

So near Christmas, he just has to be named not "Rudolph" but "Prancer"

Every day of the year we get two or three calls to go out and rescue deer. These 'rescues' tend to fall into three categories: road traffic accidents, caught in fences or attacked by dogs. The deer also fall into two categories, small or large. Small deer include muntjac, Chinese water deer and roe deer which can be handled by most of our rescue teams. The large deer, usually fallow, fall into my domain as they can weigh up to 80 kilos and be almost impossible to handle.

Luckily fallow deer are localised into specific areas so we know that a 'deer call' from Ivinghoe, Stokenchurch, Bernwood or Stanton St. John are more than likely going to be fallow, a job for 'heavy rescue'. This particular call one wet, dark evening came from the Stokenchurch area but, we were assured, was definitely a muntjac. Two of the nursing team, Sharon and Francesca, were duly despatched to rescue this

small deer lying by a remote forest road. Knowing the area, it was no surprise when Sharon phoned on the mobile to say that this 'muntjac' was in fact a fallow deer who had serious leg damage and was ensconced in an impenetrable thorn thicket. It had to be rescued so I quickly loaded a stretcher and blankets and headed for the area, the most remote and bleak in the Chiltern Hills.

It took about half an hour before I finally spotted the flashing lights of our ITW Freelander tucked into the roadside down a particularly narrow black forest road with no sign of civilisation for miles around.

Sharon and Francesca led me into the woods and showed me the thorn thicket in which the fallow deer was impossible to see, let alone catch. We would skirt around it and approach it from the other side leaving Francesca to stop it going

back on the road.

Easier said than done. There was no way that Sharon and I could get through the thorn thicket so, dragging the stretcher, torch and blanket we had to crawl through on our hands and knees until we met a field fence that we then had to climb over. Luckily the fence had also stopped the deer which all of a sudden was standing there, right in front of my face. I don't know who was the most surprised, me or the deer. He did no more than turn and dive back into the thorn thicket. "Oh no you don't", I think I shouted as I reached and grabbed a back leg before it disappeared into the thorns. I pulled him back and somehow held onto him in a deer carrying arm lock around his middle. Luckily again he was only a young fallow or else he might well have dragged me into the thicket. As it was he was too heavy to lift one armed over the fence so Sharon had to give me a hand. Once he was over we soon had him strapped to the stretcher and covered by a blanket.

All this time Francesca had stood on her own in the woods, on the other side of the thicket. She couldn't see our torch nor hear us as we started to search the field in the pitch black to see if we could find a gateway. All of a sudden a horrible, high-pitched almost disembodied voice hollered out at her, "Turn me off! I need recharging!" "Turn me off! I need recharging!" "Turn me off! I need recharging!" I think she nearly died

of fright and dropped her torch which seemed to have this wonderful effect of calling out if its batteries ran low.

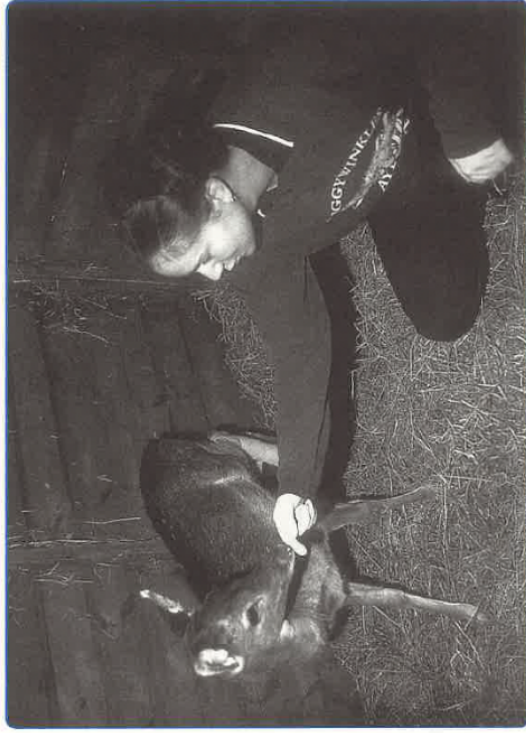
We also heard the torch from the field and burst out laughing as we could now hear Francesca muttering something about "a stupid torch".

We never did find a gateway and in the end had to manhandle the stretchered deer over the fence and drag the stretcher under the thorn thicket, once again on our hands and knees.

Soaked, cold and still laughing at Francesca we then loaded the surprisingly calm deer onto the Freelander for the drive back to the Hospital, always happy that we had managed to rescue the deer from a slow and lingering death in that thorn thicket.

Back at the hospital the deer needed an intravenous drip to counter the inevitable metabolic shock it would be suffering from. At this stage it is crucial to totally evaluate the condition of the deer, predict if any surgery might be necessary and most important of all, confirm whether it was male or female. Part of its back leg was missing so at least the rest of the leg would need amputating - which meant that we would not release the deer but instead would introduce it to our small herd of fallow deer in the paddocks below the hospital. But horror of horror the deer was a male and male fallow deer are too dangerous to be kept in captivity.

Let me explain, each year in a rush of testosterone male fallow deer go into a rut period where they will challenge and fight anything that moves.



This is alright in the wide open spaces of a wood but in one deer paddock a buck would be a danger to anyone venturing into his territory. It is possible to castrate male animals in order to calm them but deer need their testosterone in order to shed their antlers after the rut is over. Without this hormone there is a possibility that the antlers will not shed and the ensuing annual growth of antlers would create a deformity on the deer's head.

We had to make a decision there and then. Normally a full grown unreleasable fallow buck would have to be 'put to sleep'. But this was a young deer who had not even yet grown any antlers and Sharon had already named him 'Rudolph', but that was too naïf so we re-christened him "Prancer". I took the cover off his head and looked at his face. He licked my hand as I held his head and he looked around the 'prep room' as though he had been with us all his life. We couldn't kill him so spoke to John Lewis, our vet, to get his agreement to perform the major

surgery that was needed on the leg, to neuter "Prancer", and then each year look at his growth of antlers, at least giving him a chance of some life.

Nobody had ever monitored the antler growth of a neutered fallow buck so we all might be pleasantly surprised to find out that with veterinary intervention "Prancer" might be able to lead a full life in amongst our little herd of fallow does.

Sometimes in dealing with injured wild animals we have to make momentous decisions. This time we had allayed the inevitable and everybody was over the moon. "Prancer" has not yet had the remains of his leg amputated. It was too badly infected for surgery but is responding well to antibiotics and L.I.C. from everyone. We thought we had adopted him, but he seems to have adopted us. I will let you know how he gets on over the next few years.

We hope we have given "Prancer" the best of Christmas presents, his life.