



March 2008

The NWCPA Fieldsmen Network

The Association has just purchased a portable weighing platform for the use of its members. This platform folds up so that it fits into the back of a pick-up or estate car, and it is battery operated so that you can use it in a field. This is an ideal instrument for those of you who would like to join a Pedigree Breed Plan where you need to monitor the development of your animals regularly, or if you need to get an accurate weight of an animal prior to a sale. The picture shows Fieldsmen Roddy Watt using the kit to weigh his young Gascon bull.



The Fieldsmen Network is an advisory service run by the NWCPA. We have a team of experienced cattle professionals who are able to offer help and advice to people looking to make a start with cattle, or to established crofters and farmers looking for new ideas or ways to improve the returns on their herd. This service is free to NWCPA members, and as an introduction

to the Association non members are offered a free first consultation. You don't have to own cattle to use this service. If you are considering starting with cattle then the Fieldsmen will be happy to talk you through the options open to you. Call 01641 521345 or email info@nwcpa.org.uk for more details.

NWCPA AGM

The Associations AGM will be held at Lairg Community Hall on Thursday 20th March at 7.00pm, all welcome

The NWCPA is here to represent the interests of cattle keepers in the North West and to try and improve their lot by providing an advice service and organising training courses to meet the needs of its members. To keep doing its work the Association needs help from you. It needs your support which you can show by joining the Association. Membership is our way of demonstrating to national bodies that we are a representative organisation speaking for our own particular area. We can only speak with authority if we have your

support.

The Association is approaching a turning point as its current three year plan is nearing its completion. In future the Association will continue to run its Fieldsmen Network, but we need to know from you the members how we can best support you in the future. We would welcome any feedback on this. Please come to the AGM and have your say on the Associations future. If you are unable to attend the AGM please get in touch with the Associations office.

Beef on your plate

Here Roddy Watt, NWCPA Fieldsman, explains how to get the best quality product if you intend to sell your beef from the farm

There seem to be many factors affecting the eating quality of beef, namely finish of the animal, care and handling of the animal pre- and post-slaughter, how the animal was fed, what it was fed on, even the breed!!!

The finish of the animal is important because of the amount of fat on the carcass. It seems to be accepted that a certain amount of fat is required. The various reasons quoted are: the taste is in the fat!!; the meat matures better with a fat cover; it is easier to cook with a fat content, especially marbling (fine veining of fat within the meat as opposed to sub-cutaneous fat). This does seem to be the case, although we had a double-muscled animal that was almost devoid of fat; however the meat did hang well in a slightly colder than normal chill, and the meat was well tasted and tender, although it possibly needed more careful cooking to avoid dryness.

Pre- and post-slaughter handling is very important. Pre-slaughter is important to keep the animal content and not stressed. Stress can lead to various chemicals forming in the muscle tissue which can badly affect tenderness and taste. Post



slaughter, proper cooling of the carcass and hanging time have a great deal of effect on eating quality.

The level of feeding available right through the animal's life seems to be quite important with regard to optimum muscle development. It seems that a reasonably level plane of nutrition with minimal ups and downs is best, and not too quick a finishing system is the ideal.

What the animal is fed on is a major factor in the taste of the meat. I don't think the breed has as much effect on taste as some would have us believe, but what the breed does affect is the texture, mainly in the fibre structure of the meat. Shorter finer fibres seem to produce the tenderest meat. The breed also affects the marbling of the meat, although this is also a factor of maturity of the animal – possibly breeds with a reputation for marbling mature earlier than others.

An introduction to the new Scottish RDP

The new Scottish Rural Development Plan is almost with us, late, with potential to be still later, but at least we now know the basics and what we are going to have to do. Firstly the RDP contains some of the grant schemes that we know from the past. These include CCAGS, LFASS and the more recently introduced Rural Development Contracts (RDC) "Land Management Option", these are not going to change. What's new is the RDC Rural Priorities scheme, a source of funding for on farm projects, which that includes the replacement of the old Rural Stewardship and Crofter Forestry Schemes. First an apology for the fact that there are so many acronyms, they are not mine and are unavoidable...



If you are considering applying for any of these funds then there are two important points to start with. Firstly applications for RP funds can only be made online via the internet, and secondly, it is a competitive scheme. Once the year's funds have been used up in a particular area then no new applications will be accepted regardless of their merit.

