

RED DEER MARKET IS ON THE



BY JOHN MENG

Deer farming has been labeled as the ‘next adventure in agriculture.’ Because deer farming offers a viable means to maximizing the profitability of small tracts of marginal land, deer farming can be more profitable than raising traditional livestock and it is currently one of the fastest growing industries in rural America.

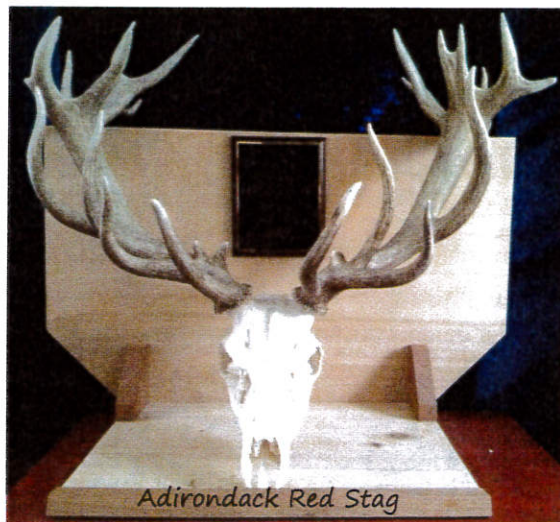
But not all cervids are created equal. Every species in the deer family has unique characteristics, management requirements and marketability. In fact, when it comes to diverse market opportunities and ease of handling, some deer farmers today are really seeing red — particularly red deer.

Similar to elk, the diverse nature of red deer allows farmers to develop specific genetic lines for antler growth, breeding, venison and velvet production, and to sell stock

to hunting preserves. However, red deer are smaller and easily managed. For example, an average red deer stag may weigh 650 pounds compared to an adult elk male which can tip the scales at 1,100 pounds or more.

Almost 25,000 tons of red deer are produced annually on U.S. and Canadian farms. In 1997 Canada reported nearly 13,000 head of red deer, and the United States imported nearly 1,000 tons of venison from New Zealand, which made up nearly 85 percent of the market. Today, according to estimates from North American Deer Farmers Association (NADeFA), red deer farms make up only about 15 percent of all deer farming operations in North America.

“The farm-raised deer population in the United States is growing steadily due to increased demand for deer products, but we still only produce about 20 percent of the venison



Red Deer a proven success in a diverse market.

needed to satisfy the domestic market,” says Shawn Schafer, executive director of NADeFA. “There’s still a lot more room for growth in the venison, breeding and hunting markets for red deer, and we encourage prospective new deer farmers to consider all their options when determining what species best suits them and their property.”

In 2012, Fred and Marie Anken considered those very options. Their choice was red deer.

The Ankens converted their nearly 250-acre dairy farm in Upstate New York into a deer facility and officially launched their ‘next adventure in agriculture’ as Adirondack Red Stags.

“We decided on deer farming because it’s much easier than traditional livestock. We looked into raising other species, like elk and whitetail, but decided on red deer because there was not a huge number of red deer farms to compete with.”

The couple started with a starter herd of 30 animals, which they purchased from one of the oldest red deer farms in the country. Their ‘starters’ featured blood lines from Europe and New Zealand that had proven bloodlines which have produced antlers scoring 500- to 600-inches on both sides of their family tree.

Today, the farm is home to 173 red deer — 71 stags and 102 females — all of which are genetically selected and specifically raised for the high-end hunting, breeder and venison markets. Adirondack Red Stag Farm is situated in the foothills of the Adirondacks Mountains at the base of Star Hill, the highest point in Oneida County, N.Y. One of

the only red deer farms in the Empire State to sell live animals, Adirondack Red Stag Farm features world-class trophy stags for hunts, breeding stags and breed hinds. The facility features a closed herd, which is CWD tested and TB accredited.

And, they are apparently are on the right track. Not only is Adirondack Red Stag routinely producing yearlings which feature 30 points or more, the Ankens won the antler competition at the 2016 NADEFA Conference, held recently in Tulsa, Okla. The winning stag was ‘Culdabeast,’ a yearling which produced 64 official points and an incredible score of 377 2/8 inches, which Anken believes could be a world record.

“Culdabeast is very unique even among red deer,” adds Anken. “He’ll definitely be featured in our breeding program.”

Anken explains that the deer industry is a whitetail based industry, but red deer are excellent for two different markets.

“Any animal that does not score well enough to be considered as a trophy or top-of-the-line breeder, we can use them in the venison market,” he says. “We also use their antlers to make chandeliers, pistol grips and knife handles. We use every part of the animal, right down to their ivory eye teeth that my wife uses to craft custom earrings.”

Anken’s success perhaps foretells a new chapter in deer farming. With less market competition, a proven success in diverse markets, and a possible new world record breeder in their industry, red deer just might have many more prospective new deer farmers seeing red. ♦