

Flock recording helping to protect Connemara/Mayo Blackface

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Father and son partnership Martin Joe and Martin Kerrigan are hill sheep farmers in the Glentrague valley near Clonbur in Co Galway. Their land is in the heart of 'Joyce Country' and overlooks the picturesque Lough Mask.

The farm includes 133ha of good-quality mineral type enclosed hill grazing, along with 4ha of grazing in the foothills and a further 4ha of improved permanent pasture.

The farm has been in the family for generations, with Martin Joe taking over from his father in the early 90s. In recent years, Martin Joe has been joined by his own son Martin as joint flock owner. The farm is home to 220 Connemara/Mayo Blackface ewes, 40 replacement ewe hoggets and six stock rams.

"We breed our own ewe lambs to reduce the risk of buying in disease, but also because it offers us the opportunity to fully exploit genetic improvement," says Martin Joe.

Flock recording

Following the setting up of a flock book for the Mayo/Connemara Blackface Sheep Society, the Kerrigans joined the recording group for purebred status.

"We've collected data on 40 ewes with the help of an EID handheld reader and submitted the information via the Sheep Ireland app," says Martin Joe.

Martin adds: "The best way for farmers to improve the overall quality of their breeding stock and productivity is to start recording their flock. It is then a lot easier to identify bad genetic traits in stock, which can be culled from the farm".



Mayo Blackface producer Martin Joe Kerrigan and Damian Costello.

In the last year, recording has been expanded to include the whole flock, in order to accelerate overall genetic gain.

The nuts and bolts of flock recording

It's fair to say the uptake of flock recording has been a slow burner in the hill sector, mainly for understandable practical reasons.

"Lambing most of the ewes indoors makes tagging and recording at birth a little easier," Martin Joe remarks.

However, he is quick to point out that he has seen other group members lambing outdoors having great systems in place to do the necessary birth recording.

"At turnout, each ram EID is linked to their ewe group in a single sire mating system," he explains.

"When a ewe lambs down, scanning her EID tag with the handheld device

immediately brings up the sire," he continues.

"The progeny are then EID tagged (usually within 24 hours of birth) and linked to the dam, giving full parentage details. A birth weight is then taken and, along with the sex of the lamb, recorded on the handheld."

Martin Joe acknowledges Martin as being the more 'tech savvy' of the pair, but is now very comfortable using the technology himself.

When questioned about the extra work involved, he says he feels that with a good system in place, the flock data being captured is invaluable relative to the time spent recording it.

In terms of tips and tricks, he puts forward the insertion of different coloured management discs at tagging time, to identify lambs from the different sires, as a very useful management tool.



Martin Joe and local Teagasc advisor Joanne Masterson view some Mayo Blackface ewes.

Using data to cull poor performers

"In late July, we gathered the single-rearing ewes and their lambs and took them down from the hill for weaning. The 25% of the ewe flock rearing twin lambs had been grazed on the improved grassland area since lambing," says Martin Joe.

All ewes have since gone through their annual fitness-for-breeding health check after weaning. Udders, teeth, body condition score, feet etc, were checked, with culls identified for selling. Ewes that had issues during the year, such as prolapse, had this information recorded on the hand-held device and were also identified for culling.

"Ewes that presented at weaning with the lightest lambs reared are not up to the job," says Martin Joe.

"Using the data recorded at birth, we can identify the dam as a poor performer and cull her out of the system, which will prove a major positive for overall flock performance into the future."

Selecting ewe lamb replacements

Another important task that takes place at weaning is selecting the

home-bred ewe lambs that will be retained in the flock for breeding.

The Kerrigans have a keen eye for selecting replacements that are true to type. By selecting well-grown lambs at weaning, they are selecting progeny from the top-performing ewes in the flock.

The progeny of any ewe that has had issues around lambing, such as poor milk supply, poor mothering ability etc, does not receive a management disc and will not be considered as a replacement.

"As the parentage of these replacements has been recorded, inbreeding can be avoided when these lambs come of age to join the ram at 19 months old," says Martin Joe.

"Once replacements are taken out, the surplus lambs are marketed at a number of local special breeding sales."

Connemara/Mayo Blackface breeding group

In the past year, Martin has been involved in the development of the Connemara/Mayo Blackface breeding group. This is a group set up for all farmers who breed Connemara/Mayo

Blackface sheep.

At the forefront of this initiative are young, driven farmers in the area, who respect and see a bright future for the Connemara/Mayo Blackface breed and hill farming.

Breeders in the area were concerned that the genetic traits of the Connemara/Mayo Blackface breed were in danger of being diluted, as a result of crossing with other Blackface breeds.

The main goal of the group is to revive this unique and versatile hill breed and they ultimately hope to improve the overall quality and standard of the breed.

The group is currently busy with preparations for their first premier breeding sale, which takes place in Burkes Livestock Mart, Maam Cross on 2-3 October – ewe sale on 2 October and ram sale on 3 October.

"Hopefully, it will be a great way to showcase the breed and we are expecting to attract buyers from all over the country, as well as local customers," Martin says.

"We have a Facebook page set up Connemara/Mayo blackface group, if anyone wants further information on the sale."



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Hill sheep research

The Teagasc BETTER Farm sheep programme covers lowland and hill sheep farms spread right across the country. The programme has highlighted the necessity for having a clearly defined plan for managing and grazing a hill flock throughout the year.

Furthermore, by having a defined breeding policy in place the potential for genetic gain in a hill sheep enterprise is clear.

These farmers are recording performance data from their flocks throughout the year and are using this data to track the performance of individual rams, similar to the Kerrigans.

Data derived from the Teagasc National Farm Survey (NFS) has shown that 25% of the national lamb carcase output originates from hill progeny.

Teagasc has an ongoing research programme examining the options for finishing hill lambs indoors to carcase weights of 12-16kg and over 18kg and looking at the options for finishing hill lambs outdoors on a selection of for-



Mayo Blackface rams.

ages. This research is aimed directly at hill farmers hoping to finish their own lambs on farm but also at providing information to store lamb purchasers buying hill bred lambs after weaning.

Over the past number of seasons Martin Joe and Martin have sold some ram lambs to Teagasc for this project and are quick to endorse the value of this work to the hill sheep sector.

They have also used the blueprint coming from this study to intensively

finish some of their own ram lambs indoors and sold them through the Connemara Hill Lamb producer group.

“I have found the Teagasc store lamb calculator excel programme a very useful tool in deciding whether to head to the mart with store lambs or opt to finish the lambs ourselves,” adds Martin Joe.

More information on the store lamb calculator at the following link: <https://www.teagasc.ie/animals/sheep/financial-management/>