In some ways the RP is similar to the Land Man-

agement Options in that there are specific funding packages (options) that you can apply for (135 at the last count). These packages are divided into 30 plus "Priorities". The application process will work as follows; remember this is all done over the internet.

Step 1 is to provide a Statement of Intent (SoI). This is a short summary of what you wish to do, basically who, why, where and what costs are involved. It is important to consider everything that you want to do at this stage; you cannot add to it at a later stage. On the other hand you can submit as many SoI's as you like.

Your SoI will go through an initial assessment procedure which will see whether your scheme meets one of the RP's Priorities and whether there are sufficient funds left in that part of the

scheme, the more points the plan gets, the better chance that it will have of being approved, so it is worth considering these criteria in detail when the plan is being produced. There are some obvious marking criteria like the quality of the proposal, but other criteria include "Collaboration", would the proposal work better in conjunction with others, and "Integration", does the plan need to include more items to enhance its benefits.

Step 4. If the plan is awarded enough points it is put to the Regional Proposal Assessment Committee (RPAC), a committee made up of members from Public Bodies such as SEPA, SNH, and Highland Council. At the moment the plan is to hold 3 RPAC meetings per annum but there is a suspicion that they are going to need more than that. The RPAC can reject a plan or recommend it to the "Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and



programme to fund it; if in both cases the answer is yes, you will get permission to work up an Outcome Plan.

Step 2. Prepare your Outcome Plan (OP). This is a full scale proposal of the work you wish to carry out. You can get a grant to help you do this: £150 if you do it yourself, £200 if you use an agent, and 50% of the costs of up to £800 if you require specialist advice. Once you submit your OP it will go through an initial assessment, you will get some feedback, and changes can be made. Once you have a final version OP and are happy with it then you "Commit" your plan. No changes are now possible.

Step 3. The plan is assessed on 14 criteria, on which it is allocated points. This is a complete

the Environment" for approval. In which case all the work will have been worthwhile, and you can get on with your project.

That is the theory. At the moment the scheme is scheduled to open for business from April 2008 although as yet there are still some pieces of legislation to go through the Scottish Parliament and IT infrastructure to be finished.

I personally will be testing out the scheme as early as possible. The RSS scheme which encouraged the keeping of native cattle on crofts has been superseded by the Small Holdings Package. I will be making an application for support to start a small herd on my croft. I will let you know how I get on in future newsletters.

Where are all the twite?

Over winter 2006-2007, the RSPB and a team of volunteers undertook a survey of twite in Caithness and Sutherland. Twite nest in small groups on moorland and along rocky coasts and feed on small seeds collected from farmland. In winter they gather in large flocks (sometimes even in their thousands) in areas of seed-rich habitats on farmland. Twite wintering in Caithness originate from breeding grounds across northern Scotland, including Shetland, Orkney and the northwest Highlands, as well as local birds. The survey was last undertaken in 1998, when two Caithness Ornithologists, Hugh Clarke and Robin Sellers, estimated the population was around 6000 birds, and highlighted the importance of the area for twite.

The 2006-2007 survey appears to reveal a dramatic decline in the number of wintering twite, with a peak count of only 900 birds. This drop in numbers may indicate that the birds are no longer finding the food source they require in Caithness and Sutherland. During the 1990s, fields of oil seed rape became the main habitat for twite as changing agricultural practices saw a decline in the area of weedy turnips (estimates indicate a reduction of around 60%) and an increase in rape production. More recent changes to subsidies has



led to a reduction in the growing of rape in the area, which may have reduced the availability of suitable food to twite, and consequently impacted the number wintering in the area. Whether twite have been able to find alternative seed sources elsewhere in north Scotland is presently unknown.

We need your help!

If you see or are aware of flocks of finches in your area please let us know. Any information may help as we try to pull together some rescue measures to try and prevent numbers of wintering birds from dropping even further. Please contact Kenny Graham or Kirstin Carmouche at the RSPB Scotland Golspie office on 01408634404.

Bull for Sale

This 4 year old Highland x Limousin for sale, Contact John Makim, 018417 611312 or email inchverry@tiscali.co.uk



Survey Sheets

We would like to say thanks to all of you who returned the cattle survey sheets that went out at the end of last year. The overall results showed a slight net decline in cattle numbers in the area, but this looks to be a result of a couple of large herds being dispersed. Most of you have similar now to what you had when we first surveyed the area.

North West Cattle Producers Association
Email info@nwcpa.org.uk, Phone 01641 521345
www.nwcpa.org.uk

