

Feature



Feeding wild deer

NGO Development Officer,
Tim Weston, looks at the facts...

IS IT ETHICAL NOT TO FEED OUR WILD DEER populations? The debate goes on and the arguments for both are clear and well constructed. Some say that by providing wild free range deer with supplementary feed they are being “un-wilded” whereas those in favour argue that the deer population will benefit in harsh winters.

Feeding wild deer is not a new idea. In the Highlands and Islands, the stalkers have been feeding wild red deer for decades. The ancient forest keepers in the New Forest in Hampshire would also feed wild fallow deer to help sustain the herd and, in more recent times, to improve the chance of a trophy buck or stag.

In Europe and in some North American states, it is commonplace to feed wild deer and much research has been done into the best type of nutrient and minerals required. The main reason for feeding the deer is to gain an advantage over nature and allow the ground to hold more deer than it would without the supplementary feeding. In Germany, Austria and Hungary, countries with the highest densities of wild red deer in continental Europe, it is a legal requirement to provide food over winter for free range wild deer.

Another reason for supplementary feeding wild deer is to help prevent environmental damage especially to commercial and native woodland. Research into feeding for this reason in Europe and North America has been inconclusive. Some studies show that by supplementary feeding the damage by deer will significantly decrease, some studies show no significant difference, and others show a large increase in damage to trees probably because of the increased number of deer. The main factors are probably the local environment and species of deer that are present.

If you decide to feed deer on your ground there are some things that you might want to consider. You will need to think about the species of deer you have and how they feed: we all know that deer take wheat from a hopper, but

is that necessarily good for them? You will also need to consider what you want to achieve. If you wish to increase the body weight and even antler growth of the animals, then research suggests that you should feed the deer throughout the year and not just in the winter. Deer gain most weight when times are good in the summer months and the herding species are also growing their antlers at this time of year.

There are lots of different deer feeds available to deer managers; an internet search will point you to a huge variety. These can take the form of supplement blocks that are left out for the deer, to properly-made and speciality-formulated deer nuts. Whatever you choose, you will have to consider the pros and cons of feeding free range wild deer.

Some of the pitfalls of feeding wild deer might be an increased density of deer that could lead to unacceptable damage to the environment. Another problem that can occur with feeding wild deer is that they can become “lazy”, concentrating only on the feed stations and, in turn, become reliant on them. This is a huge problem

when food is withdrawn. There may also be an increased chance of the spread and cross spread of parasites (such as ticks) and disease (eg. TB).

If I were to use supplementary feeding for free range wild deer I would use a specialist feed in the form of deer nuts. I could be sure that the feed will give the deer the fibre that they need as well as the other nutrients. Deer are ruminant feeders and the correct make-up of their diet is vital to their welfare and survival. The supplementary licks have their place, but I have not found them very satisfactory in either attracting deer or holding them.

Supplementary feeding of free range wild deer is not a black and white issue and it needs much thought and consideration by the deer manager. As well as deer welfare issues, you must also take into account environmental issues. The Mammal Society produced an interesting paper on the subject in 2004 written by R J Putman and B W Stains which is freely available on the internet and I suggest that anybody considering feeding deer reads that paper first.

DEER FEED

A specialist deer feed is available from BOCM Pauls. Contact Philip Hembury, Cairngorms Deer Feed, Tel 07836 290905, www.bocmpauls.co.uk

Feeding deer, Glenquoich, Inverness-shire. Photograph courtesy Quiller Publishing from *Going to the Hill: Life on Scottish Sporting Estates* by Glyn Satterley, which is reviewed on page 52.



GLYN SATTERLEY