

Belgian Blue Cattle as Conservation Graziers

Extracts from NIBBLERS online discussion group (Dec 2003)

A farmer has recently expressed an interest in using Belgian Blue cattle on an SSSI in Dorset. The site, Lydlinch Common comprises open neutral grassland and a fen-meadows with very important scrub communities. Much neglected, apart from some scrub and tree management, it needs a fair bit of restorative (extensive probably very low stocking density) grazing. I have recently been asked whether Belgian Blue cattle would be any good on this type of site. I have so far only come across them on intensive farms (most recently on a Jersey Dairy farm where they are being bred for mainstream beef market). Could they hack it on 'rough' sites? Does anyone have any experience or know someone who has used this breed.

They are not the breed we were hoping for (White Park and North Devon have also been suggested for the Common) can we be persuaded or should we be persuasive?! I do have the Traditional Breeds Incentive as a possible carrot.

Sean Cooch
English Nature
Dorset Team

I may not be entirely unbiased, but I would urge the use of native adapted breeds for conservation grazing. As you mention, the Traditional Breeds Incentive is based on native breeds, not only to assist conservation of AnGR, but also because they are adapted to extensive systems of husbandry in UK.

Belgian Blues are imported, and are a breed specialised for intensive production. I think they would be anatomically and behaviourally unsuited to production on your site. Both White Park and North Devon would be excellent choices for your purpose, and I know there are several of the former in Dorset employed in conservation grazing. I also have been involved with grazing them on Salisbury Plain and in Savernake Forest.

Lawrence Alderson (RBST)

I agree with Lawrence that the BBs are not ideal but if you have no other choice for now I would still give them a go. They should be able to cope with unimproved neutral grassland fairly well (after all they do have shorthorn blood in their genetics). And the older they are the better.

IGER found that the advantages in performance of Welsh Blacks over Charolais on unimproved hill grazing became less marked as the age of the animals increased. Dry cows would be ideal.

Bill Grayson (GAP)

I manage a coastal grazing marsh farm / nature reserve for the Essex Wildlife Trust. Our grazer used Belgian Blues for the first time in 2003. The reserve consists mainly of improved and semi improved grassland but there are also unimproved areas. The cattle were in-calf heifers and were on the farm for the summer months and did well on the improved areas. However when they were put in a field with both improved and unimproved grassland available they remained in the improved area despite the grass becoming very short - I didn't even see them in the unimproved part of the field.

We didn't put them in any fields that only contained unimproved grassland - so I don't know how they would have coped if they had to eat it.

Nick Robson
Blue House Farm Warden
Essex Wildlife Trust

Sean -

Another issue to consider with Belgian Blues is an ethical one. They have been bred to have so very much muscle that many (most?) pure-bred calves have to be born by Caesarian, like bulldogs. You can get an idea of the kind of thing from the breed web-page: www.belgianblue.co.uk or their American equivalent www.belgianblue.org.

Cross-breeds are less of a problem -- as an ultra-extreme beef animal they are generally used as a cross onto extreme dairy cows in the hope of getting any beef at all from their calves, so the cross-breeds are more normal. Pure-bred animals are mainly used to generate the sires.

So one could argue that by using Belgian Blues (either crosses or pure) you are encouraging both extreme beef and extreme dairy animals, with all their environmental and welfare implications. Is this in keeping with the principles of the TBI? Perhaps you could have an IBD -- Intensive Breeds Disincentive...?

Richard

Richard

Thanks for that info. I'm not surprised but what you have said. The real (potential) difficulty is if a farmer goes down this route and they happen to manage a grassland SSSI and it is the only beast they are prepared to use do we say NO!

Sean

If the stock are not grazing the unimproved areas then they will not be delivering favourable condition on an SSSI. So at some stage you will have to say no - but there may be some more pressing sites elsewhere demanding attention first (which is how we are handling a similar situation in Wiltshire).

Possible suggestions would be to use traditional breeds and sign them up to the Traditional Breeds Incentive, and explore all areas of support within this scheme. Alternatively, if they are worried about the viability of beef/stock produced with such breeds, something like Aberdeen Angus or Herefords will do better and could be sold through the relevant branding schemes. Alternatively, they should consider "renting" the grazing out to someone with the right stock (a WIGI approach here would be to support finding non-SSSI grazing for his Belgian Blues to help ensure he does not need to reduce the size of his herd just to get someone else's funny looking cows on the land he imagined the Belgian Blues were grazing).

Cheers
David

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Here in the Cotswolds we have quite a similar parallel with a farmer grazing Charolais on part SSSI grassland. The farmer had found in previous years that the cattle remained on the improved areas and did not graze the unimproved banks. But with financial support from English Nature the farmer stopped fertilizing the improved areas and he found that as the fertility dropped the cattle grazed both areas as one unit. In the farmer's words - he gained 40 acres of pasture. The young single suckled Charolais looked fantastic. They were finished indoors in the last winter to give the farmer a viable business marketing the beef at a premium, while delivering favourable condition on the SSSI. Surely this could work with the Belgian Blues with the right level of incentives, though I agree with moral issues highlighted about the breed.

As to moving any animals from site to site to match up grazing/graziers with intensive/extensive grassland is fine - but should be kept in my view at a Parish level. It must be better to try and create closed herd situations as much as possible. I think that conservation organisations must be very careful not to be contributing to the spread of TB which is out of control in the Cotswolds.'

If you think its worth passing on please could you let me know how I go about it. Thanks

It is interesting that the cattle appear to have become acclimatised to unimproved pasture. I wonder if any of this learned behaviour was passed on by suckling cows to their offspring - were any retained and reared as heifers? It would be interesting to know if Belgian blues or Charollais would still retain some preferences within the unimproved vegetation compared to more 'traditional' breeds. This kind of thing is the subject of some experimental work at IGER in Devon, carried out by Jerry Tallwin (managing the project, that is - not doing the actual grazing!)

Francis

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