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GLENHOPE FARM

By Andy Cowan

A noticeable thing about good farmers is their ability to access information about their experience. They generally keep a fairly detailed log of farm activities to aid their memories. Record keeping is actually critical to the development of any farm. Since learning a little about Glenhope Farm, I would think that Gordon and Myrlene Carter have kept meticulous records over the last 16 to 17 years. They purchased a run down property and are now able to compare, justify and make informed decisions for the future based on past experience. The records they have kept have helped with the improvement of both the land and the herd.

Gordon believes that buying a rundown property was an advantage as it allowed for a clean start. Gordon works in the city during the week and, although he looks after the farm at weekends, he employs a manager to oversee the running of the farm during the week. He notes with interest how each of the managers he has employed over the years have made significant contributions to the operations, development and success of the farm. Initially, Wayne Allan made some excellent decisions on the farm lay out. In particular, as Wayne drove trucks, he made sure that it was easy for trucks to access the yards. Gaye Cameron taught Gordon much about pasture. A particular memory is when Gaye suggested that they make silage from the cape weed. Knowing about Gordon's aversion to "chemical" sprays, this seemed like an interesting bit of lateral thinking that worked well as the resulting silage smelt like figs. Gaye recommended Ben Hall as the next manager. Gordon believes it will be hard to replace Ben who managed Glenhope Farm for 11 years, and is grateful for his dedication and friendship over this period. He is still in the area and occasionally drops in to give a hand and some advice.

Glenhope Farm is located at Neerim Junction near Warragul, in Gippsland, Victoria. Approximately 63 hectares in size, its soils are old lava flows and primarily basalt. Typically, these ferrosol-type soils are found in high rainfall, old rainforest and hilly areas and have good drainage and thus limited fertility. The annual rainfall on the farm is over 1100mm and the driest months are February and March. The undulating topography of the farm varies from 408m to about 380m above sea level. The majority of the farm can be driven over by a tractor.

As previously mentioned the high rainfall, and possibly earlier land management practices, meant that the soil was very acidic when purchased - around pH 4.8 to 5.2. The soil is managed using Albrecht principles so the aim has always been to get the cation balance in the correct ranges rather than simply try to correct the pH. Regular applications of lime/dolomite have moved the pH to around 5.9 - 6.3. Glenhope Farm has the soil tested on one third of the farm each year on a rotational basis. There have been no artificial fertilizers or herbicides used on front of the property for over 10 years. The front of the farm is managed as closely as

possible to organic principles. The fertility of the soil has been maintained by the application of fish, kelp, plasma, compost and lime plus trace elements when needed. The weaners are weaned into shed each year for approximately 3 weeks. The bedding is then composted with poultry manure, sawdust, seaweed, trace elements and any waste hay. This compost is then spread on the front portion of the farm. In this situation, care is taken when drenching stock as the type of drench used is crucial.

The back area of the farm is managed differently. In this area, artificial fertilizers have been used according to the results of soil tests. Spot spraying for weeds has been done in moderation if necessary. It has also had applications of fish emulsions and seaweed. It is now over 10 years since any spray has been used. Pesticides have never been used.

Although this area is not technically “organic”, fertilizers with minimum damage to the soil biology are always used. That is to say, if potassium is required they apply potassium sulphate instead of potassium chloride. They use biological farming principles.

Weeds are almost non-existent on the organic section. They are a little worse on the Biological section - but not significantly so. Over time, it has been noticed that the weeds are becoming less of a problem as the soil becomes balanced. They are not overly anxious about weeds as some are seen to be useful in bringing nutrients up from deeper in the soil profile.

As a general philosophy, the pastures are maintained as far as practical with as many species as possible. When replanting or renovating, a significant emphasis is put on deep-rooted plants that are to be used in the mix, e.g. a seed mix may consist of chicory, lucerne and plantain.

