

The Importance of Hill Breeds in a Structured Breeding Program

By Graham Phillipson

Throughout history, hill breed sheep have been the basis for all breeds, with many scattered all over the world and living autonomously in mountainous regions. During more recent centuries certain hill sheep have been developed to consistently breed exactly true to type and now form the basis of structured breeding programs.



Photo courtesy of Littledale Farms

A mixed group of the Phillipsons' hill sheep graze at Littledale Farms, in Richland Center, Wisconsin.

THE SHEPHERD

Some of the breeds are: Scottish Blackface (SBF), North Country Cheviot, Shetland, Swaledale, Welsh Mountain, and several other regional breeds. For the purposes of this article we discuss the Scottish Blackface sheep that are indigenous to Northern England, Scotland, and similar cooler temperate climates.

Scottish Blackface Origins

The history of the breed is lost in the mists of the past, but there are references to sheep which were probably the forerunners of the Scottish Blackface of today. Monastery records of the 12th century speak of the Dun or Blackface breed of sheep. The monks used this sheep's wool for their clothes and also exported large amounts to Europe.

The breed has been described as of "fierce and hardy look," and that description still applies today. There are several regional variations in type, which range from the large framed Perthshire with medium to heavy longwool to the lighter framed short wooled types, with the Newton Stewart type being the most refined and improved but no less hardy.

Today, many of these types are intermixed and variations can easily be seen in modern stock.

Changes

Husbandry of the Old Scottish short wooled breeds was completely changed when the Scottish Blackface became more dominant around 1752. They quickly took over the Highlands where previously cattle ruled. At the same time, rivalry between Cheviots and SBF was intense. At first, the Cheviot was preferred, as its better wool found a ready market when Napoleonic Wars cut off imported Spanish wools.

Early attempts to improve the SBF breed with New Leicester type crosses were dropped in favor of natural environmental improvement, when it was realized that the SBF had the ability to survive and reproduce under the most adverse conditions and was therefore best suited to hill and mountain grazing.

In earlier years the Border Leicester was crossed extensively with SBF and North Country Cheviot (NCC) as a sire to the older draft ewes. Later, Wensleydales and Teeswaters became associated with the Swaledale for

crossing; this cross produced the 'Masham' crossbred.

Today, most draft ewes are crossed with the Bluefaced Leicester (BFL) to produce the Scotch Mule.

History

Breeders of Blackface sheep in Northern England formed a Swaledale Sheep Breeders in 1920, because large numbers of SBF sheep from Scotland were being sold further south. This led to an accelerating trend of Swaledales being used in SBF flocks to increase milking performance.

Other similar breeds to SBF are the Lonk, Derbyshire Gritstone, and the Rough Fell; with the Rough Fell being larger than the SBF or Swaledale, and have a closer, finer, heavier fleece that tends to get waterlogged in heavy rains.

There are many similar regional breeds all over Northern England, though none of these exist in North America.

Today, there are about 2.5 million Scottish Blackface and a half million Swaledale in the UK.

The SBF represents about a third of the UK's purebred stock and, commercially more important, contributes its genes to millions of crossbred stock.

This Blackfaced Hill breed is basic to the UK sheep industry. One hundred and fifty years ago, their presence was hardly acknowledged by pedigree breeders, who thought of them as the only ones able to survive in such dreary wasteland where they are found in Central and Northern Scotland.

Scottish Blackface sheep are "easy care" and ewes lamb easily, quickly and, aided by the mothering of the attentive ewe, lambs are up and feeding in a very short time. The ewes are defensive of their lambs and develop a strong bond.

Both ewes and rams are horned with black and white markings on heads and legs. The body of the fleece should be free of black fiber.

Scottish Blackface Wool

Scottish Blackface wool is in a class of its own and has no direct competitors in its field. The purpose of the fleece is to keep the sheep dry and warm in the extremes of the bitter weather she has to face. One good shake will disperse all the snow off her back and the

openness of the fleece allows quick drying.

There are variations in fleece types relative to their regional type. The Southern types have finer wool and are generally classed as short or medium fine with a Bradford count of 40 or so. Northern types have coarse stronger wool and normally yield around 5 to 6 lbs of grease wool.

The main markets for these wools are mattress and upholstery trades, carpets, and heavy cloth trades.

