I think we can all agree that the summer weather this year hasn’t been entirely favourable, with both June and July having above average rainfall, with July being the wettest since records began in 1991. Not only has it been wet, it has also been slightly chilly, with below average temperatures in both months. However we did get to the tropical temperature of 24°C one day in July!

Despite this, we have marked all the lambs, clipped all the ewes and are looking to wean them next week, taking full advantage of the new handling systems.

Sheep
Since the last advisory group meeting all ewes and lambs were gathered in for marking and weighed and we finally got to see how well the ewes from the Auchtertyre flock did. In total 233 lambs were marked which is slightly less than last year (252) but we are still hoping for the odd straggler. This works out at 65% marking percentage.

At clipping time, the Kirkton & Lleyn lambs were gathered again to go through the TST (Targeted selective treatment) for dosing. Half of the lambs were treated selectively according to their weight (only dosed if they didn’t reach their target weight) and the other half were dosed according to their faecal egg counts. Only a small handful of lambs needed...
dosed according their weight gain as most of them had reached their target weight and the faecal egg counts were low so the other lambs did not need dosed (apart from a group of lambs on Kirkton face, which had a slightly high egg count).

The same process happened at pre-weaning. Faecal egg counts were taken and found to be higher this time round so all conventional lambs were dosed. The lambs which were dosed according to their weight gain, nearly half of those required a dose as they had not reached their target weight. However there are some lambs which have not required a dose at all.

Below is the average weights for Kirkton, Lleyn and Auchtertyre lambs at marking (June) & milkclip (July).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flock</th>
<th>Marking (June) average weights (kg)</th>
<th>Milkclip (July) average weights (kg)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kirkton</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lleyn</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auchtertyre</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next week, we are due to back fat scan the lambs and wean them from the ewes.

We have also been keeping track of lambs with plochteach this year, so far we have had 51 lambs affected by it, 6 of which were Lleyn the rest were blackfaces. Last year we had 63 with only 1 lamb being a Lleyn. All lambs were kept in the shed out of sunlight with the ewes until they improved and they now seem to be recovering.

**Cattle**

The cows are still out on the hill, looking well with their calves. The bull was taken out and is currently in the shed at Kirkton waiting to go on his new adventure. The calves were weighed back in June and averaged 118kg, it will be interesting to see how they are doing when we bring them down off the hill to wean them from the cows.

**Infrastructure**

The new fank is now fully up and running and we have been using it for the past couple of weeks. The sheep are running through it nicely and only an odd tweak is needed once we saw how the sheep went through. The addition of the conveyor has significantly sped up the process of dosing lambs and it makes it a lot easier, Definitely a worthwhile addition to the fank!
Visitors to the farms

A lot of focus over the summer has been in taking the message about the research happening on our farms out to farmers and crofters attending events organised elsewhere (e.g. North Sheep in Cumbria, Highland Sheep in Tain, the Laig Lamb sales, etc), details of which can be found on the SRUC website via the following link: http://www.sruc.ac.uk/news/120252/hill_and_mountain_research_centre

We did, however, host a site visit to the peatland restoration work that we are conducting in association with colleagues in Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park. This resulted in two short television news pieces being aired on both BBC Alba and BBC Scotland – see the following SRUC News Items for more info: http://www.sruc.ac.uk/news/article/1331/major_peatland_restoration_work_ongoing_at_sruc_s_kirkton_and_auchtertyre_farms. We are also in the process of arranging a peatland restoration workshop for farmers and land managers in the autumn.

We also hosted a visit from a group of 40 French students to hear about the agricultural and environmental challenges facing Scottish hill farmers. The group contained a mix of agriculture and environmental students from CFTA Coquereaumont, a training centre near Rouen, in Normandy, which specialises in training apprentices and adults for careers related to the environment, agriculture and trade. The students were in Scotland on a whistle-stop tour of a number of Scottish farms to help increase their understanding of land management issues outside of France. See the following SRUC News Item for more information: http://www.sruc.ac.uk/news/article/1333/auld_alliance_alive_and_well_at_srucs_kirkton_and_auchtertyre_farms

Finally, over the summer Ailsa Thomson, a 3rd year Agriculture student at SRUC’s Aberdeen Campus, has gained invaluable knowledge about upland farming after spending her summer placement working with us. For further information see the SRUC News Item at: http://www.sruc.ac.uk/news/article/1364/sruc_aberdeen_student_heads_to_the_hills

Oban Times

The text of articles since June 2015 are included below:
Lambing has finished at last and like most farmers and crofters in the north and west, it has been a spring that I would rather forget! The lack of heat, and therefore grass, over the last month has caused everyone problems. The cows have unfortunately struggled a bit with the cold conditions and in hindsight should have been kept inside for a couple of extra weeks. We can only wait and see what any other knock on effects will be over the summer in terms of both the livestock and our ability to harvest a crop of silage.

We had the vet in to do our annual herd health check last week and had the 10 male calves castrated at the same time. Also during his visit, as part of the Sheep Health Scheme, any ewes which had aborted their lambs were blood tested. Once again the results were all negative and we are therefore accredited for another year.

