

SAYING WHAT HE BELIEVES & BELIEVING WHAT HE SAYS

The story of the straightest talker of them all



◁ **Bob Swann holds a Big Dad antler**
At just under 7 kg at 16 years old, he's the "Daddy of them all".

Deer — the pot of gold that helped Bob Swann buy land for his family
Bob was determined to farm deer whether it was legal or not, in order to make the best use of his land.

THE PIONEERS

SAYING WHAT HE BELIEVES & BELIEVING WHAT HE SAYS

The story of the straightest talker of them all

by Bill Knight

LET'S GO and visit Bob Swann, Glenfiddich Deer Farm, Sherwood Downs, RD 17, Fairlie.

Actually, Bob is such a family man, his name shouldn't be mentioned without also referring to his wife Frances, and the other family members named on his business card — Ian and Corrine, Peter, Robert, and Christine. He got started in deer in 1973, but unlike many others, instead of building up a big herd, he took advantage of the high demand for deer to cash in on live sales and buy land; driven by a desire to help his three sons, who all wanted to be farmers as well.

Now, the Swann properties are very much a family affair, covering close to 2000 ha. The Glenfiddich block makes up 1297 ha of that. Ian has Glenburie, there is 77 ha under the name of Sherwood Park, and Bob has "a 44 ha farm at Geraldine as my retirement block."

So here we are: We've found the end of the road, and we're surrounded by Land Rovers, trucks, feed hoppers, implement sheds, haybarns, welding gear, tractors, farm bikes, people and dogs. Despite that, it's tidy and everything looks well-maintained. It's a coldish overcast day, with the mist well down on the back of Mt Peel way across the valley. And up behind Glenfiddich, the high country is also shrouded.

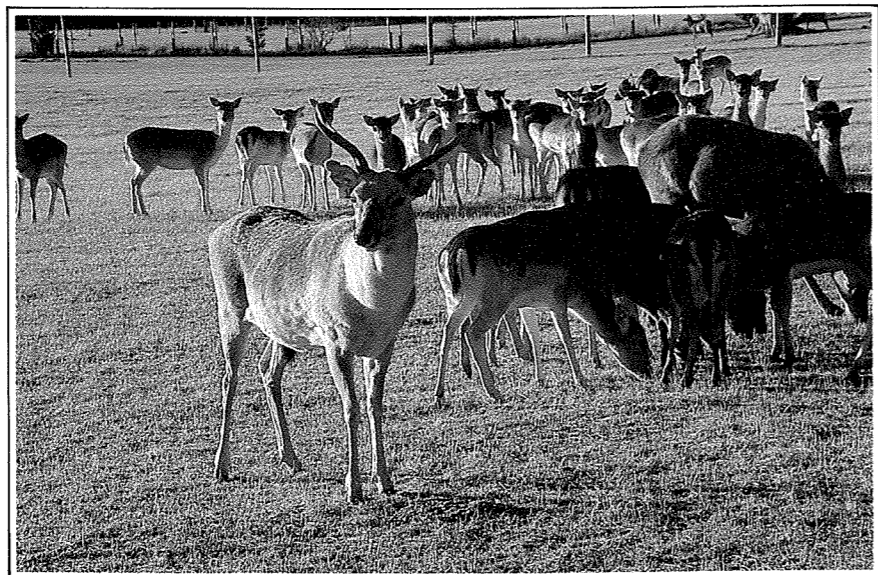
Introductions are made, and the trick is to memorise lots of new names which all end in Swann . . . except one, which belongs to a man with a cheery face and a Welsh accent. His name is Steve MacIntosh (mostly called Tosh) and he is here for a year's 'practical' as part of his degree studies. "I couldn't have struck it better," he says, referring to the range of experience he's getting with the Swanns — including deer, cattle and sheep.

The day's work is well under way, and Tosh and Robert are about to take a truck and deer crate to the yards down the back where some weaners are waiting to be drafted. Bob and I go ahead in a Land Rover, with a round bale on the back. The track is wide, grassy, and rough; it's a paper road of sorts which provides hunters with access to the high country behind Glenfiddich.

