

Invermay herd goes commercial at Orokonui

by Warwick Massey

PRIME MINISTERIAL tyre-marks on the driveway is not all that is new around Invermay. The big breed has been packed off down the road to an old psychiatric hospital.

The Wapiti and the Elk are settling-in on the Orokonui Block, 25 minutes away at Waitati where they are in the safe hands of Lands and Survey Block manager, Murray Johnston.

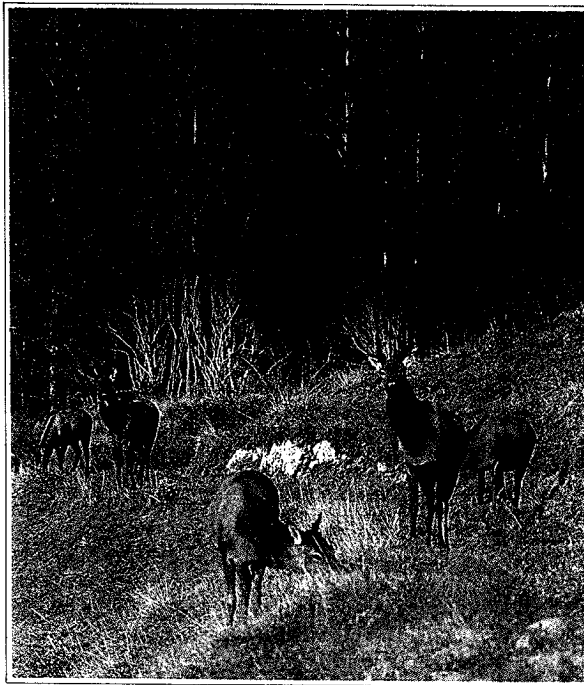
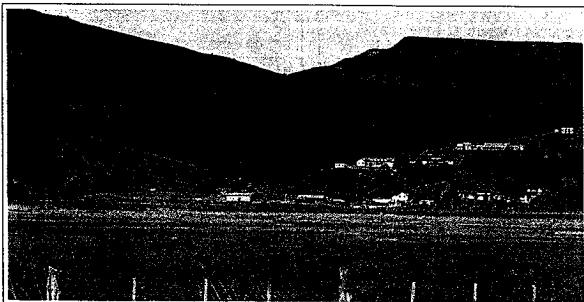
There is fine scenery and it is a kind, harbour site which has sprouted a Regnans eucalypt to 71.6 metres in 80 years, making it the tallest vegetable in the country. The 42 ha presently fenced are on the lower northern slope of the west-facing valley and climbing across the creek to 46 metres on over the open side of the valley. Within a year the entire 300 acres should be fenced, all of it to the south.

The Lands and Survey Department wants room to expand with the 60 part of its 60:40 offspring split. There is some discussion around using the animals as a national terminal sire herd for Lands and Survey deer farms. The department took over this unit of two former dairy farms in 1967. All the buildings are fenced off and leased out as residences — and there's a possibility of converting the old main building into a tourist-guest lodge.

The farm is at the end of the road and snuggled into trees. Extensive reserves protect the back. It is a site Invermay Elkresearcher Geoff Moore is well pleased with.

At present there is a considerable shaded proportion and the pastures will take some time to adjust to heavy traffic in the wet. But most paddocks have their established timber — sufficient to provide ideal high, open-fronted and warm shelter for calving, and prime sites for the efficient feeding of supplements high up on a strong, wooded ridge in the centre of the valley.

There is a good balance of well-watered flatlands with a generous public accessway along the creek to the prime Regnans stand in the back of the valley. The breeding cows have been in their territory since October 1984 and take no exception to the



Top: The Orokonui Block, at Waitati, new home to the Invermay Elk herd. The deer yard is on the left. Future development is out of picture to the right.
Lower: Pure Elk cows, like these from the Invermay herd, could have their role in the national herd as mothers of pure Elk velvet bulls, and as the source of terminal sire bulls of various degrees of purity.

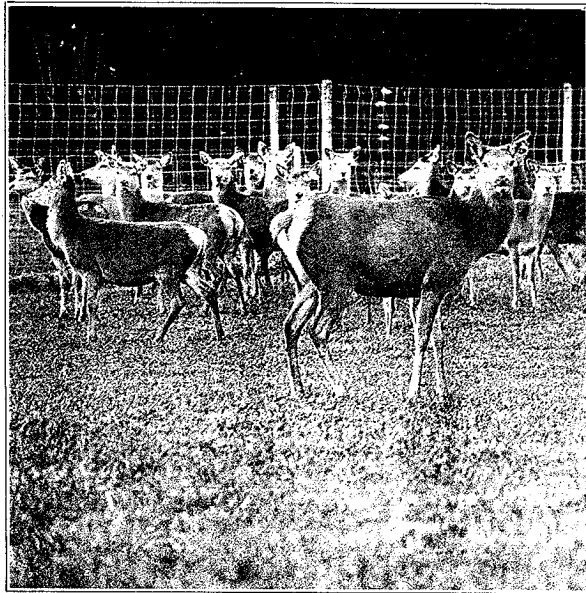
WAPITI

▷ foot traffic (130 on the biggest day). But unknown dogs are a different story and they provoke immediate excitement. Murray Johnston will consider restricting their access over calving.

The pure Canadian Elk herd, 12 adult females, 10 young and the seven sires arrived from Invermay in March. "There was the ryegrass staggers problem at Invermay," says Geoff Moore, "and this is a conducive environment to fit together a breeding programme".

Yards are a standard central pen pattern with overhead walkways and a modified (only for ease of needle access) Heenan crush. Murray Johnston has had no problems getting accustomed to the bigger animals after a lifetime following the sheep, and last season he velveted 20 using local anaesthetic in under three hours, and in 150 animals only needed to use Rompun three times. Animals invariably went to immediate graze in a slight apparent haze.

There is lifetime trial work with two cohorts of Red and Wapiti stags running on a grazing basis. But the real work is with the hinds. Captured Wapiti first produced 60 per cent calving in 1978 now they are on an upward trend at 90 to 95 per cent. The Canadian Elk x New Zealand Wapiti-type cows were down a bit this year due to weight loss at mating. Mating has been brought through to early March for the Reds through the use of a few induced hinds in a mob running with a stag to get the bull effect. They then have no problems producing good Red hind weights at 18 months with this month earlier calving — and no problems with the Wapiti stock either. Total average weight of the Wapiti bred hinds was 170 kg with the biggest at 210 kg and the Canadian Elks weighed in at 230-250.



Invermay's F1 hybrid, Canadian bull Elk over big, pure Red. Sociable animals and at 18 months, showing 'most impressive' growth rate.

This year Geoff put an early Red stag with the young Wapiti stock — the hefty yearlings, the two and some three year olds. Old 74, a foundation Fiordland bull, may be dead this winter, after 40 cows but his spirit lives on. The seven Elk that rule the range now are a strapping even line of 6-year and 7-year olds, a gift ex Elk Island of the Canadian people. The top among them was 330 kg after the roar, after being 360 in early February.

There will be an annual sale established as an outlet for Wapiti

and Elk-cross surplus stags. A lower cut will be venison. So the Invermay herd is now the Orokonui herd and the long-term velvet and venison advantages of the hybrid and its various back and forwards crosses can be evaluated over a stable long term future.

The only real disappointment is that The Deer Farmer doesn't run the lodge, so we could slip down occasionally just to keep an eye on things in very pleasant surroundings. And I never did ask about the fishing.