

Trophy deer can mean big money for area agriculture

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treatments get," he said.

Crow's deer receive eight to 10 different vaccines, sometimes loaded into a dart gun. When administering several vaccines at once, he shoots only once with an anaesthetic dart and then injects the vaccines with a syringe. This allows deer to avoid being shot with darts several times.

Veterinary care for deer can be difficult to find, but the Lampasas County ranchers say they have been pleased with the treatment their animals receive from the Burnet Veterinary Clinic. Town and Country Veterinary Medical Center in Killeen also has deer specialists on staff, Mrs. McLean said.

Mrs. Duncan takes fawns to the Burnet clinic in pet carriers, and a Wisconsin veterinarian visited the McLeans' ranch to help with artificial insemination.

The most important contribution to herd health, though, comes from the owners themselves, as they feed fawns and check on their animals daily to watch for signs of illness or injury. Breeders check for indicators of good condition, like clear eyes and sleek skin, and note limps, behavioral changes and abnormalities in fecal samples. Deer owners also provide fresh drinking water in containers cleaned with bleach.

Bottle feeding, which continues for about three or four months for doe fawns, can begin as early as 5 a.m., Mrs. Duncan added. At the point of peak consumption, fawns drink about 17 ounces of milk two or three times a day.

"It's just like any other animal," she said. "If you want your animals to produce, you've got to take care of them."

While nutrition -- deer owners feed mostly protein pellets and alfalfa hay -- and medical attention help whitetails reach their potential, genes remain perhaps the most important factor in determining size and antler development.

"Genetics is the hardest to manipulate," Crow said.

When trying to improve one's deer gene pool, a property owner needs to weed out genetically inferior animals through management hunts, Crow said.

Buyers trace the lineage of deer they purchase, a task that has become easier and more accurate with DNA testing, which Mrs. McLean said became available to breeders about five years ago. Although a trophy buck sire is important, deer ranchers often consider the doe's bloodline an even greater predictor of the offspring's genetic quality.

With the substantial investments

deer breeding requires, Mrs. McLean has turned to game management software to monitor the genetic quality of the animals in her pens. Computer programs track each deer's pedigree and vaccination records, along with providing ranch management tools and helping those who lease their property organize hunting schedules.

"It has wonderful tools in it," Mrs. McLean said of her software. "It has just made life so much easier."

Even so, raising deer, although seemingly a more profitable activity than operating a small cattle ranch, requires a substantial commitment of time and money, Lampasas County ranchers said.

Crow believes he may have to wait until his fifth or sixth year in the deer business to see significant income.

"It's quite an investment," he said. "It's not something where you start it today and start selling tomorrow."

Those who enter the industry hoping for quick profits typically end up frustrated, Duncan said. His wife, however, who grew up on a farm and bottle fed calves, has enjoyed taking on the care of deer. As much as the income from deer sales, Mrs. Duncan enjoys the new challenges of a rapidly growing and changing agricultural enterprise.

"I just like watching them," she said of her deer. "It's just fun to do."



PHOTO: DAVID LOWE

Vicki McLean tosses a vanilla cookie to a buck while standing near her all-terrain vehicle, which she uses for checking on males. The treats bring bucks in close enough for breeders to check them for signs of good health, but because males can injure humans who get too close, Mrs. McLean generally observes them from inside her vehicle.

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