

## VELVET AND VELVETTING : THE HONEST TRUTH

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The farming practice of removing velvet antler from living deer has frequently received bad publicity in U.K. from animal welfare, farming and scientific groups alike. This bad publicity has often centered round ethical, emotive issues such as pain level to the stag or profiteering from gullable Orientals, who may pay high prices for a product unproved by Western Medical Authorities. Likewise reports are often ill-informed and based on hearsay, "gut-reaction" or perhaps an eye witness account by a visitor to New Zealand who saw the operation performed amateurishly or badly.

Over the last 18 months I have witnessed or taken part in the velvetting of several hundred stags; I would be the first to admit that it is not a pleasant procedure, but no worse than tailing and castrating lambs or dehorning cattle and that some stags, a tiny minority, obviously felt a degree of discomfort. I feel that the British Deer farmer deserves at least to have the straight facts of the velvetting procedure presented before him, so that he or she can better understand the New Zealand deer farming experience, without ethical or emotive shadows. This is what I hope to accomplish in this article.

I shall present the method used by the majority first, then, at the end, show some of the diversity of approach used by minorities.

1. From early August onwards the farmer inspects his stags every 3 days and drafts off from the main wintering stag mobs all those who have cast their previous years antler stubs. Ideally, these mobs are kept separately for 60-65 days, as research at Invermay by Peter Fennessy and Geof Moore has shown that the vast majority of stags take this amount of time, from casting, for velvet to reach the optimum stage for harvest.

2. When the velvet antler has reached the appropriate stage, the required mob is mustered and brought into the yards. It is important that the stags are used to the yards and pens so that they remain quiet. They are split into groups of no more than 10 stags to a holding pen of say 60 square metres. This is vitally important as bunching of stags leads to antler breakage and broken antlers are valueless, as they are very difficult to dry satisfactorily. The stags are then taken 3 at a time into a small (about 10 square metres) dark room (ideally the holding pens are darkened as well) and any that are not quite ready for harvest are released. This dark room must have a low ceiling - usually 2m as this inhibits the stags apprehensive about antler damage, from jumping. The darkness and close confinement permit

handlers, working quietly, slowly and smoothly, to inject tranquilising drugs by hand into the neck or rump muscles of the stag with a syringe. As in U.K. all tranquilising drugs are under the sole control of veterinary practitioners and in many cases they carry out the entire velvetting procedure themselves. However, many large scale deer farmers, particularly in the South Island, have the full confidence of their local vet who prescribes 2% Rompun (Xylazine, Bayer Ltd) for their personal use, without his presence. The normal dose for a stag is 1.5 - 2.5 mls of this solution, but more or less may be given depending on individual conditions. The stags are then left quietly for the drug to take effect. It is fundamentally important that the entire process is done smoothly and quietly so that stress to the stags (and handlers) is minimised.

3. After the drug takes effect, the stag either lies on its brisket or remains standing, though sedated and local anaesthetic is administered to the antler nerves. Again, this must be carried out quietly and gently, necessitating only minimal restraint of the stags.

The Infratrochlear nerve which runs above the eye and may be readily palpated, receives 2-3 mls of a 2% lignocaine solution by manual syringe, a similar amount of injected into the zygomatico-temporal nerve behind the eye. The stag is left for 2 minutes to permit the drug to take effect.

4. A ligature is then tightly applied to the pedicles of the stag. This usually consists of a narrow strip of inner tubing wrapped in a figure of eight several times around both pedicles, with the end in a loop, for rapid removal. The velvet antler is sawn off using a medium toothed meat saw, which is kept in disinfectant throughout, about 1 cm above the coronet. The cut is either medial or lateral, whichever is easiest, but long smooth strokes are used rather than short fast jerky ones. The velvet antler once removed is held upside down to prevent drainage of blood, and is stored in a plastic bag in a freezer until sold. After both antlers are removed the stag is left in peace for a few minutes until such minor bleeding as may occur ceases. The ligature is removed after about 10 minutes and the stag is released into the paddock, when it can stand.

5. A careful watch is kept for some hours after velvetting to see that no recurrence of bleeding occurs and the stags recovers uneventfully from anaesthesia.

In the vast majority of cases no signs of panic or pain are shown by the stags.

Some variations that can occur are as follows:-

- 1) Farmers may not draft stags at casting and instead may bring the whole mob into the yards for inspection at harvest time. Some measure of selection may go on before the stags reach the dark room in this case.
- 2) Fentaz (Fentanyl/Azaperone) may be used instead of Rompun. This is invariably administered by a vet, who also administers Lethidron, an antagonist, intravenously after velvetting. As Fentaz produces better analgesia (pain-relief) than Rompun, the local anaesthetic may be omitted.
- 3) Some farmers with very quiet stags do not use local anaesthetic with Rompun, which gives some degree of skin analgesia. Although generally discouraged I have seen this system working very well. A small proportion of stags have a third nerve to the antler running from behind the ear; experience dictates that these animals require a third injection of local anaesthetic.
- 4) After velvetting sterile swabs may be used to staunch any flow of blood. Antiseptic dusts may be used to prevent infection of the antler stump. A lateral cut may be made first, to sever any non-deadened nerve, prior to medial cuts to remove the antler. If the two antlers are at widely different stages of development, one may be removed days before the other.

Various crush systems have been devised to manually restrain stags for administration of local anaesthesia followed by velvetting. They do not tend to find much favour at this time as they are expensive and relatively slow compared to the above technique, which may take less than 15 minutes from selection for harvest to release. However, newer, simpler, less expensive crush devices are being designed and these may well find favour in the long run.

By performing velvetting in batches, up to 30 can be velvetted in an hour with an experienced team of workers, whereas only one at a time can be velvetted, using a crush.

This is not intended as a political document to invite deer farmers to defy the law in U.K. and joint their New Zealand fellows in velvet antler removal. It has been written solely as an unbiased, unemotive factual account of a farming technique which is practised in this country.