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## **Annual herd inspection 2013**

On a very cold day in February I met up with Charlie and the stockmen Pat and Andy at the castle for the annual herd inspection. Charlie explained to us that it has never been his intention to copy the project of Frans Vera in the Oostvaardersplassen where large herbivores are allowed to behave as wild animals without any human interference. This means that stocking rates at Knepp will be controlled by man and kept at a level that is thought to be right at the time. This will create a specific vegetation which will vary when stocking rates are altered as density of herbivores is one of the main influencing factors of vegetative growth.

With this in mind we set off into the cold.

Despite having the impression that there was little grass left for them, the animals in the Northern Block were in good condition. Historically this herd has always been in a better condition compared with the other two herds due to the abundance of good grazing in this plot relative to the number of grazing animals.

The Longhorn cattle in the park were also in a very good condition this year. Due to a defective bull firing “blanks” in 2011, few cows calved in 2012. The result of this is that most animals didn’t have a calf to suckle and were able to put on more weight compared to other years. Over-condition in some animals could potentially cause calving difficulties later this spring. It was striking in both the Northern herd and the one in the Park that mature cows “were carrying more flesh” than yearling animals. In the Southern block the body condition scores of the animals were lower compared to the other two herds, but still not to the extent that it gave any rise of concern. This would imply that there is still room for increasing the stocking density in the Southern block. We observed how cattle were using their horns to get branches of willow down to browse on. Although salicylic acid in willow bark has caused problems during the winter of 2009/2010 animals are eating smaller quantities of it as more areas for grazing have developed since.

All of the animals that are losing excessive body condition are routinely blood sampled and we have found an increase in liver fluke. Liver fluke is a common parasitic infection of grazing animals. It is seen in areas where the mud snail *Galba (Lymnaea) truncatula* is present as it acts as an intermediate host, which is essential for the fluke parasite’s lifecycle. After the wettest year on record there has been a rise in fluke infections nationally. Although cattle can build up a certain degree of immunity to this parasite it is rarely enough to prevent weight loss or even death due to liver failure.

Recently a diagnosis of Blackleg disease has been made in the Northern Block. This disease is caused by toxins produced by a type of Clostridium bacteria. Clostridial spores can remain dormant for a long period of time in soil and organic matter. Disturbance of earth due to poaching in certain areas may have resulted in animals being exposed to the Clostridial spores. The clinical sign of Blackleg is sudden severe lameness shortly followed by death which can affect several animals.

We are working closely with the Soil Association to put preventative measures in place to avoid further losses.

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