



High-quality feed in winter helps the sheep to produce better fleece and healthier lambs in the spring

The bleak midwinter

Graeme Bethune explains how he helps his sheep to cope with the gales, rain and snow of a Caithness winter



THE NEW Year has begun, and the boys have finished their husbandly duties, leaving the sheepies with many babies brewing inside. The weather is likely to be bad, it's definitely going

to be dark, and there is little or no grass growing. But this is fine, expected, normal. Preparation, feeding and observation are a sheep farmer's main tools: they help overcome anything the winter will throw at you. If you feed sheep properly, they can thrive even in the most heinous conditions; and observing them helps nip problems in the bud. I spend lots of time with the girls during this period, and it's a pleasure to do so. When there is six inches of mud underfoot and driving rain, you have to love what you're doing - if you don't, you're in the wrong business!

Winter is when the great British sheep makes its world-class fleece, all the while brewing its lambies. Wool is my farm's main crop, so the care of the growing fleece is my top priority. The method for success is sheep happiness and good health, by letting the sheeps live as natural a life as possible, and feeding them as high-quality and natural a diet as I can.

I have two different breeds of sheep on my farm: North Country Cheviots

(big white fluffy sheeps), and Castlemilk Moorits (wee broon sheeps) - and what makes them comfortable during the winter is not the same. So I separate them, then I can help them be as comfy as they deserve. The big difference is their response to bad weather; Cheviots stand up with their bums to the incoming weather, while Castlemilks hide away and nest. Such a simple difference, but it demands a totally different response from me.

It can be heart-rending to watch the Cheviots in gale-force winds and Caithness rain (which is when rain flies horizontally, and then goes back up without touching the ground.) But conditions like this are fine for the super-hardy Cheviots. Their natural behaviour is to ride out the weather, secure in their amazing fleece. Just keep feeding them as much hay as they want and they will keep on trucking.

The Castlemilks are also hardy, but 40% smaller so they chill faster in bad weather. They want and need shelter. To help them, I keep them in fields with broken ground, trees, stone walls - places where they can hunker down and nest away. When I say nest, each sheep selects a spot in the field which is theirs, against a tree or anything providing protection. They use their spot to sleep and re-chew their food. This is natural Castlemilk behaviour, and helping them to live like this makes them happy.

I feed all my sheepies the same good hay or haylage (haylage is pickled hay in a rolled-up bag). Good hay is made in mid-summer when the grass is full of sap and sugars, vitamins and minerals - all the things a sheep needs to grow great fleece and lambies. I feed the girls as much hay as they want, even if I have to buy in substantial amounts. This is too important: you simply cannot scrimp on quantity or quality with hay. When they finish a bale, I give them another straight away - as I write this in mid-January, I have nearly finished my hay supply, but am buying in more as needed. The girls are eating as they need to, not as I had planned for them too, if you see what I mean. The sheeps need more this winter: it's wet and very cold, there's no grass in the fields at all, so I must adjust and follow their direction.

I want the different sheeps to feel as comfortable as possible - not just well fed and safe from bad weather, but free to express their natural behaviour. This will make them happier and thus healthier. It's a kind way to manage such lovely beasties - after all, their exuberant and natural behaviour gives me much pleasure, so how can I not support it? They will give me better fleece and then yarn, which will be as ethically farmed as I know how. ☺

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Next Month: Graeme starts his preparations for the lambing season