

# Highbourne Farm

(Continued from Page B2)

water supply's Lake Redman.

"A friend who was a curator at the Bronx Zoo suggested red deer, rather than fallow deer which we also considered," says John Behrmann. "They're more disease resistant, carry more body weight and have a better feed conversion rate."

Behrmann imported his initial 50 head of breeding stock from New Zealand in 1990. Due to quarantine laws, the deer could not directly enter the U.S. from New Zealand, but first had to go through Canada, a process that in total took 210 days. A second herd was imported from Canada two years later, with bloodlines from Scottish red deer.

"That was to get another gene pool and add hybrid vigor to our herd," Behrmann explains. "The stags from that bloodline are larger but have a quieter temperament."

Since red deer, especially the stags or males, become more confident with size and maturity, temperament is Behrmann's first criteria for breeding selection. Size and conformation follow close behind as desirable selective traits.

"You never turn your back on them," says Behrmann, of the gentle-eyed, docile-looking deer. And, since many buyers of red deer are first-time livestock raisers or former producers of domestic cattle, a calmer temperament enhances ease of handling of this traditionally wild species.

A mature red deer stag may weigh as much as 600 pounds, while females, or hinds, average about 280 pounds when full-grown. Stags reach breeding maturity from 24 to 30 months of age and should remain viable herd sires through at least eight years old. Females can be productive breeders for about 15 years, Behrmann estimates.

Red deer are related to the North American elk, which they resemble in conformation and impressive stag antler growth.

Their offspring are called calves, and are born after a gestation period of 233 days. Mating season at Highbourne Farms runs from early September through mid-December. On average, one stag is run with a herd of 40 hinds, with a second stag rotated in about half-way through the breeding season to catch any remaining open females.

Early-fall bred calves, for May or June calving, are most desirable, since they will grow to about 120 pounds by September weaning and can better withstand harsh winter weather and competition at the feed troughs.

"We follow a lot of the same management practices as those for cattle," Behrmann says. "We test for brucellosis and tuberculosis vaccinate for 13 different potential health problems and worm four times a year."

Hardy animals, the deer rarely use the shelters located in the pastures, even through the coldest weather, such as that of this past winter. They will seek out shade during summer heat, preferring the tree-lined pasture edges or wooded pasture areas.

"They are a lot of fun to raise and to watch grow," grins John Behrmann, who obviously enjoys this unusual livestock enterprise. "Successful deer farmers generally to something else as well. Deer don't take all that much time, maybe two hours a day, except at times when we tag, test or vaccinate."

Though semi-domesticated, the deer are still skittish and do not herd well for handling, so special procedures are followed for health work. High gates are set up from pasture exit to the barn and covered with shade cloth for a wall effect. Then the deer are slowly moved to a work area in the barn, where they are run through a hydraulically-operated squeeze and weigh chute. The high, enclosed, thickly-cushioned sides keep the deer calm and protected during weighing, testing and vaccinations.

At weaning, calves are

Though quick to scatter if frightened, the red deer are normally docile, even-tempered and curious.

weighed, tagged and penned, then calmed with round-the-clock music to distract them from a constant calling between mothers and babies. With hand-feeding and extra attention, they quickly tame, and are then grouped by weight and size.

"Dogs are their worst enemies: the deer could clear our seven-foot fences if they were pressed," says Behrmann. More of a problem is that some of the deer become very friendly and will quickly slip through a gate in search of feed handouts, given the opportunity." Double gates at the pasture compound entrance are added "escape" insurance.

"You can't chase them, but they will come right back if they do get out," says this red deer specialist, relating the tale of a North Dakota deer-raising friend whose herd of hinds escaped when a gate was left open. "They all came back in the fall, bringing their calves with them."

White-tailed deer are abundant in this part of southern York County and have an occasion come bounding in through the 35 acres of fenced deer pasture. Usually, notes Behrmann, that happens when farm equipment working nearby stirs them from the fields. Visits from their wild deer neighbors are more likely to occur during intensely-bitter winter weather, when natural feed for the whitetails becomes scarce or inaccessible.

Deer hunting season was a real concern for at least the first few years. The herd is kept relatively confined during that period and shade cloth draped over the enclosure fences. Neighbors of Highbourne Farms have also become extra watchful during deer season for unfamiliar vehicles and hunters.

Corn silage is fed through the winter, November through April, along with an average of four pounds of orchardgrass hay and two pounds of grain. Pasture is the prime warm weather feed, a blend of bluegrass and common white clover which withstands close cropping and constant trodding by the herds' sharp, pointed hooves.

Browse from trees and shrubs is a natural favorite of the deer. In the several areas of wooded pasture, Behrman has encircled in wire the trunks of trees he wants standing for shade. The deer eat the bark from the unprotected trees, which are cut for firewood after they die. In the openings cleared in this way during the past four years, grass patches will be seeded to enhance eating and feeding areas in the wooded paddocks.

Stags are dehorned each year when their antlers have reached about half-growth, to help control

## Highbourne Farm

**RED DEER  
BREEDING STOCK  
& VENISON**

**428-2774**

fighting and injury to other herd members. Behrmann relates that the first year they had the deer, they wanted to see how large the antlers would get, and lost a female that was fatally injured from an antler goring.

