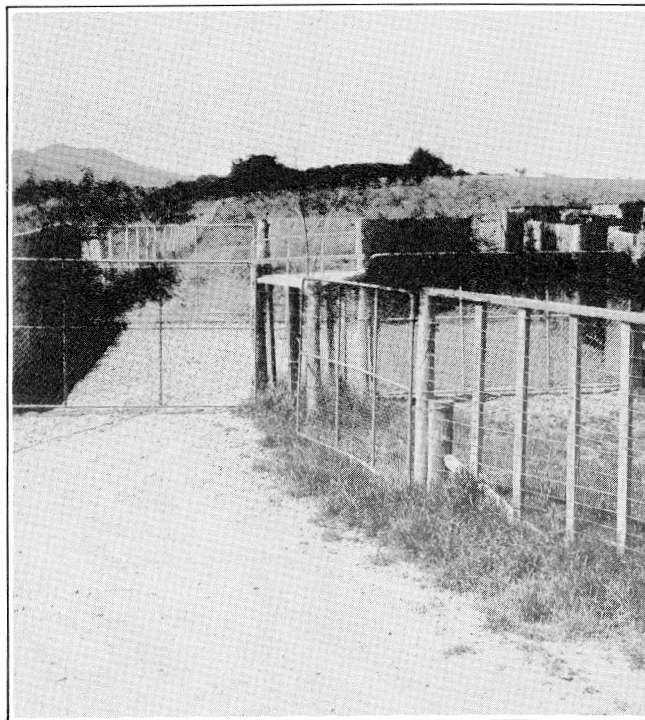
One of the problems at fawning time in the past has been that the pastures get away from the hinds and become rank. As an experienced sheep farmer, Michael knew that pasture management systems being urged by people such as Ken Drew and Kerry Giles, made sense. He'd strip-grazed pasture during the winter in an effort to cut back on supplementary feed – wind-fall apples and nuts mainly – and found it successful. A battery-powered unit and three electric wires seemed to work perfectly well, even if there was always one or two in each mob who had to be on the other side of the fence.

This summer, as soon as all the fawns are born, the hinds will go on to strip-grazing, and in this way Michael hopes to lift the carrying capacity of the farm, his fawning rate and the weight-gain of stags, even further. "We've done reasonably well so far, but," says Michael, "it's time we were looking at ways of doing even better."

There's a possible side benefit from this grazing system. When captured deer first arrive on the place, Michael mouths them all and invariably finds they have good teeth. Yet within a



Part of the herd of Reds on 'Wharerata' on the easy-sloping land running down to Lake Wairarapa in the haze.



Yards at 'Wharerata' are centrally placed to provide road access and lane access from all paddocks.