

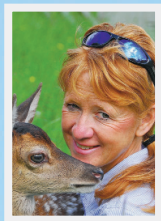


POLLY'S PLACES

Hanging With The Hill Billies

Polly Pullar stops
by Kingairloch to
see if the local
feral goats are
down low... and
she's in luck!

POLLY'S PLACES



IT'S a cold January day. Loch Linnhe is steely grey, hammer marked by fretful waves. The shore is grey too. I sit waiting, hidden behind a large rock.

Oystercatchers brighten the morning with their dapper pied plumage, crimson bills and legs flashing brilliance against a watery sky. Greylag

geese circle before landing noisily on the headland's sheep-bitten turf. A curlew cries as a grey seal bottles inquisitively, snorts and disappears again. The tide is retreating.

A tripping sound of sharp little hooves on rock grows louder. They are descending from the crags on the other side of the road, skipping and leaping, jostling one another rushing to the beach. Several have tiny kids and the females call to them to keep them close.

They cross the single-track road, and trot swiftly to the waterline. The kids head-butt one another in mock battle, kicking little legs out to the sides performing an enchanting caprine Highland Schottische.

I watch intrigued as their games continue whilst mothers pick at succulent iodine-rich seaweed. Further along the shore, there is a tribe of billies. Beach boys; scruffily dressed in heavy coats like muted sackcloth, long beards blowing in the wind. Their horns are impressive as they flick them casually at one another. Pungent, even from this distance, the salt air carries their intoxicating stench – rancid, overpowering, and long lasting.

Once over the Corran Ferry, I often take a detour en-route to Ardnamurchan, to see if the goats of Kingairloch are down low. Tough and hardy, they are well equipped to withstand the elements that buffet this rugged coastline finding shelter and sustenance on the vertiginous hillsides. Yet goats are animals that detest the wet, and it rains often here. Over generations they have become immune to it.

Free-living goats are still found in various parts of

Scotland and referred to as “feral” yet their presence in the British Isles dates back to Neolithic times when they were introduced from South West Asia.

The oldest recognised goat tribe remains at Inversnaid, on Loch Lomondside, though it is diminished in size. There is a well-documented tale of King Robert the Bruce (1274-1329) and the goats here. He was hiding from his enemies in a cave on the hill, but due to their presence lying before its entrance, it was assumed that he could not possibly be inside. His opponents passed by leaving him



Pictures: POLLY PULLAR



Heading for the beach...

“Goats are browsers, but they will eat almost anything”



...in search of seaweed

unscathed. He was so grateful to the hapless animals that he ordered a decree stating that they should never again be molested. Though the Loch Lomond tribe is reputed to be the oldest in the country, it is doubtful if these are really the descendants of those early goats, for between 1700 and 1920, intense planting schemes would never have established had the goats been present. It is likely that they would have been removed, and others reintroduced later.

Naturalist Frank Fraser Darling noted that domestic goats when released swiftly reverted to wildness in only a few generations. More recently culls have kept numbers at Inversnaid in check due to the considerable damage they cause to fragile and important flora and young trees in the National Park. Goats are browsers, but they will eat almost anything.

Man has a long association with the goat. It was one of the earliest animals to be domesticated, and provided not only milk and meat, but also fine skins to make kid gloves, and other items of clothing, as well as fans and fire screens, and tallow for candles.

The St Kildans used goat hair to make ropes for it was stronger than hemp, and during the 18th century it was in demand for perukes, though first had to be bleached and baked to rid it of its nauseating perfume.

Some hill farmers in areas densely populated by adders kept goats believing that they killed the snakes and drove them away, whilst in dangerous rocky locations they thought that their expert scrambling onto inaccessible cliff tops to devour succulent foliage would discourage their sheep from doing so, thus avoiding the risk of them becoming trapped, or crashing to their deaths. Though goats are not immune from falling off cliffs either, and there are many incidents of golden eagles harrying them over sheer precipices.

During the 18th century, feral goats were widespread »

FASCINATING FACTS

Mountain goats can jump nearly 3.5 metres (12 feet) in a single bound.

When goats graze their eyes rotate, keeping their rectangular pupils parallel to the ground to check for predators.

They were one of the first domesticated animals – archaeological data suggests Neolithic farmers in West Asia kept herds around 10,500 years ago.

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Inquisitive and hardy

“Some goats on Ben Lomond were reputed to weigh 25 stone”

Invited to the island of Rum by Lady Bullough during the late 1940s, Whitehead describes a testing stalk. After several days of savage weather and thwarted attempts, he successfully shoots the billy in question. Its massive head is well wrapped as the arduous journey back to England begins. Once on a train, Whitehead secures a carriage to himself well aware of the horrendous aroma emanating from his revolting prize. Soon another passenger enters the carriage, and as he does so, opens the window wide and apologises profusely to him. “I hope you don’t object to the smell of herring as I have just bought some for the wife and I’m afraid they are going to stink the carriage out.”

“Ah,” replies Whitehead, “it takes a good smell to keep another down.”

Feral goats reach sexual maturity before their first birthday, with the annual rut taking place in September and October. The billies behave similarly to tups with ewes, and do not guard their females with the same jealousy as the red deer stag does. However there is often a clash of personalities and dramatic jousting between males. The dominating aroma becomes all the more potent emanating from glands near the rampant billy’s horn base.

Outwith the rutting season, males tend to stick together living quietly as their testosterone levels diminish. Gestation period is around 150 days with kids born early in the New Year. Many fall prey to eagles and foxes, or die of exposure, thus naturally limiting population explosions.

With a growing conservation movement to encourage native woodland and natural regeneration, the place of the feral goat as an integral part of our native fauna is far from guaranteed. But there are still many areas where it can thrive without causing damage. Without the presence of wild goats – capricious hill billies brimming with character – Scotland would be the poorer. 🐐

*‘Up in’ the hill for fine weather
doon I’ the field for snaw
When it’s dry they’ll lie I’ the heather
On the rocks if it’s gan te blaw’.*

Old Scots rhyme for weather forecasting by goat!

on the Scottish mainland. Their long presence in Scotland is illustrated by a wealth of Gaelic names, including Aird Ghobhar – Ard gour – place of the goats, Stob Ghabhar – hill of the goats, and Eilean nan Gobhar – Isle of goats – on Loch Ailort.

There were few Scottish Estates that did not have goats, from Sutherland and Caithness, to the Mull of Galloway, and just about everywhere in between. They were introduced to numerous islands and strongholds remain on Mull, Jura, Islay, Rum and the Galloway Forest Park.

Victorian sportsmen claimed that as a quarry species a goat was comparable to shooting a red deer stag, though singling out a particular beast was not so easy as it often fled into inaccessible country amongst sheer cliffs or impenetrable screes.

Horns, like trees, gather an annual age ring. Some are swept straight back almost as if wind-sculpted; others sweep back before curving around the animal’s face. One sportsman boasted that a goat he shot had such long horns, “it could scratch its arse with just a flick of its head”. The record horn length of 114cm (44¾ inches) comes from the Isle of Bute, but controversy surrounded a claim by W. Joynton, that a billy he shot on Ben Venue in 1937 weighed 140kg (22 stone). Some goats on Ben Lomond were reputed to weigh in at 159kg (25 stone). The deer and feral goat expert, the late G. Kenneth Whitehead, disputed this and said that an extra large feral goat would be unlikely to weigh more than 76kg (12 stone).