Behrmann is a director of the North American Deer Farmers Association, an industry group of about 400 members raising various types of elk and deer. Fallow deer are the most numerous, with members growing about a half-million head. Red deer rank second in popularity, numbering about 25,000 head. In western states such as Texas, deer farmers operate primarily as ranchers with fenced, open-grazing areas, while producers in other parts of the country have facilities more traditional to cattle raising. New York has numerous deer farmers, many of them dairymen who sold their herds in the whole-herd buyout program.

Prices for a "covered" or bred female are in the \$2,500 range, while breeding-size stags may sell for more or less, dependent on their bloodlines and conformation. A male weaned calf is worth about \$500.

"We are fighting as an industry to be treated just like livestock," Behrmann says of regulatory concerns of the organization. "We want some regulations, we want to be classified as livestock, we want brucellosis testing when animals are moved from state to state."

Concerns over deer spreading diseases like brucellosis and tuberculosis to cattle has haunted the industry and caused some friction at time between deer and

cattle producers. Elk and whitetail raisers are subject to oversight by the Pennsylvania Game Commission, since those species are indigenous to the state, while producers of non-native deer come under Department of Agriculture regulatory rules.

"We've tested for tuberculosis for a long time. Everything that goes out of here is tested in accordance with either the rules of the receiving state or within the state for our Pennsylvania buyers. Some states require two sets of tests, given 90 days apart. The producers with the most financial stakes are going to follow the rules because they have the most to lose if they don't."

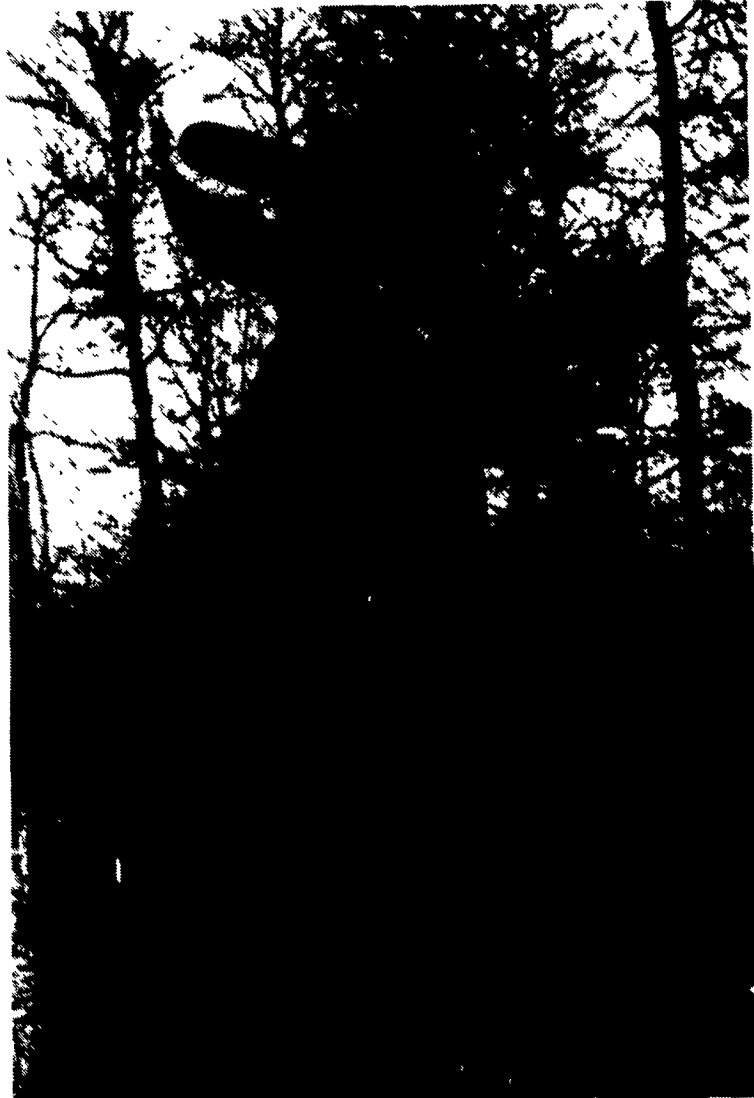
Because of his deer raising experience, Behrmann finds himself in a consulting position to others interested in the business. He has helped start up operations in Tennessee and Maine and has inquiries from New York, New Jersey and Delaware.

Due to the excess of stage resulting from the breeding stock business, Behrmann has also become a marketer of another commodity — venison. The initial aim was to retail quarters, halves and whole carcasses, but venison sales have instead gone in the direction of the restaurant trade, while retaining a small retail clientele. Cutting and packaging is done by the J.L. Miller Sons meat retail market in York. Meat is sold either fresh, or freshly frozen, sealed in cryovac packaging, and demand is now outpacing Highbourne Farm's ability to supply.

Two primary wholesale mark-

(Turn to Page B4)

# Homestead Notes



Antler growth, which begins in early spring, will be removed from the stags to prevent them from causing injuries to other herd members.