



Sheep on the fells

Rough Fell sheep flourish in the hard Cumbrian winter, tended by shepherd Alison O'Neill



IN THE FIRST minutes after daybreak, on a biting cold December morning, a flock of 200 Rough Fell sheep are waiting in a Cumbrian farmyard.

These hardy sheep are eager for their first feed of the day. Twice a day, at first and last light, they make their way down from the high, frozen fells to get the hay, oats, beet and maize they are fed by shepherd Alison O'Neill to see them safely through the freezing winter.

The breeding ewes in the flock are in the early stages of pregnancy, and with the long grass of the autumn flush - the last growing spurt of the year - now gone, there is only very meagre grazing on the snow-bound hills where they roam. The Rough Fell sheep is well suited to endure the hardships of the exposed and high upland mountains of South Cumbria, West Yorkshire and north Lancashire where the temperatures stay below freezing in the harsh winter months. They are a large, heavy animal, weighing between 50kg-80kg and their extreme hardiness makes it a popular breed in these areas, although it is little known elsewhere in Britain.

"I start feeding the flock on December 1 and continue until spring. For the rest of the year, the Rough Fell's strong constitution allows it easily mother and rear its lambs while feeding on the poor upland grasses and heathers," says Alison.

Each sheep has two red marks on its rump, called smits, that indicate these are her flock, distinguishing them from other farms in the area. On open fells and common land, sheep identification is an important issue. Farmers need to know which sheep belong to them and which to their neighbours and these smit marks, daubs of colour applied to the fleece, sometimes along with distinctive cuts in the ears, mean they can tell their animals apart.

The smit was traditionally made of a thick grease coloured with haematite or graphite, but nowadays a harmless fluid which can be readily scoured from the wool, is used. The marks are commonly 'strokes' or spots and sometimes letters or shapes such as crosses, swords or bugle horns. These wool and earmarks are recorded in special Shepherds' Guides, which print the individual markings for every flock in a region. The first one for the Lake District was produced in 1817 and they have been updated every 25 years since then, allowing for the identification of any lost sheep.

There are separate green marks on the sheep's backs which indicate the animals have been vaccinated against fluke worm, which can prove fatal.

"I know each one of my animals without the distinguishing marks. Shepherding is a skill and a way of life to me." Born into a family of sheep farmers and raised on a farm across the valley, she began helping to herd the family flock from the age of four. Today she is a shepherd at Shacklabank, a hill top farm overlooking Sedbergh in the Howgill fells on Cumbria's eastern edge. "Owning my own flock of these hardy sheep allows me to follow the natural rhythm of the land and seasons and farm in the same way that my grandparents did."

Her flock's thick, warm fleeces mean the sheep can, and prefer, to remain outdoors even in the depths of winter, seeking shelter only in the most extreme cold weather. This means they don't need to be physically herded much at this time of year, although they must be vigilantly monitored. The deep wet >





Temperatures stay below freezing in winter and a traditional shepherd's hut provides shelter should a storm sweep in

Below from left: The flock are fed oats twice a day; Curved horns start to grow soon after birth; The distinctive red smit marks that show these are Alison's sheep





snow can easily lead to footrot in the animals, and they must be constantly checked to ensure they are in good health.

Caring for sheep in a challenging landscape such the fells is hard and in a Cumbrian winter, when the freezing north east wind carves its way across the land, it can be gruelling.

Shepherds have to work with the landscape, the terrain and the weather. "I patrol the fields three times a day, to check on the flock. It's too far to walk, and Cumbrian Fell ponies like the one I ride have been working with shepherds on the fells for over 1,000 years. We make a fast, easy pace through the snow, followed by my two sheepdogs. I will know immediately if one of the flock is missing, and will set off to look for it."

The flock are hefted, as are many on the northern fells. This is when sheep instinctively return to the territory where they were raised. No matter how far it roams, a hefted sheep will

always try to make its way back to the same small patch of land, usually about 12 miles in diameter, where its mother reared it and where it knows it can safely feed.

After the flock have been fed and checked, there are hedges to trim and ancient dry stone walls to repair. Every day Alison must also carry the stacks of winter hay through the snow to the feeding shelter, where she tosses it loose to prepare it for the animals. There are flashes of colour in the hay where buttercups and clover flowers have been caught in the tangle. It fills the shelter with the scents of the meadow from when it was gathered in the summer.

With the winter days now at their shortest, the second feed of the day takes place as the last of the light fades, around 3pm. It is now that freezing fog creeps in, pushing dull yellow snow clouds further down the valley.



The flock make their way down the fell for the last feed of the day



Although the sheep have evolved to survive the poor vegetation of the upland fells, they need their diet supplemented with hay when snow is on the ground

“Up on the fell tops, I can see the weather before I feel it. There is a three-minute warning before the rain or snow arrives. But the sheep are intelligent and sensitive animals, in harmony with their surroundings. They know when bad weather is coming, long before it can be seen on the horizon and set off down to the safety of the lower fells.”

Steadily, they make their surefooted way across frozen patches of muddy ice to the shelter, bleating as if to announce their arrival. ■

• Words: Helen McLaughlin • Photography: Ian Lawson

CONTACT

www.shepherdess.co.uk

Hefting sheep

Hefting is an ancient practice in moorland shepherding and eliminates the need for fences or enclosures, helping the shepherd keep the flock close. To heft a flock from scratch can take years; the shepherd must be with animals every day, guiding and herding them to graze only within their boundaries. Having other flocks grazing nearby helps as sheep do not like to mix with other flocks which means they are more likely to remain within their own heft.

Once a sheep has established its territory it will graze there for life, passing on the knowledge to its lambs, who will do the same through subsequent generations.