

Restocking Hefted Flocks Following a Cull in Gloucestershire

This case study explains how some of the 'Badgers' of the Forest of Dean rehefted their flocks after a total cull of the area during the 2001 Foot and Mouth epidemic. This is an atypical case study as a number of shepherds were interviewed. The reason for this is that the flocks are small averaging 50 head and the majority of the shepherds are caring for their sheep part-time.

The Forest of Dean covers 8,910ha (22,000 acres) lying between the rivers Wye and Severn, half of which is grazed by commoners. The land is owned by the Crown, managed by the Forestry Commission and is designated a National Forest Park. As well as being a Royal Forest in the original sense of the term, the land is also afforested, most of the grazing being forest waste and wood pasture. Common Rights were bestowed upon foresters, being people born within the Hundred of St. Briavels (anywhere in the Forest), in Norman times and are still exercised today.



Sheep in the Forest

Most of the foresters, or commoners, who keep hefted flocks in the Forest are not farmers but are referred to as sheep badgers. The badgers were miners by trade, working shifts and caring for their sheep part-time with the help of their families to supplement their income. The last of the coal mines closed in the mid 1960's but the badgers continue to manage their sheep whilst carrying out other work as well, unless they are retired. Very few are full time farmers.

The Secretary of the Forest of Dean Commoners' Association states that there are around 100 members but only half of them now run sheep. There are approximately 2,500 sheep grazing in the Forest at present, making the average size flock just 50 head. This is half the numbers of sheep and of flocks that were running in the Forest prior to the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic.

Much time and attention is lavished on these small flocks and many badgers feed their sheep twice a day, as much to keep them in their 'run' or 'haunt' as for the nutritive value. Each flock knows the voice of its badger and they come running when he calls. They even learn the sound of the engine of his van and hear him coming. One badger considers it takes only three days for the sheep to learn a new engine, when someone changes their vehicle.

Most of the sheep kept in the Forest of Dean are Welsh or Welsh crosses known as 'tats'. Sometimes a Charolais or Suffolk ram might be used to produce a better conformation lamb. The sheep are small and tough and able to live on coarse vegetation and browse. It is important that they are close woolled because there is much scrub and bramble in the Forest. They are frequently brown necked and brown legged with brown, yellow or speckled faces. They must be hardy, versatile sheep.



Typical Forest of Dean sheep

Most sheep badgers have some 'back ground' or enclosed land of their own. Rams are usually kept on enclosed land and only turned out on the Forest

with the ewes at tuppung time. After tuppung they would be brought back in and fed more. Some of the badgers make hay for their sheep on their enclosed land, but many rely on bought-in hay. However, problems arise because some badgers do not have sufficient enclosed land to bring in their own stock.

The Secretary of the Commoners' Association remembers abortive attempts to co-ordinate scab eradication; through organising a time when everyone was asked to take their sheep off the Forest for treatment but co-operation was limited. One badger has an old brick built dipping tub and used to organise a big dipping day for his sheep and those of his neighbours. "But nowadays you couldn't do it." He says. "You have to be licensed to buy the dip and you have to pay to dispose of it. It would all be too expensive." Sheep out on the forest have to be treated frequently for scab and lice because, as there is no co-ordination of treatment, they are constantly re-infected. Sometimes sheep are bought from market and turned straight out without quarantine or treatment. However, fly strike and foot problems on the Forest are relatively rare and found to be worse when sheep are brought into enclosed land.

The sheep spend their whole lives out on the Forest. One badger explains that rams are turned out with the ewes for tuppung on the Forest. No one minds if their ram serves someone else's ewes or if their ewes are served by someone else's ram because all the sheep are of roughly the same type. However, rams are liable to wander more than the ewes so must be watched closely and shepherded with dogs as necessary.

Lambing takes place in March and April and all the sheep lamb out on the Forest. There is no scanning and no separation of doubles and singles. Sheep are seen more frequently during lambing and there is general agreement that people are very good at helping each other at that time. One badger said, "If anyone saw a ewe in difficulty he would help her, whoever she belonged to."

Lambs are never weaned, but run with the ewes until they are sold. Where ewe lambs are retained there are often two or three generations running together and they tend to remain in their family groups. Lambing percentages of at least 100% at lambing are expected but this is more likely to be around 75% by the time the lambs are sold. Many lambs are lost to road traffic accidents, several to foxes, especially doubles, and some are stolen. It is believed that many end up in someone's freezer..

Many lambs are sold as stores and some for breeding, the first cross Welsh/Suffolk ewe lambs are more valuable than the pure Welsh. However, many lambs are sold finished straight off the Forest. One badger stated that they can finish in 9 or 10 weeks and achieve 16 to 17kg deadweight. Some are sold direct to slaughter and some through Ross-on-Wye market, and it is generally believed to be important to support the livestock markets as the price setters.



A badger calls his flock

During the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic all the sheep in the Forest of Dean were slaughtered. The Commoners still feel a sharp sense of injustice that the compensation paid was only the market value of the animals and did not recompense for the cost of re-hefting their flocks. This required expensive feed and fencing and a considerable input of time and dedication. The badgers explain how it was done.

“A hefting pen would be put up. An area of perhaps a third of an acre would be fenced in to hold around 25 sheep. They would be kept in that pen for a few weeks and fed regularly, at 4pm every day say. Then they would be let out for an hour a day, with a man and a dog to watch them, put back in their pen at 4pm and fed. This would go on for three or four months. Then they could be let out all day but called in and fed every night at 4pm. They would learn to come back to be fed. But it would take three generations before you didn't have to watch them and you could be sure they would never wander off. Some people fed their new sheep up to three times a day, just to keep them in their run.”

“The ideal size run for a small flock of around 25 sheep would be about two or three square miles. Before foot and mouth there were enough flocks to provide pressure around the boundaries of a run but now, where there are no neighbouring flocks, the sheep wander much further. Sometimes they have been known to travel 8 to 10 miles. Wandering is a particular problem in April when there is new grass about. Much of the Forest is now under grazed and

some of it is not grazed at all. Because there are fewer flocks the sheep get less attention and less shepherding, because everyone would see other people's as well as their own."



Feeding time

Around half the Commoners who kept sheep prior to foot and mouth never restocked. The time input required must have made it impossible for many with full time jobs and the reduced profitability means many, particularly younger people, do not find it worthwhile. The average age of the Forest of Dean sheep badger is believed to be increasing and there are few young people keen to take over. However, those that remain are determined that this centuries old tradition should be maintained.