We'll be feeding out to the cattle up ahead, and Bob Swann says he winters about 200 of those. They keep the



Robert Swann and Steve MacIntosh working in the Glenfiddich yards
'Tosh' says he couldn't have struck it better.



Opel, Bob Swann's Mesopotamian Fallow buck
Bought to preserve the breed and "to add weight to NZ Fallow".

tracks and country open, as part of his general grazing programme which includes 7000 sheep (blade shorn every year) and 800 deer — including a velveted herd of 250.

The radio-telephone crackles and a voice from the truck behind says "Hey Dad, that bale's going to come off. We'd better stop and tie it down." The stop — I notice — gives Robert and Tosh a chance to get in front, and a half mile later, we see them stop well

ahead and emerge from the cab, loading and cocking shotguns as they crouch-walk to a fence. The season is almost over, and the mallards in the dam down the bank have a sixth sense by now. Fifty ducks scatter. Fortynine make it. Robert retrieves his duck, while Tosh looks somewhat ruefully after the departing flock, the whistle of their flight fading in the distance, and says he reckons he's got the shotgun with the faulty firing pin. "I know," says Robert, sort of smiling.

Bob Swann is a Life Member of the New Zealand Deer Farmers Association, having spent 11 years on its council. He has a reputation for controversial statement and straight talking, saying what he thinks, and believing what he says.

Try this one for size: "If you wanted to be provocative, you could ask me 'have you benefited from any research that has been done on deer in New Zealand?' . . . and the answer is, No, to my knowledge, I haven't. What knowledge they (the researchers) put out, they got from us (pioneer deer farmers) anyway."

We're standing alongside the deer yards now. They're made of grey and brittle tanalised pine to match the grey and brittle day. (Several cold-weather farmers have expressed concern that pine may not last too long, despite tanalising, because it dries out so much that it warps and cracks and breaks very very easily).

Glenfiddich is cold high country, and some of it is sour, wet and unproductive. Swann says he saw that as a challenge when he bought the place, and at the same time, he was determined to farm deer anyway, whether it was legal or not, so he could make the best possible use of his land.

Legalised farming came along, and he secured live capture rights to a big local area, and his herd retains the best of those Rakaia Red deer bloodlines. For three consecutive years he won the National Velvet Competition in Invercargill and today his Big Dad stag and its progeny have become something of a legend.

But Swann has definite views on breeding programmes, and he doesn't like the way so much emphasis is being put on improving weight-gain characteristics:

"It concerns me, because we are running down the same path as the sheep and cattle men. They went in going for quick growth rates at the expense of muscle and bone.

"Consequently we're running into an over-fat problem. It's alright in the juvenile males because you're selling them, but what's happening with the females is that they're being bred over and bred over and in five generations down the track you've got a short little dumpy Southdown-type deer."

He's emphatic about that, and equally emphatic that his breeding programme is based not on weight, but on bloodlines "which have a proven ability to produce antler and velvet.

"I argue like hell with Invermay; they love arguing with me. But in pushing

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their hybrids, they will not tell me exactly how much it cost to get that size feedwise; I say that size never gets sucked out of the air." He points to his throat. "It's gotta go down here hasn't it? It's gotta go down the throat."

In his view, some basic research that MAF should be doing is comparative trials using Wapiti, Red deer, and Fallow deer. He says they should be compared on one-acre paddocks, simply to establish which breed has the best weight-gain per acre.

And he's sceptical about claims of potential genetic gains through stud breeding (be it cattle or otherwise): "They were hoping to get stags as big as bulls and bulls as big as elephants, but they haven't."

We take a break while he helps Robert, Tosh, and Peter with the drafting, and once that's over, Tosh joins us and we feed out to the cattle. But the talk is all about deer, and Swann extols more of their virtues as ideal animals for his tough country. Aside from hay, he feeds out a special brew of pellets in the winter, and the deer know full well when tucker is on the way. "We give them about a pound of grain a day, and not unlimited hay, but the moment a deer doesn't fall all over you in the winter, you know a storm is coming. They tighten up (their metabolism)."

What is your actual breeding philosophy? "I haven't changed or deviated one inch from centre on endeavouring to produce outstanding sire stags for velvet and trophy potential."

