

# Kentucky Alternative Livestock Association (KALA)

## Cervid Husbandry

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As it is with most things we choose to do in life, we strive to know everything possible about that topic to excel. This is especially true with deer farming. The weight of caring for such a unique herd coupled with the high cost of startup and ownership leads deer farmers arguably to be some of the most diligent farmers in agriculture. As a deer farming community, we are bound together in the mission of helping the world to understand what we see so clearly every day: there is nothing like spending a life with these beautiful creatures on your farm.

While it is important to understand the specifics of care for certain seasons and events, it is more important to understand the impact of your daily routine on herd management. When you do the daily things well, it builds confidence for the once-a-year tasks and makes them seem more manageable. While we so often don't take the time to pay attention to the mundane in daily life, it can be lifesaving in deer farming.

First and foremost, it is critical that you spend time with your herd. This goes beyond simply glancing over them as you are feeding or passing by the gate. Each deer is unique: they have individual mannerisms, patterns, and even personalities. The better you can understand these, the better you will be able to detect health concerns and be able to enjoy the playfulness they often exhibit. As you are getting to know your herd, take the time to sit in the pens with them. This allows you not only to watch their normal patterns of behavior, but it also allows them to see you as someone they can trust. By doing so, you will likely be able to have your hands on them for friendly head rubs with many of them within a matter of a couple of weeks (or maybe sooner). This isn't something that is accomplished by spending a couple of hours in one day: much like our connections with other humans, relationships are developed over time. The more time that we invest, the richer the relationship will be.

When monitoring your herd, be certain to look for any sign that the deer may be ill. This can include drooping ears, eyes that don't seem as clear and bright, or reduced movements. Deer naturally attempt to hide illness, as it makes them an easy target for predators. While this benefits them in the wild, it makes our job as farmers more difficult. By the time a deer is showing outward signs that illness is present, they are already likely pretty sick. This is where knowing your deer and their habits will serve both you and the deer well. A rapid response will likely help to save the deer's life. Even in those circumstances where you do respond quickly

and the deer doesn't make it, you are still gathering valuable information for what to do the next time you are faced with that situation. The learning process never stops.

Spending time planning for the upcoming season will never be wasted time. No matter what kind of farming operation you have, the period between Christmas and the beginning of fawn season is typically the slower paced period. While there is still work to be done daily in ensuring that deer are fed and watered, it tends to be a less intense season overall. During this period, you can begin preparation for the upcoming fawn season by purchasing supplies that you will need once your census begins to increase, beginning building projects for adding fawn stalls, expanding, or adding pens, or adding a new handling facility.

Summer is an incredibly busy time around the farm. With fawns starting to arrive by the mid part of May, work is certainly going to increase. Even if you plan to leave the fawns with their mothers to nurse, it is still going to increase your workload through tagging, vaccinations, and additional monitoring to ensure the health of the fawns. If you elect to or must bottle feed fawns, your time schedule will become much more structured for the duration of bottle-feeding season. For more information on this, see the fawn care guide.

Summer also brings needs of other sorts. Ensuring that water troughs or automated waterers are full is a must during the heat of the season. Not only will the deer drink more during this time, but the heat will also cause faster evaporation. Keeping troughs clean and full will reduce the presence of midges and bacteria that can cause serious health challenges. Summer storms may threaten or compromise fences because of downed limbs or trees. Keeping pens and runs mowed so that gates open effectively can be tedious work, but it is well worth the time spent.

Once all fawns have been born, spend time thinking about the makeup of your pens. Will you have all the doe fawns in one pen and two-year-old bucks in another? Or will you put the buck fawns in with your three-year-old bucks? You may find it helpful to place tag numbers on a board so you can visualize who is in what pen at a glance and manipulate those numbers to come up with a new plan before you physically have to move the deer.

No sooner than fawns are weaned, antler growth is rounding out for the season as fall is right around the corner. At this point the census of your farm may be changing yet again with the sale or movement of stocker bucks to hunting preserves. Ensuring that bucks have had ample protein to grow a desirable amount of antler throughout the season will equate to greater financial gain upon their sale. Of course, with the growth there is also risk involved: risk of damage to the rack while still in velvet as well as the concerns of damage to other deer once the antler hardens. It is a fine balancing act of managing personalities with increasing testosterone and remaining profitable and keeping a healthy herd. If you are leaving the antlers on your bucks, it is critical to keep a good watch over the other deer they are in the pens with to ensure that injuries have not occurred while they are sparring. If you are cutting

antlers off, this provides for a wonderful opportunity to complete a total health check and give any booster medications.

As you watch the growth throughout the season, perhaps you have begun to think about who you use as breeder bucks for the upcoming season. Take time to explore your options for breeding. Will the amount of money you invest into artificial insemination be manageable for you? Are you willing to tackle bottle feeding into the fall if your fawns are from live breeding? Remember, what you choose to do this year doesn't have to be the same thing you do next year, nor does it have to be what you do for your entire herd.

As the leaves begin to change and the hours get shorter, focus shifts again to hunting, breeding, and increasing food intake as the deer begin to prepare their bodies for the winter to come. Monitoring feed intake is important, as you want to be sure that deer have plenty to eat while not leaving out too much feed that may be an invitation for scavenging animals to enjoy the leftovers. Breeding season may mean a little work or a lot of work in only a few days' time. If you are live breeding, the work is little. Artificial insemination can mean a couple of long days (or more depending on herd size) to sync the cycles of the does and then complete the insemination.

Investing your time and attention into your farm is paramount. Though difficult times with crises, illness, and loss will inevitably happen, it is always going to benefit you more to spend time with your herd. By knowing your deer, you will likely prevent a bad situation from becoming catastrophic, catch illness earlier, or not experience that loss. It's not just about knowing your herd, but also about staying abreast of trends in the industry for everything that impacts your farm. And never forget that the time that you spend listening to your gut will rarely steer you wrong. This multi-dimensional management style can and will take your farm to the next level.



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