

# SCOTTISH BLACKFACE

## Summary

A hardy breed widely kept on the Scottish hills and moors, the fleece and size of the Scottish Blackface, influenced by climate and environment of their origin, varies considerably. A naturally ranging breed that disperses widely to forage, it has a strong hefting instinct and is well adapted to grazing extensive areas of low growing poor quality grassland.

**Hardiness** - hardy and well adapted to extreme weather conditions and exposed environments.

- *Tolerant of extremes of weather* - its coarse, dense fleece is resistant to rainfall. However, many flocks are now over wintered on more productive, sheltered in by land, which may condition the breed to a less harsh existence.
- *Maintains condition on poor forage* - although maybe less so than the primitive breeds and one or two of the other hill breeds.
- *Shelter* - adept at sheltering behind rocks and scrub to avoid the worst of the weather.
- *Supplementary feeding* – Generally none required

**Physical Attributes & Husbandry** - a self-sufficient hardy breed, particularly when kept in traditional upland grazing situations.

- *Handling* - run together well as a flock, so easy to work with good dogs. Difficult to handle as strong and inclined to struggle; nervy when enclosed.
- *Size* - medium (45/70 kgs on poor/good grazing).
- *Agile and adventurous* - almost goat-like, so will get to less accessible parts of sites to graze, but may work its way into dangerous places and get stuck or fall.
- *Brambles* - long-fleeced, thus liable to become entangled in Brambles and other thorny scrub. Adults strong and may be able to pull free, although not advisable to put ewes where there are brambles; lambs prone to getting trapped.
- *Fencing* – requires well-maintained standard stock fencing, although lambs may get heads stuck and so need frequent checking. May become trapped by the horns when pushing through slack wire. Will jump, and also very good at climbing.
- *Flystrike* - rare on extensive, exposed upland sites. May be a problem on warmer, more humid lowland sites and on sandy areas.
- *Lambing* - produces good single or twin lambs on low quality keep. Good mothers, able to give birth unaided, with self-reliant offspring. Tend to lamb late in the year (March/April).
- *Feet* - generally good on thin, stony acidic soils of the hills. On more improved and damper sites, their feet will require routine attention, especially if kept on same area all year round.



**Grazing Characteristics** - well suited to grazing extensive areas, especially where dominated by low growing grass swards.

- *Favours short grassland swards* - and grazes even shorter. Takes Purple Moor-grass, Cotton Grass, Tor-grass and other coarser grasses in season. Not keen on Yorkshire Fog and Creeping Soft-grass.
- *Grazing impact* – remains loosely within family units which disperse widely to graze, and selectively produce a mosaic within the site.
- *Sedges and Rushes* - take sedges of short swards. May take Soft Rush in winter in absence of grasses and Heather.
- *Browsing* - readily eats and suppresses Bramble. Some impact on Willow and Birch seedling growth. Otherwise, minimal browsing impact.
- *Ericaceous plants* - selectively grazes Heather; low stocking densities crucial to avoid damage. Not keen on Bell Heather. May suffer a photosensitive reaction if Bog Asphodel is eaten (probably also true of other breeds).

**Interaction with the Public** - probably best suited to large sites if there is heavy public access, particularly where dog walking is common.

- *Dogs* - nervous and vulnerable to attack. Will generally run, rather than stand their ground.
- *People* - wary of humans and will keep their distance. This may have implications for grazing impact on small or well-used sites.

**Marketability** - used most commonly for crossing with other breeds.

- *Meat* - lambs slow to finish and not much of a UK market for its fairly small carcass, although a big European market for the 28-33kg finished lambs.
- *Breed value* - the pure bred ewes are often kept to cross with sheep such as the Blue-faced Leicester, to produce the larger, more commercial North Country and Scotch Mules.

## Sites where Scottish Blackface sheep are in use & contacts

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
<b>Ardalanish Farm</b> Isle of Mull	Moorland and coastal grassland.	Commercial extensive grazing. Hardy, but prone to ailments requiring typical routine treatments. Very selective; favours heather, Purple Moor-grass in season.	Minty and Aeneas MacKay 01681 700265
<b>Beachy Head, Butts Brow &amp; other sites</b> East Sussex Downs  Eastbourne Borough Council	Chalk and other grasslands; scrub.	Restoration grazing with wethers since 1992. Good impact on coarse grasses, including Tor-grass & Bramble scrub. Maintain condition well; occasional hay in frost/snow. Some escapees, so sell-on troublemakers.	Dave Pearce 01323 415267  Mike and Chris Miles 01323 411469
<b>Gallants Bower</b> and other sites, South Devon Coast, (National Trust),	Maritime grassland, scrub, and cliffs.	Good impact on Bramble and coarse grasses with fairly low stocking rate. Disperse well to graze. Dog worrying a problem on some narrow, steep cliff sites, with heavy public usage. Agile and surefooted, but inclined to work their way onto dangerous cliff ledges with subsequent public concern.	David Ford 01752 840434
<b>Insh Marshes, Badgoch and Strathspey Highland</b> Inverness  RSPB	Wet rush grassland and tall fen.	Long history of extensive grazing. Also use Highland cattle and Highland ponies. Sheep tend to stick to grazing the driest areas (flood levies). Low stocking density so tend to avoid ranker areas. Sheep probably not ideal for the site as much of it is very wet.	Tom Prescott 01540 661518
<b>Kindrochaid</b> Islay  Upland farmers	Moorland and sea cliff.	Commercial extensive grazing. Flock of 750 ewes which heft to different parts of the moorland, grassland and sea cliffs forming six groups. Well suited to the environment. Feet fine unless on soft ground. Favour shorter, grassy swards. Select Heather & Purple Moor-grass only in season; rushes when there is nothing else.	Eric and Sue Bignal 01496 850330
<b>Murlough NNR</b> County Down  National Trust	Dunes, de-calcified dune heath, mesotrophic and acid grassland.	Grazed with breed 1987/88-2000. Not very successful at grazing coarser swards. Good effect on Brambles; Bracken trampled well; little impact on other scrub. Select ericaceous plants to their detriment. Suppressed flowering species and did not poach as much as desirable. Hardy. Few dog worrying incidents.	Hugh Thurgate 01396 751467
<b>Pentire Head &amp; Port Quinn Bay,</b> Wadebridge  National Trust	Maritime grassland and scrub.	Winter grazing on coastal site along with other breeds, thus difficult to separate effects. Seem very focused on short swards, grazing very tight; potentially good for Large Blue re-introduction. Readily eat Brambles. Generally hardy and healthy.	Simon Ford 01208 863046
<b>Polden Hills</b> Somerset  Millfield School, C & J Clark and Somerset Wildlife Trust	Chalk grassland and scrub.	Hardy, but did not maintain condition well. Concentrated on grassland areas and not on the vegetation of the areas from which Turkey Oak and Pine had been clear-felled. Replaced with Hebrideans which foraged on these areas readily and maintained condition well. More instances of flystrike and foot problems with Scottish Blackface.	Paul Kemp 01623 825399
<b>Other contacts:</b>		Blackface Sheep Breeders Association	Eileen McFadgen 01764 683746
		Chairman and Secretary of the Achintee Common Grazings. Long experience of the Scottish Blackface.	Lewis and Betsy MacRae 01520 722602

## References