Trophy potential? Yes — Swann was always a keen hunter and lover of the back country. He has put his expertise into breeding trophy stags for a specialist safari market.

Bob Swann has travelled overseas extensively to study, appraise, buy and import deer for himself and other breeders. At present, he's planning to import a Maral stag from Turkey; he says it is a purebred cross between Red deer and Elk.

His first overseas trip was as part of a delegation which went through Russia, West Germany and Poland. He stayed on and visited Britain and Denmark, and was most impressed with the Danish stags. "Of all the deer I've looked at in Europe, the Danish stuff are going to have more to offer this industry."

He runs through a list of their attributes: Conformation ("size-wise, bloody good"), temperament ("above average"), velvet ("short thick beams,

what these Koreans want"). On his own property, he has pure-breds, half-breds, and a special White herd as well. Swann loves deer. Even Fallow deer . . . which he adamantly maintains he was once misquoted about.

The way to get him going on that, is to say: "You've been known to say that Fallow deer are no bloody good." Try it. He'll react in a flash. "I haven't been known to say that . . . I've been misquoted . . . but I haven't changed my mind. They're difficult to handle; their velvet at that stage was virtually unsaleable; and they had the habit of dying for no reason at all. That was virtually the three things I did say; and it is still fair comment . . ."

Swann should know. He has a Fallow herd of his own — and once you learn that, it puts the whole thing in a different perspective. His objective is to try and save the Mesopotamian Fallow from extinction, and he has imported a grand Mesopotamian buck for that purpose.

He gives you some history. "Contrary to what people will tell you, Fallow deer throughout the world are all the same. They're not like your Red deer where you've got your Danish style, or your Hungarian or Yugoslav which are all sub-species.

"There is only one sub-species of Fallow deer and that's the Mesopotamian. The rest are all Dama dama throughout the world; and the Mesopotamian I consider have the ability to put that 15 per cent more weight on to every Fallow deer in New Zealand."

That, he believes, will improve returns to farmers, especially he says since it costs as much to process a 23 kg Fallow as it does to process a 70 kg Red deer.

Swann imported his Mesopotamian stag from Opel zoo in Germany. It cost something over \$50,000. The breed's natural home range is in Iran, but he says they're dying of starvation in the war zone, and there are less than 200 of them in the world.

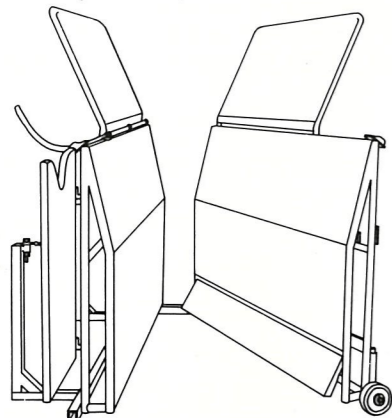
He called his stag Opel; it's three and a half years old, and aside from his belief that it can improve weights in the Fallow herd over-all, he says its antler construction is more rounded than the traditional Fallow, so it has the potential to give better velvet.

As well as his South Island Fallow herd, Swann has another buck at Ruakura, and sent 10 does up there this season. He says he is running a commercial herd "just to get our money back, that's all," after getting involved in the Mesopotamian preservation scheme. ▶