The farm includes approximately 6 Ha of bush and when purchased some 16 years ago, there were some significant old Cyprus pine wind breaks on the property. Any trees, if in reasonable condition, have been retained and significant effort has gone into additional planting of further windbreaks and fodder trees. The additional plantings include oaks, tagasaste, honey locust and other assorted natives. The older trees that had to be removed were milled on the property and used for portions of the deer shed, fencing and general farm use. More trees are being planted to increase shade and shelter in all paddocks.

Significant thought went into planning the deer sheds in particular. The deer shed was designed to ensure maximum safety to animals and operators and to enable the processing of up to 200 animals a day. In addition, Gordon wanted to be able to wean into the shed. The shed has met all expectations in these regards, as have the outside working yards, although one mistake in design is the inability to get bales of silage and grain into some areas of the yards which makes weaning more labour intensive than it should be.

The main benefit of weaning in the shed is that the calves become more familiar with machinery, humans and the yards which in turn makes them quieter and easier to handle.

Prior to weaning, all fawns are matched to their mothers. Weaning occurs in the last week in February and the stags are put with the hinds before 1st March. By using single sire mating, Gordon is able to identify the best hinds and fawns. It is important to be aware of the possibility of non-performing stags. On two occasions since beginning to farm deer, Glenhope Farm has been caught out with non-performing stags. This being the case, Gordon still believes that the benefits far outweigh the risks. Significant emphasis is put into selecting the best hinds.

First fawners have the stags put in with them in mid February. The stags are removed after ANZAC day for matures and the first week in May for first fawners. The farm aims for 98% weaning on matures and 85% on first fawners. They regularly achieve 95 to 98% with the matures. The first fawners are more problematical. They have achieved 100% on several occasions with their first fawning hinds and this has been when the Eastern hinds have been joined to an experienced stag that was put in early. They have had also had fawning rates as low as 65%. Gordon believes that feeding is a key, especially reaching a critical body weight at joining. Mis-mothering also seems to contribute to lower fawning percentages with the first fawners.

The aim is to get fawns on the ground as early as possible. This ensures that the hinds have the best feed possible and thus are producing excellent milk quantities. Generally, as of late November, the mature Hungarians have finished fawning with 98% and 100% of fawns on the ground. The English hinds are about 40% complete. At the same time the first fawning English and German hinds are only about 10% complete. As far as possible, all fawns are tagged at birth and are weighed every second month. Any hind that is dry twice is culled.

Currently the farm carries 120 velvetters, 240 hinds and 150 weaners or yearlings. They do have a small herd of 30 fallow deer. The reds consist of Hungarian, English, German and a few Yugoslavian animals that are not normally crossed.

The February body weight of the breeding hinds needs to be over 100kg for the Hungarians at first joining and 95kg for the Germans and English hinds. The Hungarians and Germans make this easily. The English struggle in some years.

The target weights for venison animals are to get to 100kg by June. It is early days yet and few make it, but an increasing number are in the high 90kgs and the odd few make it to 100kg. These are all Hungarian or Hungarian /Yugoslavian crosses.

As far as the target weights for velvet are concerned, the minimum weight needed to make the velvet herd is 2kg as a 2 year old. This will increase next season as the herd quality improves.

The English herd has been based on Lancelot genetics. There has been a very significant contribution by G218, purchased many years ago from Maradene, out of a Lionel Campion stag. This stag proved to be outstanding for imprinting good antler on his progeny.

These genetics have been added to with embryos and AI from Merlin, Tamar, Ramasses, Hotspur, William Wallace, MH03-49 and Taylor. The best progeny of these is coming from the Mt Hutt Warhnam stag and Taylor. The progeny of these stags are like peas in a pod.
The original Hungarian stags were purchased from Ostlers Hill. One stag, with MH095 as the sire, was purchased in partnership with Nigel Barry. The other was a stag out of MH291 and a Fletcher hind. These bloodlines were bred back across each other. It soon became apparent that these bloodlines were outperforming the Warhnam stock on the property so it was decided to add to the genetic base by both AI and embryo programs. A number of these 2yo are cutting over 3 kg and one 4yo is cutting 7.4Kg.

