

Highland cattle are being used by Moray Estate to improve the habitat for capercaillie at Darnaway Forest, near Forres. © Celia Delugin

Greener pastures by going native

When Martin and Jackie Beard first encountered rare breed pigs at a highland show nearly 30 years ago it was love at first sight and in 2015 their dream of rearing native and rare breed animals on their 25-acre Parkhill smallholding in Angus was realised.

In addition to pigs, they also raised rare breed cattle, sheep and chickens, and created a loyal following at their local farmers' market for their produce. During this time, Martin also got involved with the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) which is a charity that champions the conservation and promotion of Britain's native livestock as sustainable alternatives to the intensively farmed breeds that have come to dominate agriculture today.

As well as providing advice for people interested in raising native and rare breed animals, the RBST also produces an annual 'watch list' of breeds that are declining or improving in terms of breeding, and has a long-term aim to ensure the future of native breeds.

The Beards started their smallholding with a range of livestock including four British White heifers – a breed currently 'at risk' on the RBST watch list – and were impressed at how easily the animals calved and finished on grass only. After a few years they decided to focus on pigs and sheep and again they've been happy with the ease of rearing Portland sheep and Oxford Sandy and Black pigs, both 'at risk' species.

Martin said: "We chose Portland sheep as they typically only give birth to one lamb so it suited our smallholding plans but they have surprised us because, over the last few years, three or four births have been twins. We now have 16 ewes and sell the lambs as hogget, and we've not needed to restock so

they have proven their worth already." The RBST is attracting more interest from farmers who are looking to diversify or take their farm in a different direction, particularly with regenerative agriculture, as Martin explained: "There are many benefits to rearing native and rare breeds as they are capable of surviving on poorer quality land, with the main factor being lower inputs, which can potentially improve your profitability.

"I think a lot of people are also looking at how they can diversify into selling their own products, either direct to suppliers or through farm shops and markets, and I believe that rare and native breeds are fundamental to this because they are a premium product – they will give you a higher margin, real provenance and create a great story that consumers like to buy into."

The Beards now sell all their meat to Macbeth's butchers in Forres, but there remains concern about the abattoir network able to handle private kills; the pigs are generally larger and hairier than animals raised intensively and Martin only has the choice of using abattoirs more than 100 miles away.

Despite these issues, Martin believes that there is a place for rare and native breeds in every farmer's portfolio: "If you can turn a few fields over to native breeds, you can diversify and bring a different approach to your farming. These animals were born to live in Scotland so they will graze very well on poorer quality land and many can stay out all year round.

"You may have a smaller carcass at the end, but your return on that animal may be better as your inputs are lower in the first place and you will be getting a premium for your meat."

One farmer who does not have to be convinced of the benefits of raising a native breed of cattle is Iain Graham who, since 1995, has been breeding pedigree Highland cattle – the Killochries Fold – on his hill farm near Kilmacolm, Renfrewshire. The 200-strong Killochries Fold has developed a formidable

reputation not only as show winners but also as a strong commercial strain with earlier maturing characteristics and exceptional live weight gains. Iain's main focus on keeping cattle on his farms – which includes the 1,000 acre Balgay farm, in the Carse of Gowrie, and the 160-acre Drumcross Farm in Bishopton – is ultimately to improve the health of his soil.

He explained: "My main concern is the depletion of topsoil and the damage done by industrial agriculture, and that's why I practise rotational grazing of cattle as it is the most powerful tool that we have to add organic matter back to the soil and improve its health. For example, for every 1 per cent increase in organic matter we will help capture 10 tons of carbon and add 26,000 gallons of water per acre."

At the Killochries Fold farm, Iain has an agreement with the tenant farmer, Ian Duff, on the 2,000-acre moor above his property to winter his Highlanders and this has led to benefits for both the herd and the local environment.

He said: "We winter our Highlanders, with their calves at foot, on his moor, feeding them 2.5kg/day of cattle cobs. The cattle take out the invasive plant species and control the rank heather, stimulating new heather growth and providing an improved habitat and food source that develops biodiversity.