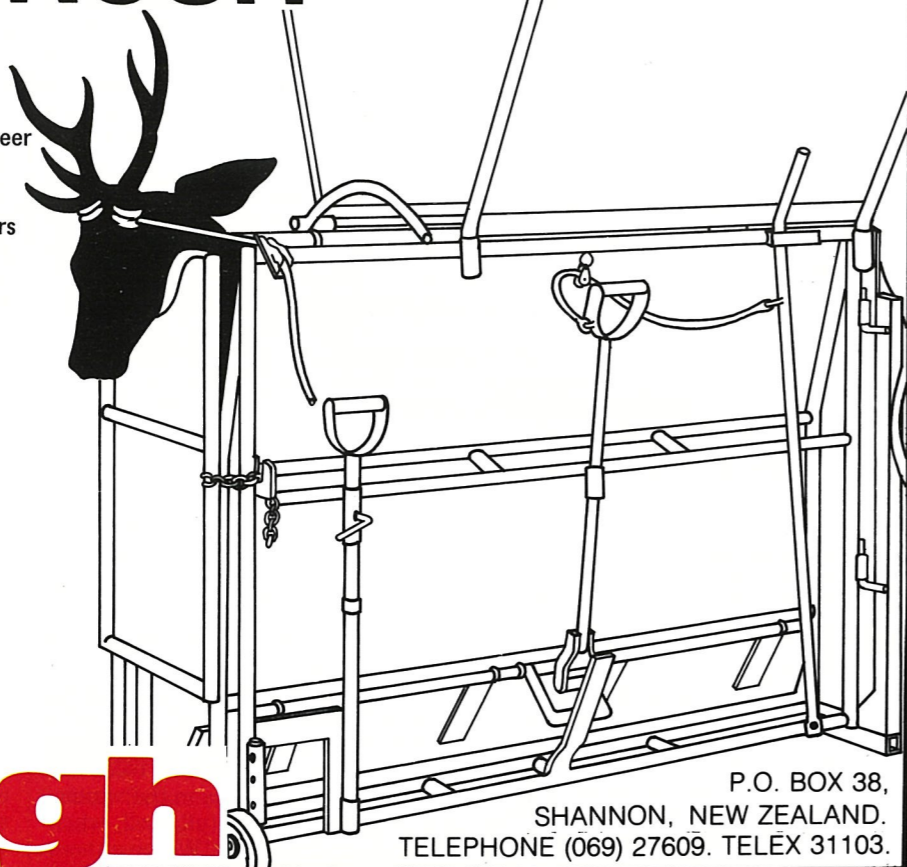
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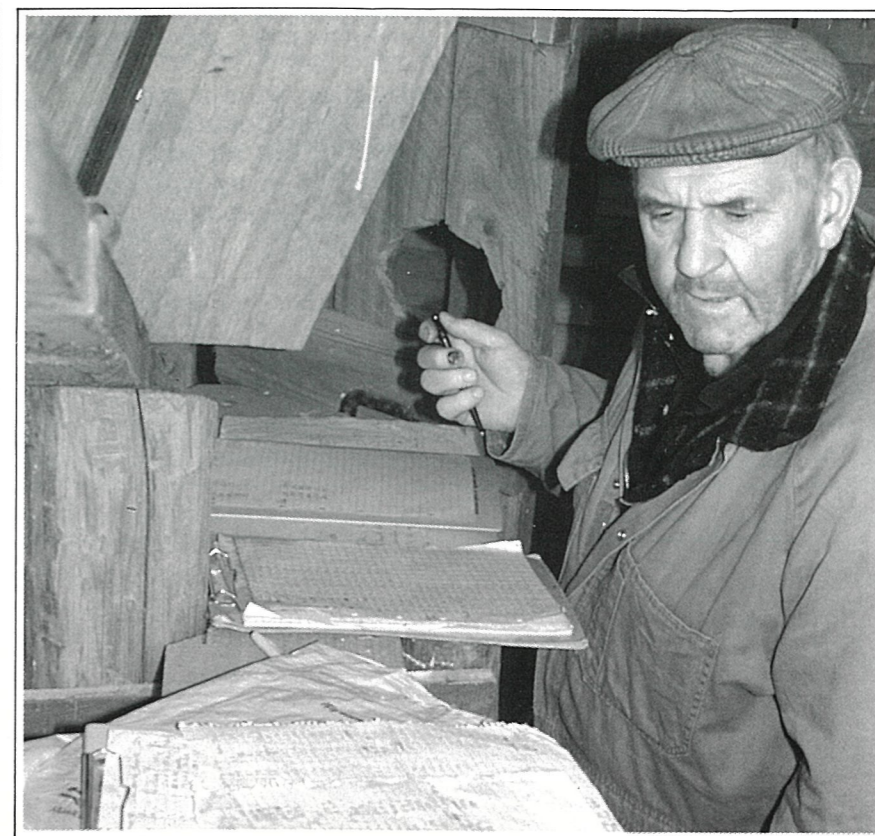
▷ When you've learned all this, you start thinking it's no wonder that he reacted like you'd stood on his foot when you mentioned that bit of old history. Yet he still says Fallow are hopeless to handle, and in case you retain even a shred of a doubt about that, he looks you in the eye and says "Okay, we'll run them in today and you can have a go at handling the little bastards." "Na. Na nah . . ." you hear yourself say. Subject closed.

