Soay ewe

Wool

Soay sheep may be divided into two classes irrespective of colour ~ hairy and woolly. As with their wild ancestors many have a coat which is made up of predominantly coarse hairy fibres or "kemps" with an undercoat of very fine fibres. In the remainder there is a loss of this kemp from the fleece. The woolly Soay is a further link in the chain from the more primitive hairy types to the modern highly evolved fleece of today.

Unlike modern breeds these sheep do not require shearing and in the summer the fleece moults. This was collected by "roo-ing" or plucking it from their bodies, but due to the size of the animals no more than 2 lbs of wool can be obtained from each. Sufficient was usually gathered each year, however, for the St Kildans to weave into a coarse tweed for their own use.

The Soays contribution to the sheep industry does not, however, lie solely in the past. In recent years animals have been exported to Canada and Europe to establish new flocks. Whilst the growth rate is not so high as modern breeds they require the minimum of food and management. They can therefore produce economic returns on areas of low fertility and supply a specialist carcass trade.

Soay Sheep Society

The Soay Sheep Society represents the interests of this primitive rare breed. For further information contact:-
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SOAY SHEEP

Introduction

Soay Sheep are native to the St Kilda group of islands some 50 miles off the west coast of Scotland and can claim a long and romantic history.

The islands now have a flock of some 1,500 head living in the feral state. In recent years small flocks have been introduced on to the UK Mainland, into zoos, parks and stately homes, as well as private flocks for breeding purposes, enabling a larger number of people to become acquainted with this interesting breed.

Soay Sheep should not be confused with the St Kilda Sheep, which are a later breed.

Origins

It is believed the first domesticated sheep to come to Britain arrived about 3,000 B.C. with the establishment of the first New Stone Age farming communities. Evidence for this comes from skeletal remains and on rare occasions from remnants of cloth found at archaeological sites. Both these sources point to a breed comparable with the Soay. Those on the mainland would have been interbred with later arrivals or have died out. So it is only on a few islands of the western Seaboard of Europe such as Soay where these breeds have survived.

It would seem from an examination of these animals that they are a result of mixed descent. Their probable ancestors being the wild Ural sheep of Central Asia and the mouflon of Mediterranean Europe. Which of these were the later introduction is impossible to say. We can, however, be sure that they are as close to the sheep of the late Neolithic times as any animals to be found in the wild today.

How the flock was originally introduced to the island is somewhat obscure. Soay is in fact Norse for "sheep island" but whether the Norsemen were responsible for their importation or simply found them there is not known. There is, however, much to suggest, both archaeologically and through the existence of many Celtic place names, that settlements were there before the Norse invasion.

Prior to the evacuation of St Kilda group in 1930 the Soays were confined to the 250 acre island which bears their name. They only had minimal value in what was a primitive hunting economy, and once or twice a year the men climbed the rocks of Soay to hunt the sheep with dogs and, in later years, with guns. Following the evacuation the stock was purchased, first by the Laird of Macleod and a year later by the then Marquis of Bute. It was his desire to make St Kilda a Nature Reserve and he had a well-balanced flock of some 107 rams, ewes and lambs transferred to the main island of Hirta where they prospered.

All the mainland and the other island flocks have come originally from the Soay island flocks and some via those purchased by the Duke of Bedford in 1910. It was a deliberate policy of the duchess to breed a dark coloured flock as she regarded this colour as being the "typical Soay" colour. Therefore many flocks seen today are of this colour.

Related Breeds

The Soay is the main ancestral source of many of our other short tailed breeds. These include Finnish Landrace, Icelandic and may be the direct descent, while many of the tan-faced group - the Portland, early Cheviot Exmoor Horn, etc., owe some of their ancestry to the breed.

Description

The Soay is a small breed with a lithe body, long legs and short tail. A fully grown animal will stand only some 22 inches at the withers. They have an amazing sureness of foot and can leap with agility.

Mature rams weigh about 85-90 lbs and ewes are some 30 lbs lighter.

Fleece colour is usually brown, either chocolate or fawn with light markings on the underbelly, rump, over the eyes and under the jaw. Self coloured (without light markings) animals occur; also black, and there are some with white markings.

Rams have strong down-curved horns in a single plane with no spiral. Typically, the points come forward, and in some mature animals they curve inwards towards the throat. Many ewes have spiky backward pointing horns, but ewes can also be 'polled'. They can also have 'scurred' (small misshapen) horns.

Behaviour and Breeding

In their wild state, the behaviour pattern is similar to other herd animals with social hierarchy and dominant males.

They are much more aware of their surroundings than the husbanded sheep, and seem to rely more on their sense of sight to warn of imminent danger. When alarmed they tend to scatter in small groups or single animals and reform afterwards rather than herd together for protection.

Tupping takes place in the autumn and it has been found that there is a high mortality rate in rams as they do not seem to over winter well in severe conditions. The breed is quick to reach maturity and ewes tend to have multiple birth.