Mating Makeover

Disappointing mating results led Tom and Nicola Wylie to try some new tactics. Lynda Gray reports.

Wapiti and red clover are the cornerstones of weaner finishing at Lora Valley Farms. But the management of both is still being fine-tuned by Tom and Nicola Wylie. A case in point is terminal sire mating, which has been closely scrutinised over 2018 in an Advance Party project. The Wylie’s interest followed a mating failure in 2017 when only 64% of Wapiti-mated Red hinds scanned in-calf. It was disappointing given that the mating management followed was standard practice and nothing out of the ordinary: two mobs each of 150 hinds were multi-sire mated with three Wapiti bulls; and each mob had access to three paddocks. Care was taken to keep the Wapiti bulls out of range of the Red stag mated mobs, and the bulls were swapped between mating mobs for the last cycle.

Tom decided to try to find out the factors that led to the poor reproductive result and ways of rectifying them for an Advance Party project. A plan of attack was charted with the help of Advance Party facilitator Dave Lawrence. The changes made in the lead up and during mating were not huge but collectively led to a 2018 scanning result of 93%, with 75% of hinds in-calf to Wapiti bulls and another 18% in calf to Red chaser stags. More would have been better, but it was a marked improvement. Tom says a better than average growing season and perhaps an element of luck contributed to the improvement. Either way the same management will be followed this year to further validate the new approach.

One of the key changes was a reduction in the mating area. It seemed counter-intuitive, Tom says, who was surprised at the difference it made. The theory was it should reduce competition among the bulls, which proved to be the case, and in hindsight a contributing factor to the poor scanning in 2017 could have been the new, young bull that was dropped in with two older animals.
Wapiti genetics and red clover are the key inputs for faster growing and heavier weaners at Lora Valley Farms.

“They probably ended up doing nothing … it shows that getting the social structure right and grouping similar aged bulls together is important.”

Another initiative to improve the in-calf result was the decision to remove Wapiti bulls at the end of the second cycle and replace them with Red stags to cover any remaining hinds.

Despite the 2017 mating failure the Wylies are committed to hybrid weaner breeding. Wapiti have a different temperament to Reds and can be more challenging but their end product for the Wylies – a 56kg CW at a kill date average of 9 January – is the positive that outweighs any management negatives.

“We like the hybrid vigour and getting them off to the works early.”

They buy one or two Wapiti bulls each year and lease four or five.

“It’s convenient and easier for us because we don’t have to feed and manage them,” Tom says.

Weaner finishing will continue to be the main deer income stream although the most profitable deer stock unit is by the velveting stags. A herd of 110 stags is kept for velveting, cutting on average 5.5kg. Tom got his velveting ticket this year and plans to increase numbers and reduce the number of dairy grazed cows. Another 40ha will be fenced over the next couple of years.

Nicola is the fifth generation of her family to farm at Lora Valley. The family connections started back in 1872, and her parents, Bill and Jill Taylor, started farming deer at Lora Valley in the early 1990s.

The Wylies met at Lincoln University and after graduating, overseas travel and contract work moved to Lora Valley in 2010 leasing the sheep farm from Nicola’s parents and helping out on the deer unit. The couple took over full management when Jill and Bill retired to Queenstown in 2016.

Deer were a new stock class for Tom, who was raised on an Edendale sheep and beef farm. However, he's enjoyed the challenge and rewards of managing them.

“I enjoy the deer industry. It’s a small industry and has good programmes in place to keep young people interested.”

KEY POINTS

Lora Valley Farms
- Lora Gorge
- Hokonui
- Southland
- Tom and Nicola Wylie
- Two employees: Nick Vinicombe, stockman; Nathan Middleton, casual tractor driver
- Integrated, semi-intensive 600ha of developed rolling country, includes 200ha of deer fencing
- Stock Units: 9600 comprising sheep (50%), deer (30%), cattle (20%)

DEER
- Focus is hybrid weaner breeding/finishing, and velvet.
- 550 English Red hinds
- 66 first calvers mated to spikers
- 170 second and third calvers mated to venison genetics Red stag
- 300 MA mated to Wapiti
- 30 velvet genetic hinds mated to leased velvet stags

SHEEP (Coopworth-Texel)
- 3000 MA ewes
- 800 hoggets
- Also trade and finish up to 3000 lambs

CATTLE
- 300 Friesian bull calves, bought in at 100kg LW in December and finished to prime weight by the following autumn.
- 120 weaners bought at autumn sales and finished to prime weight at 18 months
- 600-700 dairy cows wintered for 8 weeks

2018 WAPITI MATING MANAGEMENT
- Two mobs of 150 hinds at BCS of 3-3.5
- Hinds and fawns weaned on 4 March and bulls joined the following day.
- Mating ratio was reduced from 1:50 to 1:35
- Mating paddock area reduced from 2017 from three to one paddock only.
- Observation of mating mobs and bulls to identify any over-dominant behaviour.
- Wapiti bulls removed on 12 April and replaced with Red chaser stags for 22 days.