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Annual Herd Inspection 2012

The annual herd inspection for Knepp castle, Home Farm was carried out on the 15th February 2012.

Park Herd

The cows were in a good condition considering they should be at their leanest at this time of year. The body condition scoring varied between 3 and 3½ on a scale 1-5. This good condition can be explained by the fact that the bull, Drako, had been non-fertile for most of the breeding season. This has resulted that few cows got in calf and as non pregnant animals do not require energy for fetal growth, they had not had to use much of their own body reserves during the winter months. As these animals will not suckle calves in the spring/summer of 2012 these animals will gain even more condition this year. A potential issue could arise next year when these animals calve in over condition resulting in calving difficulties and downer cows.

It was striking to see that several steers were in significantly poorer condition than the cows (BCS<3). One can only speculate for the reasons behind this.

Southern Block

The animals in the southern block have never formed a cohesive herd and are scattered in various smaller groups. The first few animals that we encountered were in a willow shrub and the average body condition score was 2. Another larger group all had a body condition score exceeding 3. Despite the abundance of ragwort in the southern block during 2011, the animals did not seem to be affected by it. When eaten by animals ragwort can be toxic causing liver failure. Horses, cattle and pigs are vulnerable. Deer are more tolerant. The green plant is fairly unpalatable for animals but dead or dying ragwort is attractive to stock, and remains poisonous. Cattle and horses do not normally graze ragwort but when other food is scarce may be forced to do so.

When large quantities of ragwort are consumed acute symptoms may occur resulting in death after a few days. More commonly the effects are chronic and cumulative. Early symptoms in cattle include poor appetite, constipation and, later jaundice. In horses, lethargy and yawning are characteristic symptoms. Blindness can also be seen. There is no specific treatment.

Due to the profuse growth of ragwort on Knepp Estate in 2011 all the animals, particular the susceptible cattle and ponies, were closely monitored for signs of toxicity. None was observed and animals had one of the best years since the project started.

During the autumn four thin cows and some poorly looking calves were presented for veterinary examination. Blood tests revealed signs of acorn poisoning in calves and liver fluke infection in three of the four cows. Calves were housed for the period when acorns were abundant and the cows recovered quickly after fluke treatment.

It was considered to blood sample some Exmoor ponies to evaluate their liver values to see if these animals were affected by ragwort. In my opinion gathering and blood sampling will cause significant stress to these semi-wild animals and is a hazardous exercise for both man and animal. Body condition scoring of the ponies has demonstrated that all animals are in a healthy condition. In future any culls/deaths will be examined for signs of liver cirrhosis.

I feel that through constant monitoring and detailed testing we have built up a good picture of the health status of the herd. The results of the various blood tests, body condition of the animals and the low mortality rates for the various species suggest that ragwort is not affecting the animals on the Knepp Estate. During 2011 it has been demonstrated that despite the abundance of ragwort, animals have managed to find more palatable forages and have avoided the ragwort.

In the larger group of cattle that we encountered, three females had dried mucus on their tails and rub marks on their backs. It might be that these animals are not in-calf and have been bulling recently. If this is the case then we have to ask ourselves why are these not in-calf? Have these animals aborted?

Due to the late castration of a bull calf three calves were born in February which is outside the desired calving period based on available winter feed.

It was interesting to observe that cattle browse on willow twigs up to 6 feet off the ground.

All the Exmoor ponies were kept in one of the paddocks at Brookhouse Farm. None of these animals caused any reason for concern as all 16 were in good condition.

Northern block

Due to availability of more and better grassland the animals in this herd are always in a better body condition compared with the other two herds.

Also in this herd, some animals, particular calves, had developed a particular taste for acorns during the autumn. Several calves had been housed after acorn toxicity had been confirmed. All these calves seem to have made a remarkable recovery and were indistinguishable from the other calves.

Yours sincerely,

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