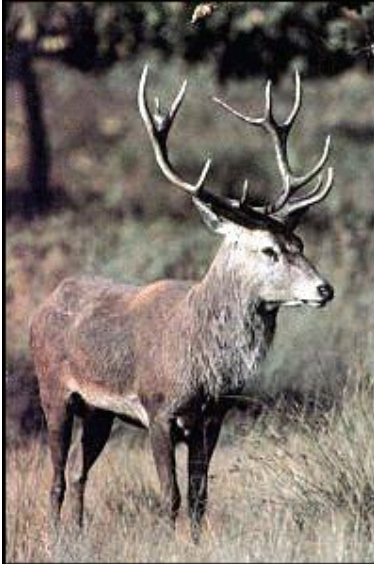


## Farmed Deer

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**In 2003, there were around 300 farms with deer in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland farming approximately 30,000 deer.**

**In England about 77% of these are Red and 23% Fallow, in Scotland virtually all are Red (1).**

**In 2008, 6,268 farmed deer were slaughtered for their meat (venison) in the UK (2).**

### Farmed Deer Production & Welfare

There are six species of deer living in Great Britain with only the red deer and roe deer being truly native to this country (3). Wild red deer evolved as forest-dwellers inhabiting open woodlands and forest margins (4). Farmed deer are considered livestock and as such all general legislation to protect their health and welfare must be complied with (1). UK producers mainly farm red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) although some use fallow deer (*Dama dama*). They can live for up to 25 years.

Red deer are deemed a more attractive livestock species as they have a long reproductive life (over 15 years), produce low-fat meat and have adaptability to a range of nutritional environments. The type of production system depends on the land resources available, e.g. hill farmers produce weaned deer calves that they sell onto upland/lowland farms for further feeding/breeding. Shelter should be provided as deer are not well insulated. Some deer may be housed during winter or even continuously housed. When deer are continuously housed they are required to be kept in small groups of 10-15. Mature stags (3 yrs plus) in antler must be penned individually. Farmed deer receive forage and concentrated food (1).

For most of the year deer form single-sex groups, only coming together during the mating (rutting) season. Adult females (hinds) form family groups, they consist of related adult hinds (mothers, aunts, cousins) and their offspring from the current and previous years, including males (stags) of up to 3 years old (4). Antlers play an important part in the life of the male deer being used as weapons to help gain access to females and protect their harems (groups of females) from other males. Antlers are not permanent like horns, and are lost each year. Antlers on adults are usually removed on safety grounds (1).

Stags reach sexual maturity at 16 months old. Mating normally occurs naturally in September during the rutting/breeding season. The gestation period is around 8-9 months and shortly before calving, hinds move away from the herd to give birth in isolation in



May/June. Normally only a single calf is born and these are usually weaned. Deer calves should receive colostrums, this is the first milk that dams (mothers) produce, and contains essential antibodies, vitamins and minerals. Calves should also be suckled before weaning. Calves may be artificially weaned, during their first 5-8 weeks of life, through feeding sheep/goat milk or milk substitute (1).

## Disease

Deer can suffer from many of the same diseases as cattle, with Tuberculosis, Johnes disease, Foot and Mouth and Bluetongue being important examples. Poor farming management can also lead to injuries and diseases through inappropriate handling and transportation. Inexperienced deer (such as wild/newly introduced stock) are particularly prone to panic which can result in a rapid rise in body temperature, i.e. hyperthermia (4).

### Tuberculosis (TB)

This is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium bovis* (*M. bovis*). Tuberculosis can also affect other species including other farm animals and wildlife, along with humans. Animals with suspected TB are usually identified by the tuberculin skin test before they develop clinical signs. Diagnosis is confirmed through post-mortem examination and bacteriological culture of *M. bovis* organisms (1).

### Johne's Disease

Unlike most other livestock species, Johne's disease is more common in young rather than old deer. It is also transmissible in the womb. It is caused by another species of *Mycobacteria*, *M Avium paratuberculosis*. Symptoms include loss of condition, retention of winter coat and, as the disease progresses, diarrhoea. Infected animals need to be isolated and with no effective treatments death will follow in weeks/months (1, 4).

### Foot and Mouth

This is an infectious disease caused by a virus (of which there are 7 types). The virus affects cloven-hoofed animals such as cattle, sheep, pigs, goats and deer. The disease is not normally fatal to adult animals but it does cause debilitation and loss of productivity for farmers (such as lameness). The virus causes a fever and the development of blisters, mostly in the mouth and on the feet. Animals contract the disease by either direct contact with an infected animal or contact with foodstuffs, etc. which have become contaminated by an infected animal. (1).

### Bluetongue

Bluetongue infects domestic and wild ruminants such as sheep, cattle, goats, deer and camelids. It is caused by a virus transmitted by midges. The virus is spread by the movement of infected midges that go on to bite susceptible animals in a new area, or by movements of infected animals that are subsequently bitten by midges. Infected animals experience discomfort, with flu-like symptoms, and swelling and haemorrhaging in and around the mouth and nose. They can also go lame and have difficulty eating (1).

## Slaughter

Deer are usually slaughtered at approximately 16 months of age (between 1-2 years). In 2008, 6,268 deer were slaughtered in the UK (4,726 were slaughtered in 2007) (2). Farmers will slaughter their deer by shooting them in the field, transporting to a multi-species slaughterhouse/specialist deer slaughterhouse or using a specialist slaughterhouse facility onsite (5). Field slaughter is the most common on farms producing venison for retail (4) and should involve accurate shooting using a suitable rifle/ammunition by a trained marksman (1). Normally, deer are killed with a headshot whilst being fed in the field, as this procedure does not involve any rounding-up, transportation or handling of any kind. These deer are



then bled in situ and transported to a nearby slaughterhouse for processing. In some circumstances the slaughterhouse may be on the farm itself (5).

### References & Useful Links

1. Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs. [www.defra.gov.uk/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/)
2. Meat Hygiene Service.
3. British Deer Society. [www.bds.org.uk/](http://www.bds.org.uk/)
4. Ewbank, R., Kim-Madslien, F. and Hart, C.B. (Editors). 1999. 4th Edition. Management and Welfare of Farm Animals. Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW).
5. Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC).

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