

Bottle Feeding vs. Not – Comparing Benefits of Both

It never fails. Every spring Nathan and Christy Ross need to bottle feed a few of their newborn fawns. Although the plan is always not too, if a fawn appears as though it may not make it without intervention, both feel obligated to step in and help. It may not be nature's way, but it does help save newborn fawn lives at Rockin R' Whitetails in Mountain Home, Texas. Yet still, Nathan and Christy, who are in their eighth year of deer farming, believe the heartiest youngsters are those raised as naturally as possible.

"We love for the mama to be able to take care of them," Christy said. "But we also want what's best for that individual fawn."

"We always try to do it naturally, but it always seems that out of 100 fawns or so, about ten percent of them need intervention for various reasons," Nathan explained. "Some does have babies and just walk away from them while others are great at raising them. Or sometimes a doe has triplets and one fawn is too small to nurse or receive adequate attention from Mom. Bad, wet weather can also be an issue with umbilical cord infections or can cause bacteria in the soil. Life or death is the determining factor for us (for intervention.)"

Other deer farmers, who feel intervention may not be the best course of action, agree that heartier deer are ones raised next to their mother. However, "if they were born weak and sickly, perhaps it wasn't meant to be that they survive," offered Chuck Blain of Twin Creek Farm in Fedora, South Dakota. "It's nature's way of promoting a stronger herd."

Echoing similar sentiments is Brad Heath of Orion Whitetails in Plainfield, Wisconsin. "There can be many more overall health issues such as scours when you intervene and bottle feed," Heath said. "I've never seen scours in natural settings." Heath, who has been through 22 successful fawning seasons, also believes naturally raised fawns have stronger survival instincts, and he sincerely appreciates the money, labor and time saved by not bottle feeding.



However, given the high-quality of milk replacers available on the market, many farmers such as Lester Eicher of Springfield Whitetails in Grabill, Indiana, feel bottle-raising their prize inventory and remaining more up-close and personal with their deer is a better way to go. Milk replacers can mimic the same ingredients found in natural milk and may even contain additional vitamins and probiotics. Many milk replacement companies go to great lengths to ensure their products are safe, thoughtfully manufactured and have long shelf lives. Bottle feeding with milk replacers also gives a deer farmer the control over the regularity and amount each fawn receives, ensuring all grow up with the best possible chance to thrive. Many deer farmers also feel that bottle-raised fawns are calmer and much easier to handle as they grow older, but will usually only bottle feed doe fawns, not bucks.

However, both Heath and the Ross's feel that every deer raised naturally will be just as calm as a bottle-fed one, given that you are always around them and caring for them. "Fawns see the interaction and they think it's normal," Nathan emphasized. Heath agreed while acknowledging "I've sold deer that were not bottle fed and you could feed them treats out of your hands. Put a bottle-fed deer and a non-bottle-fed deer side-by-side, and you can't tell the difference." In addition, "bottle feeding has been a trend to increase marketability," Kristy said.

After it's said and done, whether you bottle feed or not, every successful deer farmer will agree about this: vaccinating does before they deliver fawns. Hands-down this is one the best pieces of advice any deer farmer can give or receive as it gives every fawn a head-start in life, regardless of what lies ahead. Because at the end of the day, every deer farmer wants the same thing. A hearty, healthy producing buck or doe that perpetuates quality genetics and longevity.

By: Gail Veley