These carpets are far superior in every way to carpets made from man-made fibers and softer wools; they are warmer, better wearing and have a rich deep feel and appearance which artificial fibers cannot achieve.

The finer wools are used for blending into many strong wearing clothes, overcoats, working tweeds, and heavy blankets. The finest Scottish Blackface wool is blended with North Country Cheviot wool and goes to the famous Harris Tweed trade.

Hill breeds are the focus of the second annual North American Hill Sheep Show, in Escanaba, Michigan, September 19-21. It's the first British style sheep show hosted in the U.S., and features British judges and opportunities to learn more about sheep farming U.K style.

For more info, check out:
nahillsheepshow.com.

Hardiness

The Scottish Blackface breed has been developed to utilize rough or coarse grazing ground and to produce quality grass fed market lambs. When stocking new ground, the Scottish Blackface ewe has the added advantage of the homing or hefting instinct.

The Scottish Blackface breed is very self-sufficient but may need assistance to winter over in those areas where snow falls are heavy and little or no ground is blown bare. Supplement

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tary hay feeding may be needed. They recover very quickly following bad winters since they have great courage, which keeps them foraging for the best spring growth available. Almost nothing can tame their independent spirit which is what makes them a premier hill breed.

Sheep breeding in recent years has been more directed at prolificacy of the ewe and ensuring that the carcass of the lamb has minimum fat and bone. Within a given breed, the number of lambs born is of low inheritability, meaning differences are not genetic but mainly environmental and management. Within a breed, selection for prolificacy is likely to have minimal effect, since earlier generations of sheep breeders have already raised fertility as high as practically possible.

Cross breeding to produce hybrid maternal ewes is far more successful because genetic factors add to the cross traits of hardiness, prolificacy, and carcass quality. These F1 hybrid maternal ewes are derived from crossing two purebred breeds, which is not the same as breeding crosses with crosses. Therefore, the types of purebred ewes available are fixed and mostly older (4 years +) draft hill breeds are used.

Tiered Breeding System

The Scottish Blackface is at the pinnacle of the 3 Tier Stratified Breeding System where

ewes are kept on coarse grounds for around four years and the older ewes are drafted to better pastures to be put to the Bluefaced Leicester or North Country Cheviot or Border Leicester Rams to produce Scotch or Cheviot Mules or the English Half-bred/Greyface maternal ewes.

The ewe lambs from these crosses are both docile and prolific and are ideal for further crossing with heavy meat breed terminal sires to produce fast growing grass fed quality prime lamb.

The Scottish Blackface ewe has a long life and typically will give four or five lamb crops on the hill or marginal ground and a further two or

three crops on the lower ground.

The rams are also long lived, and are typically put out on the hills with the ewes in November, one ram to 40 or 50 ewes.

The rams run with the ewes for about six weeks and are then brought in to winter pastures. Ewe lambs are not normally put to the ram in their first year. The rams are often painted with an orange raddle before going to the ewes, so the shepherd can keep an eye on his activities from a distance.

The SBF ewe has two roles in meat production; first on the hills usually as wether lamb and secondly on lower grounds as finished market lambs and lambs from meat breed terminal sires.

The most popular crosses being with the Bluefaced Leicester and Border Leicester, but it has also been found that the SBF ewe very easily adapts to a wide variety of rams giving a lamb crop with good management of 200% or greater.

Foothold in the U.S.

In the U.S. the Scottish Blackface, and other hill breeds, have not reached their full potential as the basis for premium lamb production, due, in part, to the small numbers of animals available. This breed is ideally suited to grass based farming and in an era when grain costs are escalating, these sheep will thrive and be profitable on all types of pasture, particularly in the northern states. The production of the F1 mule ewe can surely follow and the commercial producer will have an easy keeping, productive commercial ewe available to produce premium market lambs on grass.

The Scottish Blackface Breeders Union was established to promote this Premier Hill Breed. The object is to maintain the breeds' own unique identity and to be the maternal ewe that produces the ubiquitous Scotch Mule ewe.

— previously published in *Sheep!* magazine, in 2008.



Photo courtesy of Littledale Farms

The Phillipsons' border collie, Emma, works a mixed group of hill breeds: Scottish Blackface and North Country Cheviot.