

# HEBRIDEAN

## Summary

A hardy and minority breed of sheep, once widespread within the Scottish Islands and Highlands, which has now become very popular for use in nature conservation grazing schemes. This is due to the ability of Hebridean sheep to thrive on poor vegetation and to graze/browse in a beneficial way.

**Hardiness** – an extremely hardy breed, able to cope with extremes of weather conditions and make do on poor quality vegetation.

- *Fleece* - sheds water well, allowing breed to cope with continuous heavy rain.
- *Thrifty* - non wasteful of available grazing.
- *Extremely hardy* - able to cope with a great range of climatic conditions.

**Physical Attributes & Husbandry** – a low-maintenance breed of sheep.

- *Foot rot* - rare and usually occurs when the Hebridean is run in mixed flocks with a more foot-rot prone breed.
- *Hoof trimming* - hooves hard, but may need regular trimming (2-3 times per year) if animals are kept on soft ground.
- *Shearing* – necessary for most animals, although ewes that have lambed may shed their fleece. Lambs may get stuck in brambles.
- *Supplementary feeding* - may be necessary for ewes in late pregnancy or lactation, depending on the availability of good quality herbage.
- *Handling* - wary and nervous if contact with humans is infrequent, but can become very tame. Fleet of foot; however the Hebridean flocks reasonably well, thus making it possible to round up with good sheep dogs.
- *Small size* - allowing easier handling than many of the larger commercial breeds. Approximate weight of ewes' 40kg.
- *Fencing* – both sexes horned, thus electric net fencing should not be used. Able to jump standard stock fencing when provoked, but does not generally attempt to escape if food supplies are adequate.



Peter Roworth

**Grazing Characteristics** – a highly suitable breed for grazing unimproved vegetation on a wide range of nature conservation sites, including chalk grassland, lowland and upland acid heath and sand dunes.

- *Browse* - effectively controls scrub and coppice woody regrowth, including Hawthorn, Creeping Willow, Sea Buckthorn and Birch.
- *Bramble* - browses leaves and tips.
- *Bark stripping* - of trees and scrub (e.g. Willow), particularly during winter and when short of fodder.
- *Heathland vegetation* - in trials preferred Purple Moor-grass to Heather, and took sufficient quantities of the former to reduce its vigour and allow Heather to recover (Braithwaite et al, 1997).
- *Coarse grasses* - are readily consumed; the breed is able to thrive on rough grazing.

**Interaction with the Public** – an aesthetically pleasing breed which generally avoids contact with the public.

- *Appearance* - even when well fed, ewes of this breed rarely have a 'condition score' of more than 2.5 (scale 1-5, 3 = average), which can make them appear rather thin after shearing; this perception diminishes as the fleece grows.
- *Aesthetic appeal* – black colour, horns and alert stature make the Hebridean an attractive, unusual sheep that is popular with the public.
- *Character* – generally wary of humans.

**Marketability** – as a rare breed there is a market for breeding stock.

- *Meat* – very good, tender and with good flavour, small carcasses.
- *Wool* – the Hebridean is currently exempted from the regulations concerning sale of wool to the British Wool Marketing Board.

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
<b>Crowle Moors</b> Lincolnshire Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust	Lowland, inland acidic moorland	Grazing since 1995 with 100 ewes (plus lambs) between May and September. Easy to keep. No problems. Very successful at eating Birch and Purple Moor-grass and promoting Heathers.	Karen Gray or Lionel Grooby 01652 634507
<b>Finglandrigg Wood NNR</b> Cumbria English Nature	Lowland acidic grassland, fen and heathland.	Grazing since 1992 with 20 ewes, 20 wethers (plus lambs). Moved between sites all year round. Moderately successful at Rush control on grassland and Birch and Purple Moor-grass control on heath.	Colin Brown 016974 78347
<b>Holcroft Moss</b> Cheshire Cheshire Wildlife Trust	Lowland raised mire.	Grazing since 1995. Use 46 ewes (plus lambs) between May and September. Easy to keep; no problems; very successful at eating Birch and Purple Moor-grass.	Jacki Hulse 01270 610180
<b>Lindisfarne NNR</b> Northumberland (Managed by English Nature)	Dune grassland.	Grazed since 1993 by 12 ewes and wethers, between September and December. Easy to keep; no problems; moderately successful at control of rank vegetation, grasses and scrub.	Phil Davey 01289 381470
<b>Martin Down NNR</b> Hampshire English Nature and Hampshire County Council	Lowland dry grassland and chalk heath.	Grazed since 1996 with 34 ewes (plus lambs), 1 ram and 11 wethers all year round. Moderately easy to keep; no problems; moderately successful at grazing chalk heath and grassland and browsing mixed low scrub.	David Burton 01980 620485
<b>Redmoor</b> Cornwall Cornwall Wildlife Trust	Lowland heath.	Grazing since 1990 with 16 ewes (plus lambs) between March and October each year. Easy to keep. Moderately successful at maintaining heath. No problems.	Victoria Whitehouse or Callum Deveney 01872 240777
<b>Skipwith Common</b> North Yorkshire  (privately owned)	Lowland wet and dry heathland, mire & secondary woodland.	Grazed since 1985 with 150 ewes (plus lambs), rams and wethers between May and August/September. Length of grazing season depends on condition of the habitat. Easy to keep; no problems; very successful at control of Birch, Pine and Purple Moor-grass.	Peter Roworth 01904 435500
<b>The Sandlings</b> Suffolk  Suffolk Coast District Council	Acid Heather heath, with Birch scrub and Bracken invasion. Wet meadows.	Grazing since 1994 with 60 ewes (plus lambs), between May and July. Easy to keep but need good fencing. Have suffered orf and eye infections. Very successful at scrub control, opening up heather stands and general grazing.	Val Sherwen 01394 388431
<b>Besthorpe and West Burton Meadow</b> Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust	Grassland amongst gravel pits, and heathland.	Nottinghamshire WT is planning to expand its flock of Hebridean sheep to become one the largest flocks in the U.K. These will be used for grazing a wide range of sites.	Paul Kemp 01623 825399
<b>Other contacts:</b>		Hebridean Sheep Society	Eric Medway 01423 507741 Jane Wilson 01434 240435
		Annual newsletter <i>The Black Sheep</i> . News updates <i>Blackboard</i> .	*Web page < <a href="http://www.hebrideansheep.org.uk">www.hebrideansheep.org.uk</a> >
		Rare Breeds Survival Trust	024 7669 6551
		Other contacts concerning use of Hebrideans in conservation management	David Braithwaite 01964 553000 Richard Small 0151 231 2051

## Sites where Hebridean sheep are in use & contacts

### References

KINSMAN, D 2001 *Black Sheep of Windermere: A History of the St. Kilda or Hebridean Sheep*. Tel 01539 446238.  
BRAITHWAITE D, GROOBY L & NEWBORN D (1997) *Hebridean Sheep*. Enact 5:4: 8-10.