

LIFESTYLE

By Kathryn Dick

Black Cheviot wool aims to change public perception

SABRINA Ross of Heatherlea Black Cheviots is a keen advocate of sustainable agriculture and has found a niche market for her growing enterprise which focusses on producing traceable wool from her own Scottish flock.

Having originally practised as a vet and born and brought up in Austria, Sabrina with her husband, George, now reside at Heatherlea Croft, in a remote Sutherland strath, near Ardgay.

The croft was assigned to George by his late father, Robin, and the couple now run a 600-ewe flock of standard white Lairg-type hill North Country Cheviots, as well as a separate small flock of black Cheviots.

The couple have diversified the croft's livestock enterprise by running a special business that sells wool and woollen products to local and worldwide customers, including New Zealand, Canada and Europe.

Here Sabrina told us about her business:

What's your story?



SABRINA ROSS with one of her beloved 'Black Granny', the 10 year old matriarch ewe

We are fifth generation crofters and run a flock of hill North Country Cheviot sheep alongside our smaller flock of the rare black hill North Country Cheviot.

A Scottish superstition states that having some black sheep in your flock will bring good luck, so we have always kept a couple of black Cheviot ewes to run alongside the white Cheviots.

I've always loved working with animals and having enjoyed my holidays on granny's self sufficient farm throughout my childhood, I always imagined myself working as a vet for cattle and sheep - or have a lot of my own animals to care for.

Many might have thought it was wishful thinking back then, but fast forward 40 years and here I am living my dream.

My husband, George, who shares my love for animals and the rich biodiversity on the croft, supported my decision to leave the full-time vet profession, which was not an easy one. However, being a part time agricultural officer has given me the freedom to have more involvement in croft work and focus on my other love - working with wool.

How did you find your way into working with wool?

Wool has always played an important role in my life and I especially connect to it since I am fortunate to have a mother who is an expert knitter and crocheter. I always loved wearing the finished garments - from her handmade socks to pullovers,

blankets to couch throws, her woollens have travelled the world with me and lasted a lifetime.

I learnt knitting in primary school in Austria, however I was not patient enough to appreciate it at the time! Little did I know back then that shearing time, following lambing, would turn out to be my favourite time of the year.

By combining my knowledge of genetics and the science of wool fibres, I have managed to develop a black North Country Cheviot flock with a very desirable fleece. North Country Cheviot (NCC) fleece has a medium to long staple, amazing crimp, is springy, soft and durable - a very rare combination.



A SELECTION of the Heatherlea hand-made wool produced by the croft's own sheep

In this modern world, sheep wool is very much undervalued but I am an optimist. In my eyes, NCC wool is often overlooked because it is not a rare breed but it really does offer what most fibre friends are looking for.

The idea of showing people what is possible with real wool kept me motivated and the idea of a small wool business was born.

What is the process?

Don't expect to get rich ... unless your wool is golden!

There is a heck of a lot of work and time involved. Local women taught me how to spin and the feeling of connection to the sheep and the land, for me, is vital to stay motivated.

We shear the hand-spun range with hand clippers, with the remainder of the flock being clipped with an electric headpiece. After clipping, the fleeces are graded, washed, carded and spun into skeins. As we are both fond of our croft biodiversity, animal welfare and carbon footprint, we try to carry out most of these processes in an eco-friendly, traditional way...by hand.

By selling our wool in local village markets, with some going abroad, we wanted to learn more about our product in the hands of experts. All our machine spun wool is 100% traceable to our own flock and the hand spun skeins are traceable to the individual sheep too.



SOME OF the Heatherlea black North Country Cheviots

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What is the process?

The public perception of real wool mostly involves a negative memory of a scratchy childhood pullover.

Wool has come a long way since then and due to our selective breeding, our wool is soft and warm and can be worn directly on your skin. The majority of our range is undyed and unbleached and ideal for sensitive skins.

Our closed flock only welcomes new tups that have a dense coat, tight crimp and no kemp, and must have a fleece that can withstand the harsh Highland climate. For those willing to overcome negative memories, there is a special 'Cheviot starter kit' to tackle that issue.

Next to hand and mill spun knitting wool, I provide raw fleece for crafters, washed and carded fleece for fibre artists. I also have various knitting kits available and designed different patterns to purchase, with the newest set being for a knitted skirt. The starter kit is a great first step to working with real wool and hand felted slippers are available too.

I also enjoy entertaining and educating small knitting groups via appointment - mainly out-with the farming community - and show how natural wool is processed, as well as how sheep are kept and handled. The majority of people are delighted to learn where their wool comes from.

With farmers struggling to make a



THE WOOL has been sold both locally and to customers across the world, and all derives from the croft which is located in Sutherland

profit from wool, how do you see the future for your business?

I am curious about what the future brings for the versatile wool. These days, for most farmers and crofters, it costs more to shear the sheep than they will get paid for the fleece it provides.

Consumers often buy plastic wool, which really dumps prices to a bare minimum and even below that. Thankfully, quality is appreciated by my customers and although each material has its place, wool has often been associated with heritage and it is woven into tradition.

I can see that wool is something that is still proving very positive and will always be part of our culture and local identity, passing on knowledge for generations to

come. The more natural wool worn, the less micro-plastic in the ocean and it will also encourage slow fashion in the future. With more demand for natural wool, surely the prices for the raw fleece producer will increase.

The future for my wool business is hopefully a positive one. There are a few new projects in the line up. I am fascinated by the idea of teaching children the way that sheep survive and mature, to let them understand where wool comes from and to contribute to this, I am currently working on a children's book about this topic.

■ For more information or to purchase yarn, please visit: <https://blackcheviot.com/>

D and G's RHET ball raises £45k



SOME OF the organising team behind the D and G RHET fundraising ball, left to right: Sara Barbour, Emily McBride, Abby Forsyth and Tracy Martin

MORE than 350 friends and supporters of the Royal Highland Education Trust (RHET) gathered at the Easterbrook Hall, recently, to raise money for the well-known charity which aims to educate children on food, farming, and the working countryside.

The event was organised by local RHET committee members Sara Barbour, Emily McBride and Abby Forsyth, along with local Dumfries and Galloway RHET project co-ordinator, Tracy Martin. Turcan Connell and Savills jointly sponsored the ball for the third time - the previous evenings being held in 2016 and 2018.

The tables had sold out within days and there were 351 people attending on the

night. Guests were welcomed by regional chairman Hugh McClymont and tucked into a delicious feast of beef sirloin, donated by Scotbeef, of Bridge of Allan.

The vote of thanks was given by RHET national chairman, Alistair Marshall, prior to an entertaining live auction carried out by Andrew Goldie. A silent auction also ran throughout the evening adding to the funding.

The ball organisers and the rest of the RHET D and G CI were thrilled when the total raised was announced at its agm, when it was revealed that a staggering £45,514 had been raised.

This figure will allow the purchase of a 'Countryside classroom on wheels' (or a C-COW, as it's known). Tracy

Martin said: "This will allow RHET D and G to engage with pupils across the region, and really bring the countryside to the classroom for all."

"We hope to give pupils and staff a taste of what we can do out on-farm, by bringing them livestock to explore, and facilitating outdoor learning activities for children to enjoy, on their doorstep. This resource will allow us to raise awareness of what RHET D and G offer, as well as sparking an interest in the wider world of food production, agriculture, and the working countryside."

■ Should you want to volunteer, arrange a farm visit, classroom talk or a visit from the C-COW (when it arrives), then contact Tracy on dumgal@rhet.org.uk.

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