



Four horned Hebridean ram

BREED FOCUS: Hebridean Sheep

Helen Babbs meets the crofters' sheep that's perfect for smallholdings.

When Ken Ballinger steps out of his back door, his flock of Hebridean sheep in the surrounding field look up and bleat a greeting. "They all come rushing down if I go out and call them," says Ken. "They're very inquisitive and friendly. If we didn't have the electric fence round the garden, they'd come right into the house!"

Crofters' sheep

This level of friendliness is typical of Hebridean sheep, perhaps due to the breed being originally the "household sheep" of the crofters on the western coasts and islands of Scotland. A primitive breed, these small black sheep had flourished in the challenging coastal environment for centuries, but in the 1800s, the introduction of new, "improved" sheep breeds gradually forced the Hebridean sheep out. By the 1970s, there were no flocks left on the Scottish islands, and with only around 300 sheep surviving in parkland flocks elsewhere in the UK, the RBST identified Hebridean sheep as a breed "at risk of extinction."



Today, thanks to considerable conservation work, Hebrideans are no longer on the RBST danger list, with over 3000 pedigree breeding ewes registered in the UK. Some are back on their native islands, but flocks exist throughout the country, including the Vault flock on Ken Ballinger & Zoe Wright's smallholding in the Welsh Marches. "We started with three ewes from the Cotswold Farm Park in 2004, as lawn mowers," says Ken. "Now we have a dozen ewes and a ram, plus a dozen shearlings. Joe Henson at the Cotswold Farm Park recommended them as ideal for a small acreage or new sheep keepers and we've found them to be so!"

Little black sheep

The first aspect of Hebridean sheep which makes them ideal for smallholders is their size. Hebrideans are small and fine boned, with the ewes weighing about 35-40kg. "Even on good grazing, their body condition score rarely gets above three," says Ken. "They're a wiry breed." Hebrideans are also relatively easy to handle as they flock together rather than scattering when startled, like Manx Loaghtans and some other primitive breeds tend to.

Although a range of colours used to exist, the Hebridean breed is now a uniform black, including their wool-free legs and faces. Even their tongues and noses are black. "Their fleece is black or dark brown," Ken describes. "The shearlings get paler brown from sun bleaching, as they keep their fleece for longer, and the older ewes go grey." Both ewes and rams have horns, usually just a single pair but it can be up to 6 or 8! "We now have only the two horned sheep," says Ken, "though we used to have some with four horns as well. These



Hebridean ewe and lambs

make up about ten percent of the national flock, but breeding for good, symmetrical horns is harder the more horns they have."

Conservation grazing

The other key feature which makes Hebrideans a good smallholders' sheep is their feeding requirements. "They can be totally grass-fed, depending on how much grass you have," says Ken. "They also like to browse along the hedgerows, and they strip the leaves and bark right off any cut branches we put in the field for them. They're good for clearing pasture of willows and other bushes after horses and cattle, too." This scrub clearing habit is utilised by many regional Wildlife Trusts, who keep larger flocks of Hebridean sheep for "conservation grazing" – helping to clear and maintain areas of natural grassland free from invasive shrubs.

Over the winter, the pregnant ewes have a mineral bucket, and Ken sometimes supplements the



Hebridean lamb

“They lamb very easily; I’ve only needed to interfere twice with lambing in fourteen years.”

Hebrideans' grazing with hay. "It was a long winter, this year," he explains, "so we used about 15 small bales of hay. I also top them up a bit with a locally made sheep concentrate mix. This isn't every day, but for very frosty mornings when the grass is still frozen. It also makes sure they'll always come to a bucket!"

Lambs in the snow

The Hebrideans' hardy, thrifty nature extends over into lambing. "The ewes don't come into season until mid-October," says Ken, "so they lamb outdoors in mid-March." When there's heavy snow, Ken moves the ewes and new lambs into an open barn for a couple of days, before they go back out onto the field. "It's

just to make sure they've bonded well and the lambs have had enough colostrum," he explains. "They normally have twins, but first-time ewes often have a single lamb, who tends to be big to make up for it. They lamb very easily; I've only needed to interfere twice with lambing in fourteen years."

Meat and wool

If you want sheep for more than just lawn-mowers, Hebrideans are a highly productive breed too. Although they are much smaller than the modern meat sheep breeds such as Texels, most Hebridean lambs are raised for meat. "They're marketed as gourmet meat," says Ken, "with its fine texture and gamy flavour." Hebrideans



Shearlings have brown, sun-bleached fleeces



The ewes commonly have twins



Hebrideans get on well with all kinds of livestock

mature quite slowly, and are usually slaughtered as hogget when over a year old. "We carry over our shearing lambs until the following July, when they're 15 months old," Ken explains. "This gives a dead-weight of about 22kg. They can be sold for meat in November, at eight months, but this gives a dead-weight of only 16-17kg." As the ram lambs grow faster if left entire, Ken separates his flock at weaning time rather than routinely castrating the rams. "This also means we can use the shearing rams to provide a tupping service to people who have just half-a-dozen ewes, without any inbreeding risk," he explains.

Hebrideans also serve a niche market with their naturally black fleeces. "We have the skins back

from the abattoir," explains Ken, "as they make good sheepskin rugs." The sheared fleece, both black and grey, is popular with hand-spinners and other craftspeople. "We once sold ten black fleeces to Germany, to make dolls' hair!" says Ken. Hebridean fleece also felts well, and the whole fleece can even be felted together to make "vegetarian" sheepskin rugs. The horns can also be used for various crafts such as walking stick and button making.

Friends with everyone

The final advantage of Hebridean sheep for smallholders is their friendly nature. This makes them good for showing, particularly for beginners. With their restored flock numbers, there are classes for Hebridean sheep



Hebrideans are a popular breed for showing

at many shows throughout the UK, either for the breed by itself or as part of a mixed Primitive Breeds class.

The Hebrideans' outgoing temperament is also good on the smallholding itself, as they get on well with all other livestock. "We currently raise German Pekin ducks, which share the paddocks with the sheep," says Ken. "The ewes just ignore the ducks, but the lambs are inquisitive. They go up to play, the duck quacks and the lambs jump away! We've had the Hebrideans grazing with cattle and horses too, and they even got along well with our Kune Kune pigs." **SH**

For more information about Hebridean sheep, visit the Hebridean Sheep Society website: www.hebrideansheep.org.uk



Hebridean sheep can graze all year round, even in the snow



Hebridean sheep flock together well for handling