



Graeme's mother (far right) surveys the numbers of rare orchids now thriving on the farm



# Whole farm health

Graeme Bethune discusses the philosophy that is at the heart of everything he does as a farmer and yarn producer



**WHOLE FARM** Farm Health (WFH) is a concept close to my heart, and the driving ethos of how I farm my sheeps for great yarn. It is the belief that everything is connected:

if you want happy healthy sheep and thus great yarn, then everything else in the environment of the farm also has to be healthy. In service to this concept I have totally changed how I manage my farm, Ballachly, and results have been startling and wildly successful.

How am I gauging success? Threefold: first, the balance sheet of the farm is showing more profit. Second, there is more biodiversity in the farm's environment. Lastly, I am happier. A conventional definition of farm business success is only the first part, profit. Success in the other two is harder to quantify, but nevertheless just as important. After all, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul"?

There is more to life than just money. Most farmers know this; there's pride in doing a good job, pride in a well kept and successful flock. But often farmers have to suppress these feelings because they must make a living. WFH is a management philosophy that allows farmers to practise a kinder, more interesting form of farming.

WFH says that everything is connected, so everything matters. There is a straight line from yarn quality back to a sheep's fleece quality, continuing through sheep health to a naturally formed diversity of things for the sheep to eat and beyond. This means managing the land so there is a natural, wide range of plants - very different from the grass monoculture used by intensive farming systems.

A wider range of plants means more insects; then it follows that there will be more wee mammals eating the plants and insects, their presence checking the numbers of the insects, stopping them eating everything in sight. More plants and insects and wee beasties means there will be more birds living on the farm. Having a healthy number of birds steadies the numbers of insects and beasties, and also helps to spread seeds of the plants in a natural way. Once the ecosystem starts to function naturally it should work as a self-correcting web; it should stop massive imbalances that devastate the farm's productivity, for example a mass hatch of leatherjackets which destroys the plants.

The proof of the success of WFH at Ballachly is demonstrated by our healthy population of top bird predators: we are now blessed with two pairs of buzzards nesting, a pair of sparrowhawks, and at least one pair of kestrels on what is really

a quite small farm. We have also recorded a massive increase of one of Scotland's most endangered plants, the Lesser Butterfly Orchid. This orchid parasites on a rare form of fungi destroyed by artificial fertilisers, pH adjustment and ploughing. After 15 years of working through changes to grazing systems and bracken clearance here, we now have a thriving population of the orchid, which reflects the increasing health of the environment of the farm.

Our sheep are part of this interconnected web of species on the farm. I manage their presence on the farm in balance with its environment. I do not distort one part (the sward of the fields) to overload on another (the number of sheep). That is, I do not plant ryegrass monocultures, I don't use insecticide, or rip up hedgerows to gain more space for grass. I place the sheep inside the larger context of the ecosystem.

Today, the farm is able to support more sheep than before - 40% more! And they are giving better fleece for our yarns and commanding better prices for the lambs I sell. So the farm is making more money. But I am more pleased with how I am earning that money. This profit is not made at the expensive of the land, but in service of the land. A healthy, profitable farm is my small contribution to a better world. ☺

[www.caithnessyarns.com](http://www.caithnessyarns.com)

*Next Month: Graeme gets set for the busy spring months on Ballachly Farm*