"We believe that Highland cattle have made a significant contribution to the increase in bird life by increasing the invertebrate food for birds and mammals. A hill cow will produce as much as 25 per cent of its own body weight of insect life per season. That means a 500kg hill cow equals 125kg of insect life!

"A recent bird survey has demonstrated the increase of bird life on the farm, in particular a huge increase in the lapwing population."

Iain brings the cattle down to pasture in the spring and has changed the calving regime to early summer so that the young animals have access to good nutrition with fresh grass when



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they most need it and to experience better weather conditions, and this has virtually eliminated any calving difficulties.

He said: “Our main market is selling breeding cattle so we only select the very top bulls that show the highest level of the DNA traits we are looking for. As a result, we only select about five a year out of around 30 cattle.

“Highland cattle will do well in most conditions, and paddock grazing them is a good way to proceed if people were thinking about using them as you can get a large number of animals over a limited area but you must rest up each pasture area for a minimum of 24 days to give the grass time to recover. The breed is very good at grazing and putting carbon back in the soil, and the saliva from their tongue ripping out the sward actually stimulates the grass roots.

“The opportunity for Highlanders in Scotland, in terms of carbon capture and improving biodiversity, is colossal, as you can see from the results of our paddock grazing in the summer and holistic hill grazing in winter.”

The Highland cow may be the oldest registered breed of cattle in the world but Iain uses the latest technology to control their paddock grazing in the summer: the ‘Nofence’ system where each animal is given a solar-powered GPS-activated collar which sounds an alarm if the cattle stray outside a predefined area of the field designated by the Nofence software.

Another innovative use of Highland cattle and the Nofence GPS collar system is being used at Darnaway Forest, near Forres, as part of Moray Estate’s trial to use cattle to create an improved habitat for capercaillie. The trial is underway in the 500ha Darnaway & Lethen Capercaillie Special Protection Area (SPA), as Moray Estates Forestry Manager Ben Clinch explained: “The capercaillie SPA is in an unfavourable condition and the bird population, like everywhere else, is in decline, so we decided to undertake a number of

initiatives to hopefully benefit the species in this native pinewood forest. In addition to trying out diversionary feeding at the site to keep pine martins, foxes and corvids away from the chicks, we are also using cattle to modify the understorey habitat through their grazing, pugging and dung.

“The forest is thinned and has ground cover including heather, bilberry, woodrush and various soft grasses and we can already see improvements as a result of the cattle’s non-selective browsing, which is keeping rank heather growth down, and their dung is a big biodiversity boost for invertebrates.

“We’ve had the cattle in the woods since October 2023 and we’ve not had to give them any additional feed and we’re also not having any problems with worms as the grazing

density of the cattle is so low (the herd often has over 100ha to roam through), and they are potentially self-medicating by browsing on different plants – we’ve actually found the overall condition of the cattle has improved since they have been in the forest.”

Renowned conservationist Roy Dennis was instrumental in helping the estate to plan this project using the cattle to improve capercaillie habitat, something which Roy himself has been a huge supporter of for decades.

The 16 animals in the trial are predominantly purebred Highlanders with several Highland/ Shorthorn or Highland/ Shetland crosses and were chosen because they are suited to poor quality grazing and for good temperament, as the forest has public access. The animals are not dehorned as the horns are a natural part of their rummaging in the forest.

“Another important consideration was their grazing ability because we are primarily using them as ‘big mowers’, and they are doing a great job. As they walk from one forest patch to another they create small paths through the dense vegetation which are good for young capercaillie chicks to move around safely for food. The cattle love the woodrush and their hard grazing of this creates patches of earth where other birds can dust-bathe.”

The cattle’s grazing areas are controlled by the GPS collars which negates the need for fencing and Ben’s forestry team can check on their location at any time, particularly if the solar batteries that power the collars run down and need to be replaced.

Ben said: “The GPS collars are a real game changer for this type of natural habitat intervention and I can see the cost coming down in the future which would open up this approach to other forests. The Highland cattle are perfect for this environment and it’s not just the capercaillies that are benefiting from opening up the forest floor as other species like woodcock and numerous small bird species are thriving too.”



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