Our last lamb was born on the 3rd of June and despite the lack of grass, the sheep seem to be doing well. We’ll get a much better idea once they have been in for marking the lambs and we are able to handle the ewes. Marking is when we ear-notch the lambs to identify them as coming from these farms. We also give them their first vaccination which covers them against clostridial diseases and pneumonia, treat them with a pour-on insecticide to protect them against flies and ticks and dose them with medicine to help control any internal parasitic worms. We will also weigh them all.

For the lambs in our high-hill Auchtertyre flock, we will be using DNA ear tags which allow us to take a sample of tissue from the ear at the same time as marking them. This will provide us with DNA material that we will then send to New Zealand for analysis to provide parentage information for all the lambs. We also have our colleagues from Moredun Institute coming this week to take samples from the lambs in our Kirkton flock, as part of a research project trying to identify genetic markers for worm resistance in lambs.

We’ve also had a few visitors to the farm over the past few weeks. On Sunday 7th June we opened our doors for Open Farm Sunday. This proved to be very successful and we had over 100 visitors who came to see the demonstrations of the electronic tag and automatic weigh crate technology, sheep dog handling and sheep shearing. People were also able to hear about the local history of the farm, and learn about the local wildlife, including taking part in a survey of pollinators on the farm. We also had some unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs/drones) on display and information about soil and methane emissions on the farm.

The day was very sunny and people were also able to go and explore our nearby woodland.
SRUC receives funding from the Scottish Government via the RESAS 2011-16 Strategic Research Programme. Production of this newsletter is supported by the Scottish Funding Council and its Knowledge Transfer and Exchange Programme.

walks. As one of the visitors said “there is so much we don’t know about farming, it is great to see it for yourself”. The Friday before the open day we also had a very successful workshop at Auchtertyre on controlling rushes without chemicals. More than twenty farmers attended this very interesting and informative event organised by the Soil Association.

Some of my colleagues have also been at Northsheep in Cumbria and Highlandsheep in Tain. These two sheep events were a big success and very well attended. My colleagues Davy McCracken and Claire Morgan-Davies, with the help of a BSc (Hons) agriculture student from SRUC Aberdeen, who has a work placement with us for 10 weeks, have been asking farmers their views on using technology on farms. They were also keen to find out how widespread the Plochteach condition in lambs was. Plochteach is a photosensitisation disease that is partly caused by a plant that grows on boggy ground, the Bog Asphodel. This information is very important to us, as no-one really knows yet how many farmers are affected by this problem on their farm.

Although it took a lot of effort (not least because my colleagues had to travel from one end of the country to the other!), it has been very helpful to discuss sheep health and technology issues with farmers, and to raise awareness of the research and demonstrations that we do on the farms here at Kirkton and Auchtertyre.

Finally, at Auchtertyre, we have been erecting a new sheep handling system which we hope to have finished by the end of July. As I mentioned in a previous update, because we are a research facility we are handling, assessing and recording information on our animals much more often than would happen on other hill farms. In addition to a new auto drafter and weigh crate, the improvements include a new sheep handling conveyor, which I’m sure will be the subject of much discussion!

These additions will improve the efficiency of both the management of the sheep and collection of research data. Our plan is to have a sheep and cattle handling day at some point in the autumn when both our new handling systems will be on display.
Oban Times – July 2015

Despite talk of heat-waves south of the border and in Europe, I cannot say that July has been the warmest for us! The grass, however, is now growing well and there is plenty for the sheep and cattle to eat. We finished weighing and marking the lambs at the beginning of the month. Between our two main flocks (900 ewes at Kirkton and 350 at Auchtertyre), this job took the best part of 2 weeks. Now, the majority of the sheep are back on the hill and hill parks, for summer grazing.

We will gather the sheep again at the end of this month, for shearing. We started shearing some of the younger females (hoggs) earlier this month, which coincided with a shearing course that we hosted at Auchtertyre. The British Wood Marketing Board holds courses throughout the UK, one of which is held at our farm every year, training shearers of all levels of experience how to correctly shear sheep. This year 10 people attended over the 2 days and were instructed by Eoin Campbell and Andy Rankin. By the end of the course the shearers had learnt how to correctly handle the animals and how to shear without damaging the animal or the fleece. The course was well-recieved and the participants were pleased with the experience they gained.

The cows, which had been put back to the hill at the end of June, are now well established on their hill grazing, and have gone quite high up in Auchtertyre Glen. We are pleased, as this means that the animals are getting used to their ground and will be using the hill more effectively.

