

SOAY

Summary

A good example of a breed which has by-passed the intensive artificial selection applied to most breeds of sheep. As a consequence, the Soay has retained primitive characteristics enabling it to cope in harsh conditions utilising poor quality forage. The Soay is ideally suited to semi-feral situations on large, ring-fenced sites, where moving stock only involves opening and closing gates between compartments.

Hardiness – primitive characteristics make this a very hardy and tolerant breed.

- *Can withstand harsh conditions* - evolved as a feral breed and its characteristics demonstrate the effects of selection in a harsh environment.
- *Fleece* – naturally sheds.
- *Good survival instincts* – will disperse when threatened or under pressure.

Physical Attributes & Husbandry – a small, independent breed, highly suited to grazing extensive, permanently fenced areas.

- *Small size* – an average weight of approximately 25kg allows them to graze on fragile sites.
- *Fly strike* - short tail, coloured body and exceptionally short fleece may all contribute to a very low, almost non-existent incidence of fly strike.
- *Active* – enables it to travel greater distances; useful in areas of sparse herbage or difficult terrain.
- *Handling* – although small and light, the Soay is extremely difficult to herd and catch, even within relatively small enclosures, as the breed disperses rather than flocks when under pressure. Will often challenge and butt sheepdogs. Penning is more easily achieved by leading with food than driving, although this method also has severe limitations.
- *Fencing* – requires well-maintained standard stock fencing, which closely follow the contours of land as the Soay will push under the smallest gap; this can cause problems on undulating sites. Electric fencing may be useful for subdividing compartments; but adventurous individuals soon learn if the bottom line is shorting out on growing vegetation, and will push underneath.
- *Coloured fleece* – may discourage fly-strike.
- *Naturally sheds fleece* – useful as a commercial advantage as it costs more to shear fleeces than can be gained by selling.
- *Hooves* – highly resistance to foot rot.
- *Lambing* – lambs easily and happily outdoors without assistance. Mothers tend to eat the after-birth, and so minimise interest from foxes.



British Wool Marketing Board

Grazing Characteristics - effective at scrub control owing to a requirement for wood in its diet.

- *Mixed herbage* – prefers a diet of mixed forage.
- *Browsing* – control invasive scrub, through nibbling saplings, scrub regrowth and bark stripping.
- *Preferential flower grazers* – like most sheep Soays will preferentially graze flowers from a variety of plants.

Interaction with the Public – quite useful on areas with public access as generally avoid high numbers of visitors, including those with dogs.

- *Appearance* – shedding fleece in stages does mean that Soays can look ‘moth-eaten’ which may need some explanation on sites with public access. However, its quite unusual appearance can also be quite popular with the public.
- *Reaction to visitors and dogs* - tend to avoid high numbers of visitors and any dogs off the lead.

Marketability – a good specialist market exists for meat and wool.

- *Available market* – effective and profitable market through the Traditional Breeds Meat Marketing Scheme, established by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust.
- *Distinctive meat* – well-flavoured ‘gamey’ meat with high meat: bone ratio. Lean carcass does mean cooking methods must take account of lack of fat in the joint.
- *Wool market* – if plucked or gathered, the naturally coloured Soay wool is desired, if clean and free from seeds, twigs etc., in small quantities by the growing craft industry of hand spinners.

Sites where Soay Sheep are in use & contacts

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
Various sites in West Sussex including a Site of Nature Conservation Interest	Old pasture, meadow and meadow reversion.	Flock of 100 sheep grazing successfully in these habitats. Surplus sold on as 'conservation grazers' to other schemes in the country.	Mrs Ann Knowles 01444 483376
North Lincolnshire Coast, Silverines Meadow and Swaby Valley Lincolnshire	Dune grass and scrub, chalk grass and marsh.	Currently (2001) have no stock, but found Soays very catholic in diet, making them suitable for a wide range of problem sites, but unsuitable for small sites where regular movement is required, unless one wants a challenge and plenty of exercise! Flock handled though rounding up on horse back rather than working with dogs. Found limited effectiveness of electric fencing. Need for specialist handling; unlike any other conventional breeds. Very healthy.	Graham and Claire Weaver 01507 604119
Pentire Farm North Cornwall National Trust	Cliffs, grassland, scrub and Bracken.	Small flock of Soay sheep used to graze cliff slopes from 1991. Made real in-roads in to the scrub and coarse grassland. They often ring-barked young Blackthorn and ripped off young shoots of Bracken. Surprisingly flocked and did not tend to escape as had been expected. The Soays then interbred with Rough Fell and Swaledales and are not all 'mongrels'. Often thought to be deer by the public.	Simon Ford 01208 863046
China Clay Works Cornwall Imerys Minerals Ltd.	Grassland on sand waste tips from china clay production.	Soays first used approximately 25 years ago during establishment phase of waste tip restoration. Light tread reduced poaching, but sufficient to consolidate surface for germination and vegetative spread. Grazing promoted tillering of grasses. Few veterinary problems. No commercial market for pure-bred lambs but crosses with Dorset Down were marketable. No purebred Soay now retained except for feral derived from escapees.	Richard Small 0151 231 2051 Jeremy Facey 01726 858815
Other contacts:		Keeps a flock of 115 pure bred Soay sheep. Lambs available for sale in the autumn; breeding stock at other times of year.	Jane Kerswell 01694 751287
		Rare Breeds Survival Trust	024 7669 6551

References