

Silence of the lambs was upsetting during the opening walk of summer

Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group meet up at Brandywell to explore the landscape

FEATURE

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It was a subdued, hardy group of people that met at Brandywell handling pens for our first FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group) summer walk of 2013, to be led by Paula and Danny Creer – the grazing tenants on the Bheset, a 750-acre upland holding.

The Bheset has been farmed by the Creer family for 50 years and supports a flock of about 350 Sealedale/Scottish blackface ewes plus replacements, which live on the hill all year round.

We experienced the openness of the uplands in a chilling northerly gale and the impact on sheep numbers and their few lambs that have survived the heavy snowfall at the end of March and snow blanket for several weeks was inescapable.

With many farmers tragically lost like many flocks in the north, centre and west of the island, the lamb crop is likely to be half that of normal years.

Time will tell, only when the hills are gathered for clipping later in July and for weaning at the end of August will the true picture be known.

The emptiness in the hills left an uneasiness mirrored by an almost total absence of many other forms of wildlife.

Danny explained to the group that as the sheep are 'hefted', (born and live on the same hill), one cannot simply go and buy and bring in replacement ewes as they would not know where to find the best forage during the winter months of the year nor where to shelter in extreme conditions.

It was also explained to the group that some ewe lambs are kept as replacements and that other cross bred ewe lambs reared on the hills provide lowland farmers with replacement shearing ewes the following year and with the losses this spring, this will inevitably affect the supply of replacement breeding stock both this year and next year.

In late May, with spring approximately six weeks late, the absence of any fresh plant growth was clear for all to see.



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group summer walk of 2013

Until ground conditions average over 5C, then significant grass and plant growth does not begin.

The late spring issues there is little fresh forage for sheep, grouse and other wildlife such as the mountain hare, one of which was still sporting its white winter coat.

A food shortage coupled with cold weather could explain why there was little wildlife in evidence.

We were joined on the walk by Dr Peter McEvoy, biodiversity officer for DECA and Prof Jim McAdam from Glenwherry Hill Restoration Partnership in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, who are involved with a review of the Manx uplands and explained to our group the significance of our sphagnum peat bogs and the way

that they act as a carbon sink, most important in today's climate.

Jim also pointed out how special the diversity of different plants, birds and mammals found in our uplands is and that generally we have a healthy balance within our upland ecosystem.

As we walked down the north facing slope towards Montpelier, we stopped to view a large circular stone sheep fold estimated to be well over 100 years old, built with stone carried overland for its construction possibly from stone quarries further up the slope.

Here we had further input from Shaun Gelling, the forestry ranger for DECA and below the fold stopped on a section of managed heather where the shooting tenant Eddie Brew described in detail how routine burning of small blocks of heather in

rotation help to produce a proportion of young heather on which the grouse can feed yet providing cover for the grouse, lapwing, curlew and other birds to help them maintain their numbers in spite of the ever presence of natural predators such as the hen harrier.

There is an intrinsic balance of wildlife numbers, but these have been severely challenged by the extremes of weather and over predation due to lack of alternative food sources.

With such a late spring and more limited available food to birds and small mammals there will be further challenges that they achieve their appropriate body mass for them to survive before they are fledged or are weaned and go on to mature before the onset of nest winter.

Farmers throughout the

island have been severely challenged by the late spring in terms of trying to match the available grass feed with the demands of livestock and only recently still reporting shortage of grass in some upland and hill ground situations.

It is a simple fact that fodder grown in the summer months is used for grazing allowing stock to build condition for the winter months when less food is directly available, with carefully managed areas being conserved as silage or hay for winter feed.

This spring there has been a greater challenge with the grazing needs of stock out stripping the rate of growth.

One of the concerns of this is whether by the end of

summer enough good quality fodder will have been saved to provide for winter feed for next winter.

Both farming and nature alike at present are trying to play catch up from the challenges brought about by the weather since last June, may we have a season of

good growth in order to provide for the future.

May we thank the hosts of our

walk Paula and Danny Creer, Officers Peter, Shaun and Jim along with Eddie all for their input which helped provide such an insight into the delicate balance of our uplands and demonstrated how many parties work together to maintain such a valued part of our island and help to maintain its biodiversity.

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