We have two students in residence at SRUC’s Kirkton & Auchtertyre farms for the summer. Ailsa Thompson, from SRUC Aberdeen, is doing a 12 week placement with us, as part of her BSc(Hons) Agriculture. Thibaut Salanon, from France, is also doing a 12 week placement, as part of his degree in Agriculture in Toulouse, in the south west of France. Both have been really busy this month, helping on the farm and with various research projects. One of their main tasks has been taking animal observations on the hill. They have been looking at 60 ewes and their lambs on a large fenced area of the Auchtertyre hill (the Meall), checking every hour throughout the day where they are, and what they are doing. This is work for one of our PhD students, Ping Zhou, who is looking at the differences between reproductive performance of the Lleyn ewes and the improved and unimproved Scottish Blackface ewes. To be able to differentiate the animals at a distance, we have sprayed the ewes different colours, a bit like when farmers prepare sheep for agricultural shows. They present a fine picture on the hill! The observations will only last one month, until we shear the ewes. Hopefully, this should provide us with more insight in to where and how the different groups of animals graze. This is also useful in our understanding of the occurrence of
Plochteach, since the hill that they are observing the sheep on is rich in Bog Asphodel, a plant linked with this photosensitisation disease.

As well as having the two students in residence, we had a group of 40 French students visiting for a day earlier in the month. They came to hear about the agricultural and environmental challenges facing Scottish hill farmers. The group was a mix of agriculture and environmental students from CFTA Coquereaumont, a training centre near Rouen, in Normandy, which specialises in training apprentices and adults for careers related to the environment, agriculture and trade. The students were in Scotland on a whistle-stop tour of a number of Scottish farms to help increase their understanding of land management issues outside of France. The students and their lecturers appeared pleasantly surprised that we are looking at such a wide range of environmental and agricultural issues on the farms, many of which are also relevant in the areas that they farm.

So, as this month draws to a close and summer marches on, our shearers are hoping for the rain and drizzle to stop for a while, so that they can shear all the remaining ewes without too much bother. Hopefully, the end of the month will bring some longer spells of sunshine to keep the locals and the tourists happy!
Oban Times – August 2015

Not that anyone needed to be told, but it’s now official that this summer has been very cold and wet! Although it has made life difficult, our summer jobs are now complete. All our sheep have been shorn and the wool is being sent next week to the British Wool Marketing Board in Glasgow, where it will be graded and most of it will eventually be used for carpets. That’s one big time-consuming but necessary job out of the way.

We also weighed all our lambs and ewes in July before shearing, to see how they were faring and to decide whether we needed to worm any of the lambs. Like last year, half of the lambs are being treated in a selective way, using their weight gain to decide whether or not they needed worming; only a small handful did require worming on this occasion. The other half is being treated according to how many worm eggs are found in a combined dung sample. However, egg counts were so low that these lambs did not need to receive any worming treatment in July.

Once they had been sheared, weighed and treated for flies and ticks, all animals were sent back on to the hill, where the grass is now very lush (with all that rain). This also helped reduce the grazing pressure on the inbye fields and allowed the grass a chance to grow for making silage.

Now it is nearly the end of August and weaning is almost upon us. At weaning we will worm the lambs again, if they need it, and we will separate the lambs from their mothers. At this time lambs will also have their back fat and muscle depth measured by ultrasound scanning. The results of which will be used in the genetic evaluations of the individuals in the flock to produce their Estimated Breeding Values. Hopefully, a good number of the male lambs will be ready for slaughter by early autumn, whilst most of the females will be kept for future breeding on the farm.

Most of our time this summer has been taken-up building a new sheep handling system at Auchtertyre, and this is now complete! This setup is within a shed and contains: a manual drafter; a Prattley automatic weigh crate with 5 way auto-drafter; a sheep conveyor; and a vast range of pens of different sizes. The conveyor is the most recent piece of sheep handling kit we have bought. It is “V” shaped, with the sheep supported within the “V”, the sides of which are long conveyor belts so the sheep can be moved along without its feet on the ground. This allows for easy handling of sheep for tasks such as worming, feet trimming and other husbandry practices. While being held in the conveyor, the sheep tend to be more relaxed than when in a conventional race, therefore improving welfare. It is also makes it much easier and safer for us when handling the sheep.
We are organising a farming and industry Livestock handling, health and welfare open day at the farms on the 9th September, so that people can come and see it for themselves. The event will be centred around these new sheep handling facilities at Auchtertyre and the new cattle handling and shed facilities at Kirkton. The day will start at 10.00 and finish around 16.00. It should be a good opportunity to see all these changes on the farms for yourself. To assist with catering arrangements, please register with SAC Consulting Offices in: Oban 01631 563 093 or Stirling 01786 450 964

The cows are currently out on the hill where there are no fences to stop them straying, but so far they have been well behaved and have not gone too far. The calves will be weaned and weighed in the next couple of weeks to allow the cows some recovery time before the winter. The calves have had no supplementary feeding yet so it will be interesting to see how much weight they have put on over the summer. We also managed to do some silage on the farm this year, it was all done and dusted two weeks ago, when we had a couple of nice dry days. We managed to get 130 bales, so it will be useful this winter for the cows.

Finally, after having spent 3 months with us, Ailsa Thomson, our SRUC Aberdeen student that has been on placement here, is leaving us to resume her studies for her final year of her honours degree. It was great for me to have this extra help during the summer on the farm, and we hope she enjoyed her stay, despite the weather and the midges!

ENDS