Bob and Frances Swann have about 4000 bricks to clean up so they can build their retirement home. In the meantime, they live just down the road from Glenfiddich on one of their other blocks of land. This one too is fully fenced for deer, and he runs his White herd, Fallow, and other lines on this place. We went there for lunch, and as we took our boots off, the old pet dog wagged a greeting and got a friendly "Hullo Midget" from the Master.

Lunch was the best cold meat and pickle sandwiches in New Zealand — followed by the best fruit salad jam in the entire known universe (recipe gratefully received). As we left, a cat followed us, and the Master said "I used to have a cat that would come out shooting with me. It used to fetch the wounded rabbits out of the bushes."

We hop into another Land Rover and tour more of the property, through several of the 25 small herds that the total deer numbers have been broken into. The visitor is taking notes, aware that he is ignoring the tradition of being the one to open gates — but he thinks it's more important this time to get some of these Swannisms down on paper. "That last mob of hinds you saw there, 90 per cent of them are Big Dad's daughters. You've heard about Big Dad, haven't you? He is the daddy of them all. He won the velvet competition three years in a row, and turned around and cut 5.85 kg of velvet this year and he's at least 16 or 17 years old, so the genetics and longevity and velvet of that stag is just incredible; and he produces that short thick heavy-beam stuff." Swann has put his best Danish stag across Big Dad's daughters, and he's enthusiastic about their potential.

Big Dad was captured at a field day a long time ago. He didn't look too good and he was offered to a lot of potential buyers, including a busload of tourists, for \$800. Since he got him, Swann says, "that stag has made me; he's generating up to \$100,000 worth of business a year, and it'd be a big help if you'd open the gates."



Bob Swann and his 'computer'

Selecting sale deer on weight, but not his breeding animals: No way is Bob going in for quick growth rates at the expense of muscle and bone.

We make our way to the Glenfiddich yards, where Robert and Tosh are weighing and recording some weaners, after which they'll drench and tag them. To get pictures for the story, the intrepid writer (who once or twice milked some cows and herded sheep), steps fearlessly into the dusty shed. "We'll have to think about a sprinkler system," someone says).

After a few minutes in a small pen, you understand why smart farmers wear boots with toecaps. Weaner feet are rather sharp and gumboots aren't much protection; but you pretend it doesn't hurt at all and put on your thousand-yard stare as they trample on your toes.

Swann senior is armed with his portable computer — an exercise book full of figures — and he does some sums from which he determines which of these weaners need special tags so he can get a group of an average weight. It's too complicated for me . . .

He says too that while he expects great things from his Danish stags, "The New Zealand Red has more to offer than many people realise, and I'll never lose the Glenfiddich bloodline; it's a good one, Rakaia-based, caught

where you can see," he gestures to the hills and valleys. "There is only one outside bloodline in the base herd, and that's Warwick Gregory's. That says a lot; I've gone and paid big money to buy my own stags back again . . ."

Glenfiddich is pinning its future on selling animals with special bloodlines; it has its own velveting herd; but Swann sees no future for a venison herd on his country, because he can't get the growth rates that are needed. However, he knows that his animals can do well off the property, because he has followed the progress of sales made to the North Island, where some of his stock are performing among the best in their new herds.

Feeding out time comes round again. This afternoon it's a mixture of hay and the special Glenfiddich pellet.

On the road next morning, heading for Queenstown, I stop at the Fairlie museum. A restored stage coach, horse-drawn harrows and tedders, an aged well-used two-stand shearing plant . . . these and more speak of pioneers of another era; the people who opened up this country and laid the foundations of a lifestyle for those to follow.

It makes you think about people . . . like Bob and Frances Swann. □