The Germans are primarily from Boss and Mighty bloodlines bred up from Schulte-Wrede hinds. These are exceptionally quiet with excellent body conformation. They are a little behind in the antler department but one 2yo last year cut 3.73kg.

The experience of ET and AI has been positive. Whilst the first time using CIDRs was a bit nerve racking, later experience of using CIDRs in NZ made this significantly easier and ensured good results. Initially, a couple of New Zealand vets (Noel Beatson and John Hunter) did most of the work and Gordon and his team went through a fairly steep learning curve. The local vet in Warragul, Grant Nielson, was on-hand to assist the team.

More recently, they have used Australian technicians for the AI programs with good results most times. The results have varied from 50 – 75+% success rates. Gordon's manager at the time, Ben Hall, was an extremely capable and responsible manager who carried out the programs to the letter. A few problems arose when Gordon tried to include a couple of nervous hinds, because of their genetics, and a few underweight hinds that had been lactating heavily. Gordon intends to continue with the AI program next year.

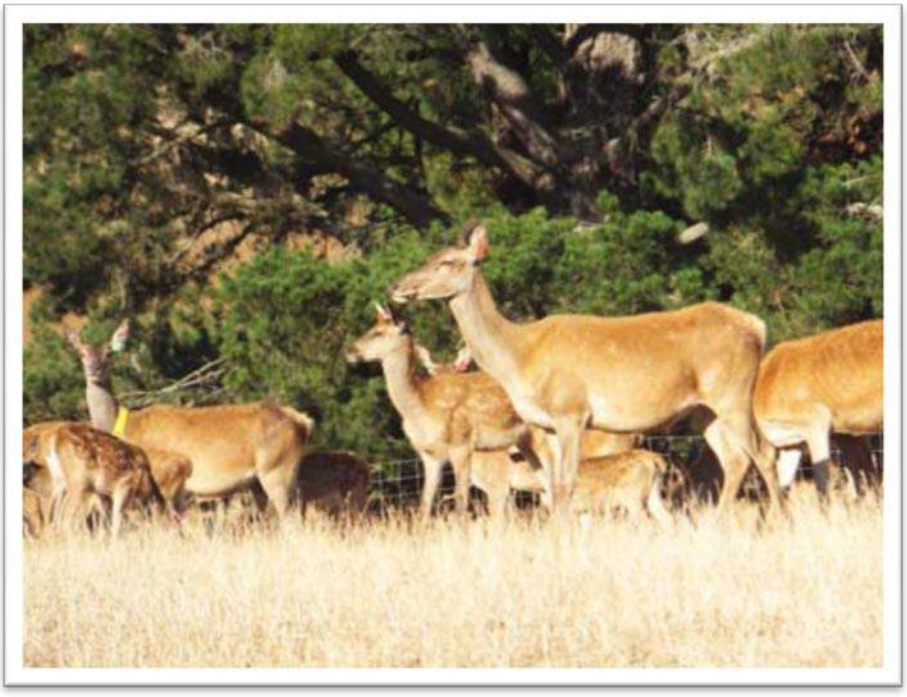
The Glenhope Farm red herd has been run as a closed herd for about 14 years. Genetic improvement has been achieved through the use of AI and ET only. ET has included the use of the best Glenhope hinds and stags. The deer have had very few health problems (most veterinarian bills have been on ET and advice), but occasionally there has been a difficult birth.

Gordon has a good message for anyone starting in the industry. If he was starting again, he would initially purchase fewer stock but only the best quality. The two things that he regards as critical are:

1. to build good sheds and yards and
2. concentrate on the female genetics from the start.

Mike Shaw, from New Zealand, has recently joined Glenhope Farm as Manager.

Many thanks to Gordon for his willingness to share this information with us and for the effort he has made in supplying me with such interesting facts. I feel a field day coming on!!



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