

PORTLAND

Summary

Despite being one of the rarest British breeds of sheep, the Portland has characteristics which may favour its expansion within nature conservation grazing. Hardy and thrifty, this small breed is able to maintain condition well on poor forage, and seems to be particularly well suited to maintaining unimproved grasslands.

Hardiness – a thrifty and fairly hardy breed.

- *Fairly hardy* – resilient to extremes of weather, although possibly less so than the hill breeds.
- *Thrifty* – good at exploiting nutritionally-poor vegetation types
- *Supplementary feed* – maintains condition well on poor forage; non-breeding animals will generally need little more than mineral licks. Breeding ewes may benefit from supplements at lambing time. Handled sheep lose the self-reliant skills needed for extensive winter grazing.

Physical Attributes & Husbandry – a small breed requiring routine husbandry.

- *Handling* – co-operative if handled regularly and can be trained to follow a bucket or gathered as a flock. However, in semi-feral situations may behave more like the primitive breeds, with individuals scattering when under pressure, so not easy to gather with sheep dogs.
- *Size* – a small breed; ewes 34kg and rams 45kg.
- *Appearance* – the adult sheep is creamy white with tan face and legs, and black nose; lambs are reddish brown at birth. Both sexes are horned; the ram's horns are heavily spiralled.
- *Background* – related to the Welsh Mountain and a descendant of the native tan-faced British breeds. Nearly died out by 1970; rescued by crossing ewes with suitable breeds, such as the Exmoor Horn. Although generally small, some have been bred for greater size and prolificacy.
- *Breeding* – generally produces one lamb. Ewes milky and protective. Usually easy lambing and lambs quick to find teats. If well fed prior to lambing, may need assistance as ram lambs have quite large horn bumps. Some bloodlines may produce two lambs in intensive systems.
- *Fencing* – fairly respectful of enclosure, although with the protection of its reasonably thick fleece, can push through strands of electric wire.
- *Insects* – not particularly susceptible to fly strike, but its woolly tail is often left long and inclined to get dirty; potential for head fly, due to horns.
- *Hooves* – quite good, hard feet; few problems on dry, hard ground.
- *Brambles* – rarely gets trapped, as seems to have the willpower and energy to drag itself out.



Michelle Jones

Grazing Characteristics - generally well suited to grazing conservation sites.

- *Grazing preferences* – readily eats both fine and coarse grasses, including long tussocky species such as Cocksfoot. Tor-grass is eaten both in season and when ranker. Tackles most grasses of acid swards.
- *Browsing ability* – will suppress seedlings and scrub re-growth, although tends not to bark-strip. Fond of Privet and fresh Bramble growth.
- *Sedges and rushes* – not keen, but will nibble the top of rushes.

Interaction with the Public – suitable for use on public access sites where dogs are excluded.

- *Public perception* – an unusually coloured sheep with attractive spiral horns, so likely to appeal to the public. Its rare breed status, particularly if grazed in its 'homeland' may raise interest.
- *Dogs* – small and very vulnerable to dog attack, despite being a heavily horned breed, although ewes with lambs will see dogs off.

Marketability – although a non-commercial breed, some opportunities for niche marketing exist.

- *Meat* – produces a small, lean carcass with a good, gamey flavour. Some people sell finished lambs through the RBST unit using accredited butchers; there may be potential for further development of niche marketing.
- *Fleece* – produces a fine wool which is good for spinning. There are indications that the smaller Portland, when grazed on poor low nutrient forage, may carry higher quality fleeces than the larger type kept on a higher plane of nutrition. Niche marketing opportunities are currently being explored by the RBST.

Sites where Portland sheep are in use & contacts

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
Badbury Rings Dorset National Trust	Chalk grassland and scrub.	Trust-owned Portland sheep were grazed for three seasons on the iron-age hill fort and surrounding downland, grazing rank grassland and browsing mechanically cut scrub and bramble regrowth. Very successful on grassland with increases in plant diversity; good on scrub regrowth (in combination with Red Devon Cattle). However, the Trust switched to farmer's stock to reduce shepherding input, but would be happy to graze Portlands again.	David Smith 01202 840630
Dorset Heaths Dorset RSPB	Lowland heathland.	Portlands grazed experimentally for 2 years on heathland; fulfilled conservation aims, but switched to graze cattle as an adjacent farmer was willing to graze his stock.	Nigel Symes 01767 680551
Langdon Cliffs Kent National Trust	Chalk grassland.	Small number of Portland were grazed (+Icelandic sheep & Exmoor ponies); restoration grazing of neglected, rank Tor-grass dominated grassland; took live Tor-grass at all stages; little impact on the litter; but, too many dog attacks on site, so got rid of the sheep; the ponies were more effective.	Jimmy Green 01304 202756
Salisbury Plain Wiltshire Ministry of Defence and local farmers	Chalk, neutral and improved grassland, scrub.	Portlands bred and grazed on Salisbury Plain; summer on more improved pasture on the periphery; winter on rougher grazing further into the firing ranges. Require few supplements; do well on the rank winter grazing. Sell finished lambs through RBST accredited butchers.	Pat Holloway 01380 813212
Weatherhill Kinross Scotland	Acidic grassland, raised bog and calcareous flushes, little ericaceous vegetation. 80 acres.	Organic farm with hills up to 900 ft grazed by mixed flock including Portland and Portland crosses. Generally good foragers; obliging and easy to handle; require little supplementary feed; but hefted themselves to a small area of low, wet ground and made no use of the hill-grazing; subsequent loss of half their number to liver fluke; took about 3 years before the remainder adapted to hill-grazing. Did keep Tufted Hair-grass in check through winter grazing.	Clementina Adams 01577 850292
Other contacts:		Portland Breed Society. Chairman and Secretary,	Mr and Mrs Robarts 01785 242039
		Breeder of the smaller 'type' of Portland Sheep. Formerly kept on chalk grassland near Bridport, Dorset, and now on lush, wetter, clay-based grassland grasslands near Lyme Regis. Advice and possibly stock available.	Michelle Jones 01297 561072
		Rare Breeds Survival Trust	024 769 6551

References

Breed Society leaflet.
 Breed of the Month, The Portland Sheep (1976). The Ark 3 (1) 7-8.
 HANSON-SMITH C (1986) *Rare Breeds: A National Trust Pocket Book*