

# MULE

## Summary

A commercial crossbreed, the Mule\* is hardy and prolific. The established role of the Mule within the UK sheep industry ensures its wide availability and although it is less able to thrive on poor keep than most hill sheep, it is an effective maintenance grazer of unimproved grassland, and therefore has a valuable role within nature conservation.

**Hardiness** – fairly hardy, but less suited to grazing low quality forage than many purebred hill sheep.

- *Maintains adequate condition on poor forage* – although may not gain weight if kept entirely on unimproved pasture. Breeding ewes require supplementary feed, particularly if rearing more than one lamb. All animals likely to benefit from a Rumavite block to assist in the breakdown of cellulose in the gut.
- *Able to withstand harsh weather* – a characteristic of its hill sheep origin, but the introduction of Blue-faced Leicester (a 'soft' sheep not known for its ability to thrive and survive) may have reduced this ability in comparison to the pure hill sheep.
- *Shelter* – natural forms of shelter are adequate.
- *Agility and temperament* – relatively sensible and surefooted, coping well on steep, irregular terrain, although possibly not quite as well as true hill breeds.

**Physical Attributes & Husbandry** – routine husbandry required, but probably no more so than most hill breeds.

- *Handling* – fairly placid, flocks well, easy to handle with dogs and easy to shear and treat.
- *Fencing* – generally respectful of enclosure and not inclined to escape. Responds well to electric fencing.
- *Fleece* – tendency to get trapped in brambles, particularly the lambs.
- *Hooves* – footrot rare on hard, dry ground; prone to suffer from Scald in long grass. Feet require no more attention than the hill breeds.
- *Insects* – not particularly prone to flystrike.
- *Horns* – a naturally polled breed.
- *Breeding* – a prolific breed, normally producing twins, frequently more. Good mothering ability; produces large quantities of milk if kept on good ground. On rough unimproved land, may only be able to support one lamb, even at low stocking rates. Requires high nutritional input to support its high output and to enable maintenance of condition, so considerable supplementary feeding is necessary. Lambs unlikely to fatten satisfactorily on unimproved pasture unless stocking rates are very low.

## Sites where Mule sheep are in use & contacts



North of England Mule Sheep Association

**Grazing Characteristics** – an effective maintenance grazer that strongly favours grasses.

- *Grazing ability* – prefers shorter sweeter swards and will strongly select the richer, finer grasses, but will take most grasses when within a shorter sward. Will readily eat Wavy Hair-grass, Fescues, Bents, Upright Brome in Spring, and may nibble fresh Tor-grass. Once grass is long and rank will trample rather than eat. Little impact on thatch of grass litter. May take sedges in short swards.
- *Browsing ability* – minimal and unlikely to have much impact, although may take some Brambles and seedlings.
- *Impact of social behaviour* – acts as a lowland breed and tends not to disperse as widely as some hill breeds. Moves as a loosely connected flock and does not appear to have a strongly developed hefting instinct.

**Interaction with the Public** – suitable for grazing sites with public access, but preferably where access is controlled and the sheep have room to avoid dog walkers.

- *Reaction to dogs* – vulnerable to dog attack. Will generally run rather than stand its ground.
- *Reaction to people* – fairly sensible and so will generally ignore the public.
- *Public perception* – a fairly typical looking commercial sheep not likely to attract particular attention.

**Marketability** – a popular commercial cross-breed.

- *Breeding* – the Mule is a product of a hill sheep crossed with one of the larger, faster growing, modern breeds. The resultant Mule ewes are often crossed with a fast-growing, lowland, 'meat' breed, such as the Suffolk, to produce a table lamb.

\*Mule – see definition of breed in glossary.

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
<b>Cavenham and Brettenham Heaths</b> East Anglia  English Nature	Breck heathland; acid grassland and Heather heath.	North Country Mules grazed on both sites for 15-20 years; Cavenham Heath in autumn and winter; Brettenham Heath in summer and autumn. Mules not ideal but graziers require commercial breeds and they successfully graze the short grasslands comprising Fescues, Bents, and Wavy Hair-grass and suppress scrub seedling colonisation. Flexible stock density; timing dictated by rabbit numbers and weather.	Nick Sibbett 01284 762218
<b>Derbyshire Dales</b> Derbyshire  English Nature	Limestone and neutral grassland.	Complicated NNR with many graziers; fairly traditional hill grazing regime. North Country Mule ewes (+ lambs) grazed July-February. Useful in grassland maintenance grazing; less surefooted on the limestone crags than the Swaledales also used. Minimal browsing, just seedlings. Hardy and easy to handle.	Ben Le Bas 01629 815095
<b>Devils Dyke, Fulking escarpment &amp; Wolstonbury Hill</b> West Sussex  National Trust	Chalk and mesotrophic grassland and scrub.	Good at maintenance grazing. Compared to Welsh Mountain sheep the Mules graze less hard, tend to avoid Tor-grass, are more prone to getting trapped in Brambles, require more routine husbandry, browse less, but are generally hardy, easy to handle, and confident grazing steep, awkward parts of the site.	Charles Cain 01273 857712
<b>Kit Hill</b>  Cornwall County Council/Tamar Valley Countryside Service	Heath, Gorse and Bracken scrub.	Aiming to promote western lowland heath and reduce the dominance of European gorse and Purple Moorgrass. Commercial Mules were grazed for a short time but favoured the Heather and avoided Purple Moorgrass. No longer used.	Chrissy Lamarchant 01579 370224
<b>Martin Down NNR</b> Hampshire  English Nature	Chalk and semi-improved grassland, with scrub.	Approx.500 Mules belonging to several graziers. About 100 used year round, within electric-fencing. Majority winter on root crops. Good maintenance grazing; prefer fescues and short, fine grasses. Not keen on Tor-grass or longer rank grasses, but checking dominance of Upright Brome. Eat scrub seedlings but minimal browsing. Prone to foot problems in long grass. Hardy and docile. Lambs get caught-up in Hawthorn regularly.	Dave Burton 01980 620485
<b>Sandscale Haws</b> Cumbria  National Trust	Dunes, grassland, saltmarsh and mires.  (282 ha)	Extensive winter grazing by 100 Swaledale Mule hogs and 150 Swaledale Mule ewes (+ lambs) in summer. Good maintenance grazers; favour the shorter sward of the salt marsh. Some will escape to access better forage. Tackle less coarse, low quality vegetation than the Herdwicks also used. Maintain condition adequately and ewes have a reasonable lambing productivity as long as forage is not too poor.	Peter Burton 01229 462855
<b>Other contacts:</b>		North of England Mule Sheep Association Limited	Mrs D Bell 01388 527411
		Welsh Mule Sheep Breeders Association	Mr WGM Jones 01970 624011

## References