Ronnie

Flocking Together

Known as 'living fossils', Soay sheep are native to St Kilda – the breed is hardy and athletic, and certainly not stupid

by POLLY PULLAR

IN my early 20s, I entered the world of the most primitive of our native sheep breeds, the Soay.

We had bought 25 blackface gimmers. They'd cost more than we wanted to pay – but, with buyer's remorse, we consoled ourselves that they were smart and their breeder had an excellent reputation for producing fine, hardy stock. Their offspring would make us a fortune.

As we shook hands, the seller said he was including two Soay wethers – castrated males – as a luck penny.

He took us to see the duo. They looked as explosive as a shaken bottle of Champagne, ready to fizz over at any moment. Had he put them through the sale ring, they would indeed have made a bid for freedom.

"Their meat will be exceptional," he said. "Low in cholesterol, flavoursome, a little gamey and tender – send them to the abattoir next year with your lambs."

Once back at the farm, the Soays joined the rest of the flock. However, over the next two years, we learned much about this extraordinary breed and gathered numerous bruises caused by their volatility and our thwarted attempts to capture them.

When we took our sheep into the fank for routine worming and dosing, the island lads leapt straight at us in desperation to escape, flattening me on several occasions.

They ignored our bewildered collies, soaring over them like Olympic competitors doing the high jump.

I considered us fit and agile, but we were no match for these ovine athletes. My admiration for the people »

A magnificent Soay tup

Main: Shuggie with Polly's partner Iomhair

Left: Shuggie enjoying a walk

Below: Ewe and lamb with mouflon patterning

of St Kilda grew. And we were on grassy fields – they had dizzyingly dangerous cliffs to contend with. Then those wayward wethers vanished. Months later, I saw two horned heads poking out of a field of ripe barley.

The local gamekeeper had also spied them and confirmed they were as fat as butter. We agreed that the only solution was for him to shoot them while they grazed peacefully. He had one and we had the other – and, yes, they were delicious.

Soay sheep have been described as "living fossils" – descended from primitive domestic sheep that came to Britain from Europe thousands of years ago.

DID YOU KNOW?

Tweed made from the wool of the Soay sheep was used by the St Kilda islanders to help pay for their annual rent of the island and was also sold to visiting tourists in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

All Soays on the mainland have evolved from a feral flock that lived on the St Kilda island of Soay and probably had Viking origins. Over the years, sheep were brought back to the mainland, establishing small flocks.

After the evacuation of the island's people in 1930, some animals were transferred to the largest island in the group, Hirta, and have been virtually untouched since.

The Soay sheep sheds its fleece annually and was traditionally "rooed" – plucked by the islanders. The dark brown, fawn or black wool was used for spinning and weaving for tweed. Many have pale underbelly markings and distinctive patterning of the wild mouflon, and have retained their extraordinary characteristics. The ewes can be horned or polled, while the tups are primarily horned.

Though the sheep on St Kilda have survived as a self-sustaining feral flock without husbandry, they have been part of a critical study since the 1950s and have provided unique opportunities for scientists – if they can catch them, that is.

With no predators and only interaction with plants and parasites, their ecosystem is dominated by extremes of climate and the stresses of the rut – their annual breeding event.

Tagging has enabled researchers to ascertain the longevity of the sheep and provides vital information about their movements.

> *"It was the smallest lamb I had ever seen, weighing just over a kilo"*

As an experiment, some males were castrated. A far more significant proportion of castrated males survived the winter than the tups – proving that the rigours and tension associated with mating take a heavy toll.

During the summer months, the islands become green due to the fertilising effects of guano from large numbers of sea birds. The lush grass enables the sheep to thrive and helps them withstand the winter, but on occasion there might be population crashes of up to 60%.

Prolonged spells of savage weather or severe worm burdens understandably seem to contribute to the demise of more significant numbers. Though other, bigger sheep breeds might have damaged the vulnerable flora of the islands, scientists have found that Soay grazing retains the sward in an ideal condition.

Working as a crew member on a small, tall ship moored in Village Bay, St Kilda, on a rare balmy summer evening, I once had the pleasure of watching the Soay sheep cabaret as researchers endeavoured to corral them – anyone who claims sheep are stupid should think twice.

Unfortunately, sound carries over still water, and the desperate captors must have been mortified by the hilarity emanating from the boat, exacerbated by the fact that the guests were buoyed up by a pre-dinner G&T.

I am used to receiving calls about ailing and troubled animals. So when our vets rang about a beautiful creature they thought I would be interested in, I was suspicious. It turned out to be a Soay lamb a tourist had handed in.

I refused to take it immediately, not wishing to be committed to endless rounds of bottle feeds. However, someone came to the house and foisted a bag of milk and a small lamb into my arms. It nuzzled into my neck and began sucking my ear. There was no going back.

The tourist's dog had scared the ewe off as she gave »

Looking down to Village Bay, Hirta

birth on a farm nearby with a feral Soay flock. The lamb had not had colostrum – the mother's first milk – and this is always a disaster, as it will then be prone to every infection.

I sighed and took responsibility, and after a summer of hurdles and near-death encounters, antibiotics and sheer dedication, our lamb – Lord Ranald MacDonald of the Isles, known as Ronnie – blossomed.

We trained him to a head collar, took him for walks and in the car, and his joie de vivre and spirit repaid us daily.

When an eminent blackface sheep-breeding neighbour came for dinner, and the subject of Soay sheep came up, everyone agreed they were impossible to work. I kept quiet.

Later, despite it being pitch-black, I went out to the field, called Ronnie over and put his head collar on – he calmly trotted into the kitchen and spoke to everyone as he does on numerous occasions, and always at Christmas and Hogmanay. The look on our guests' faces was priceless. Ronnie was undoubtedly not behaving true to the breed.

Polly with Shuggie

At seven years old, Ronnie prefers humans to the rest of our small flock. Until last summer, that is.

I had told a friend – who also keeps Soays – that if he ever had an orphan lamb to let me know, as I would willingly take it.

One of his gimmers had unexpectedly given birth at the end of June, and she was unimpressed by her lamb – the other sheep and his deer were also attacking it. It was the smallest lamb I had ever seen, weighing just over a kilo – even on St Kilda, most lambs average two kilos.

Nevertheless, I took it with enthusiasm. After some coaxing, the waif suckled enthusiastically but could only manage minute amounts of milk – too much is as dangerous as too little. Quickly christened Shuggie, what he lacked in size he more than compensated for with his character.

Easy to train to the head collar and incredibly keen to walk around the farm with the dogs, Shuggie has now joined Ronnie. Oddly, Ronnie is quite keen on him.

And, rather like humans, these so-called stupid sheep have adapted incredibly well to home comforts. As both are castrated, their atypical behaviour will not indoctrinate those feisty wild genes, so revered in one of the oldest and finest living cultural artefacts in Scotland.

FASCINATING FACTS

The Soay is listed in Category 4 – At Risk, by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust.

They are members of the Northern European short-tailed group of sheep along with Shetland, North Ronaldsay and Hebridean sheep.

In a domesticated farm situation, they may live for up to 15 years – and sometimes longer.

Pictures: POLLY PULLAR