

Aberdeen Flock in praise of Charollais

Carroll Barber reports on the flock at Parkhouse, Peterhead, Aberdeenshire



Highlander Ewes with Charollais x lambs on rotational grazing

When John Simpson returned to the family farm 10 years ago, he was determined to find a sheep production system that required less input in terms of labour. “I don’t like the term easy care but for lamb production to be profitable we have take a hard look at the our breeds and make sure they are working to capacity without too much intervention from shepherds.”

The family farm is Parkhouse, near Maud, Aberdeenshire and runs to 151 hectares (375 acres) of which 200 acres are cereal crops, 30 acres of forage crops and the rest pasture. Prior to his return John had worked on a farm in Aberdeenshire which 7 years ago started breeding Highlander ewes and this led to John’s interest in this breed. The Highlander is a composite maternal breed developed in New Zealand and was bred to produce a smaller ewe with less feed

requirements, outdoor rearing and easy lambing and hence reduced production costs.

“We have a flock of 600 ewes and ewe lambs which all went to the tup autumn 2014. Most of the ewes are now upgraded Highlanders; we started with a base of Lleyn ewes and have been



John Simpson with his father John Senior



continually crossing these to Highlander rams each year to produce our replacement ewes,” explains John. A policy of culling hard any ewes that have problems either with lameness or at lambing has ensured an easier managed flock. “With a smaller ewe you can stock more to the acre and when it comes to handling they are far easier to cope with.”

The lambing is now split into two periods; 80 ewes have been lambed earlier in February, to produce lambs for the high-priced early lamb trade. These are all tupped by Charollais rams. “It is crucial that these lambs have quick growth and produce a good quality carcass; there is no doubt that the Charollais achieves this.” The lambs are all sold direct to an abattoir except for a few that go to a local butcher. The local butcher is quite happy to take lambs at higher weights than the abattoir and the Charollais crosses fit into either specification.

The main flock lambs in mid April and everything is lambed outside. Some buildings are available for any problems but the aim is to leave all the ewes outside. All retained ewe lambs are tupped and the farm achieves an average of 75-80% holding to service. The best Highlander adult ewes go to a Highlander tup to breed flock replacements, the remainder and all the ewe lambs go to the Charollais.

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“My father used to breed registered Charollais, but now we have a dozen or so ewes to breed our own



Charollais x Highland lambs at weight.

rams. We used to aim to breed the biggest tups we could to meet the demand in local markets but the commercial market needs a different type of sheep. A quality carcass with quick growth is the vital element that a terminal sire needs to bring to the flock.”

The Simpsons have tried different terminal sires on the farm but have found other breeds are just too slow growing and lacking vitality at birth. “We find the Charollais nicks well the Highlander ewe, the lambs are vigorous at birth and with a good-mothering ewe with plenty of milk there are no issues of lack of hardiness, even in our outside lambing system.”

John buys a new Charollais tup every couple



of years and prefers a more naturally bred and reared animal. “We want a tup that will mate 70 ewes in one cycle and not lose much condition.” John also looks for performance recorded information and has in the past gone for some Lowerye blood. “I know there is a tendency, especially in our area for ram buyers to pay the highest prices for the largest rams, but the commercial market just does not need big show ponies for sires. We know what will produce a quality 40kgs prime lamb most efficiently.” John would urge all Charollais breeders to think more about the commercial market and what it requires and not focus on showing or unrelated qualities.

The quick growth of the Charollais crosses means all the February lambs are gone by May/June and the main flock progeny by Christmas. The aim is for 40 kgs live weight and most of the lambs grade E and U grades. “We can sell a little lighter earlier on to catch the market or take the lambs heavier to 23 kgs carcase, that is a big plus for the Charollais, there is a greater range of weights that you can sell at and they are still spot on for specification.”

John would like to expand his flock numbers in the future, if any land were to become available. He likes working with sheep and finds that not so many folk are of this frame of mind, so there is an opportunity for him to increase his numbers.

“This year we did try a Logie Durno Maternal line tup in an attempt to put a bit more size and shape into the ewes. We will see if this is the right way to go or not and if we are able to wean more kg/ewe and utimatey more kg/ha from a slightly bigger ewe. But we will certainly continue with the Charollais as our terminal sire.”



Ewes wintering on swede and kale



Pure-bred Charollais lambs