

Discovering Sheep farming

In the Middle Ages the wool trade was the most important in Britain. Many towns were built on the profit from wool which was mainly used to make cloth for clothes. The importance of wool in the Middle Ages is well illustrated by the 'Woolsack', a large square of wool covered with red cloth, which is still kept in the House of Lords.

Wool is still an important source of cloth but it competes with cotton and artificial fibres. There are 16.5 million breeding sheep in Britain.

Sheep are hardy animals that are suited to a wide range of conditions. They can be kept in the open for much, if not all, of the year. Britain's most important sheep product is meat, particularly lamb. Wool is a by-product and now forms less than 5 per cent of the income from sheep.

Over 70 breeds of sheep are found in Britain which is more than any other type of livestock. This situation arose because in the past sheep in different parts of the country were bred to suit very specific conditions. As a result small areas developed their own breeds.

Today many of these breeds are numerically small because a few highly productive breeds dominate the market. The major breeds can be classified into three groups:

Mountain and Moorland/Upland

These are small, hardy sheep which are sure-footed and exhibit good mothering abilities, reflecting the harsh, damp climate and rugged terrain which is their native home. Upland sheep are often allowed to roam over large areas of land so that they can find sufficient food to survive.

The sheep in many upland areas are brought down into the valleys in the winter for protection from the weather. In the summer these lower fields are left ungrazed and the grass is made into silage or hay which is fed to the sheep during winter. Typical upland breeds are Scottish Blackface, Welsh Mountain and Swaledale.

Longwool

Larger in size than the mountain breeds longwool breeds are best suited to good quality grassland. They were originally mainly kept for their wool, but they are now used to produce rams for cross-breeding with the mountain breeds. The resultant hybrid, or half bred as it is known, is prolific¹ and fast growing and is the ideal mother of lambs bred for slaughter lamb production. The main breeds in this category are the Border Leicester and the Bluefaced Leicester.

In spite of the large number of pure breeds of sheep most sheep are cross-bred as they tend to be stronger and grow more quickly. Common crosses include the

¹ The upland terrain is so tough on sheep that hill sheep can support only one lamb each. Lowland breeds and crosses, on better feed can cope with an average of two lambs and most lowland flocks will rear an average of 1.8 – 1.9 lambs per ewe every year.

Greyface (Border Leicester X Scottish Blackface) and Mule (Border Leicester X Swaledale).



Mule ewes and their lambs

Terminal Sire Breeds

These are compact, muscular types of sheep which are suited to good quality grassland and kinder lowland environments. Having fast growth rates and high yields of excellent quality meat these animals are used to complement the maternal characteristics of the mountain and longwool breeds.

Suffolk, Charollais and Texel are the most popular terminal sire breeds. They are mated with a range of cross-bred ewes to produce lambs for slaughter.

Sheep Dogs

Sheep dogs are vitally important to the sheep farmer. Without them he would have great difficulty in rounding up sheep, particularly on large hill farms. Training and handling sheep dogs is a very skilful job and many competitions, known as sheep dog trials, are held to find the best dogs and handlers. The most common breed of sheep dog is the Border Collie.

All-terrain vehicles (four wheel motorbikes) are also increasingly used to help the modern shepherd check his stock and care for them correctly.

The Shepherd's Calendar

Most sheep kept in Britain are seasonal breeders, mated in the autumn to produce lambs in the spring when the weather conditions improve and grass starts to grow. The following dates relate to an average lowland farm, though some flocks lamb earlier and others may be up to two months behind these dates, (especially mountain and uplands).

August and September

The shepherd's year really starts in late summer when he begins to prepare the ewes for mating. This involves ensuring they are in good condition, physically and health-wise. Feed intake is increased to maximise ovulation just before mating, this

is known as 'flushing'. Thin and fat ewes may be separated from the rest to be given special diets and disease prevention techniques such as dipping are practised. Dipping in a special disinfectant solution kills the sheep scab mite which can produce serious disease of sheep. To be effective the sheep must be completely submerged once and remain within the bath for at least one minute.

October

The ewes are mated with a ram. The date of mating is carefully timed so that lambs are born when grass or an alternative feed is available and assistance from the farmer is on hand. Generally farmers like the lambs born as early as is practicable because they are then ready for the market earlier in the year when they fetch a higher price.

November, December and January

Because grass does not grow much in the winter, the sheep diet must be supplemented with other foods, such as hay, silage and root crops such as turnips to compensate for the lack of grass. The shepherd must keep a very close watch for foot rot which is common in the wet conditions of this time of year. In some areas the sheep will be housed during these months.

February and March

The start of lambing. This is the busiest time of the year for the shepherd who may be up all night ensuring new-born lambs survive.

April

Until grass growth is fast enough to feed all the ewes and lambs, extra food is provided. Sometimes the lambs are allowed to graze fresh unsoiled areas of younger grass. The ewes cannot access this as small gates are used through which only the lambs can pass. This is called creep grazing. Sometimes lambs' tails are docked (tails cut short) to prevent the build up of disease and some male lambs may be castrated.

May

Worms and fly attack are a risk to sheep in May. Shepherds, where possible, utilise 'clean', worm-free grazing for their sheep, often alternating grazing annually between cattle and sheep. Where this is not practicable the sheep are given medicine to protect against worms. Preventive treatment to fly attack is also used. This may be in the form of dipping or, more frequently, a pour-on liquid is applied to the sheep's back.

June

The sheep are shorn. Shearing is best done in warm, dry weather. An average shearer can shear about 80 ewes each day, while an expert may be able to shear more than 300. Shearing does not hurt - it is their equivalent of a hair cut. Lambs do not need shearing.

July

The lambs are weaned - that is to say they are separated from their mothers. This normally occurs at 12-16 weeks of age and coincides with a decline in the ewes' milk production. The farmer may select some of the best female lambs for future breeding, but the majority will be reared and prepared for sale for slaughter.

Further information:

The National Sheep Association, the sheep producer's organisation has a detailed glossary of sheep breeds and other good educational material at:
http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=2&Itemid=40

This factsheet has been updated by Alan Spedding from the original which was produced by the Meat & Livestock Commission. Thanks are due to Duncan Pullar of MLC for help with the updating.

Further information about the Meat and Livestock Commission and its publications can be obtained from its website: www.mlc.org.uk

Alan Spedding, 03 October 2007