

Report on Whitefaced Woodland Census 2009

The main objectives for carrying out this census were to establish the numerical strength of the breed and the geographical distribution of flocks within the UK, as well to gain a further insight into the current role of the Whitefaced Woodland within the UK sheep industry. In total 147 people were contacted in relation to the census, with responses received from 126 (85.7%). The census date was 15th August 2009.

Four of the questionnaire responses were unidentifiable and enquiries to identify them were unsuccessful. Since no indication was given on these forms as to whether the sheep were or were not Combined Flock Book registered, the numbers given have been added to the overall total only. Similarly, as the information obtained for two numerically significant hill flocks was based on rough estimation, these figures have only been included in the calculation of the overall total for each category of stock. The combined total for these miscellaneous results are shown in *italics* in the table below, though these figures have not been used in any calculations during the further analysis of the data obtained.

Of the 126 respondents, 28 no longer kept any Whitefaced Woodland sheep. Of the 93 identifiable flocks for which results were obtained, 32 flocks contained solely or almost exclusively **non** RBST Combined Flock Book (CFB) registered sheep, 54 contained only CFB-registered animals, and 7 flocks contained significant numbers of sheep of each registration status. The geographical distribution of these flocks can be found on the accompanying maps. For this purpose, each flock is classified as small, medium, large or major, based on the number of flock ewes (i.e. the number of ewes excluding shearling ewes). The boundaries used for each flock size are identical to those devised by Philip Onions for his flock profiles with a small flock comprising between 1 and 20 ewes, a medium flock 21 to 50, a large flock 51 to 100 and a major flock 101 or more ewes. Where a flock contains both CFB and non CFB sheep, it appears on all three maps.

	No. of CFB-registered animals	No. of non CFB-registered animals	Total
Flock ewes	943	2261	3204+286= 3490
Ewes put to WW ram in 2008	740	1564	2304+256= 2560
Shearling ewes	255	623	878+72= 950
Stock tups	77	63	140+5= 145
Shearling tups	30	38	68+4= 72

Here it is interesting to note that the proportion of CFB-registered ewes put to a Whitefaced Woodland ram in 2008 was 78.5%, compared with 69.25% for non-CFB ewes, with 71.9% of all Whitefaced Woodland ewes bred pure in that year. From the results obtained, it was also possible to calculate not only the mean (average) flock size, but also the mean ram to ewe ratio (stock tups: ewes put to Whitefaced Woodland ram in 2008) for CFB flocks, non-CFB flocks and flocks containing both CFB and non-CFB sheep (here termed 'mixed flocks').

	CFB Flocks	Non-CFB Flocks	Mixed Flocks	All Flocks
Average flock size	14	65	28	34
Average ram: ewe ratio	1: 10	1: 24	1: 14	1: 16

Homebred sheep were by far the most common source of replacement females, although 20.4% of breeders reported that they buy in female stock. Of those keeping non-CFB sheep, 30.8% reported that they bought replacement stock tups from Bretton Mill Sheep Fair, an indication of the continuing popularity of this event,

while only 13.1% of those keeping CFB sheep signified that they bought replacement stock tups from RBST sales. Clearly therefore the society should do its utmost to ensure that future RBST sales remain supported.

	Proportion of of flocks kept mainly on LFA and Lowland	Proportion of flocks kept mainly on SDA and Moorland	Information not provided
CFB-registered Flocks	81.5%	9.26%	7.41%
Non-CFB Flocks	34.3%	53.1%	12.5%
Mixed flocks	85.7%	14.3%	0%
All flocks	64.9%	26.6%	7.44%

LFA = Less Favoured Area; SDA = Severely Disadvantaged Area

While these results in themselves are not necessarily a cause for concern, it is important to remember that the Whitefaced Woodland is a hill breed and thus should be capable of surviving and producing saleable lambs in hill conditions. It is vital therefore that hardiness is taken into consideration when selecting future breeding stock, even when breeding flocks are kept in less harsh conditions than found in the breed's native area, if the breed's characteristics are to be retained in their entirety in future generations.

The most popular breed for crossing with purebred Whitefaced Woodland ewes is the Texel. However, Texel x Beltex rams are also in common use, as is the Suffolk. A number of native down breeds including the Hampshire Down, Oxford Down and Shropshire have also been used successfully, as has the continental Rouge. Longwool breeds used include the Bluefaced Leicester and the Wensleydale. Lleyr rams were used for crossing in two flocks, while less common and more unusual crosses include the use of Easycare, Kerry Hill, Hill Radnor and a variety of other rare and minority breeds. Crossing with the more closely related hill breeds, the Swaledale and the Lonk, is also carried out.

The total number of Whitefaced Woodland cross ewes kept by those surveyed was found to be 778, with the Woodland x Texel being the most common type, followed by the Woodland x Swaledale. Several breeders favour the production of a Woodland Mule or Masham-type sheep by crossing with Bluefaced Leicester or a Wensleydale rams respectively. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, this type of sheep seems in general to be kept only on LFA land and Lowland. In keeping with the current trend in the UK national flock, the most popular terminal sire breed used on these crossbred ewes is the Texel, followed by the Suffolk and the Charollais.

The response to the formation of a new Society register of Whitefaced Woodland sheep was strong, with 30 respondents indicating that they wished to be contacted with further information regarding the registration process.

While it has not been possible to identify the exact size of the national flock, given that a 100% response rate was not achieved and 100% coverage could never be guaranteed, the figure of some 3,500 flock ewes provides a good indication of the numerical strength of the breed. While there is no room for complacency in these figures, it is encouraging for the future of the breed that some 72% of the national flock was put to Whitefaced Woodland rams in 2008. Furthermore the figure of 950 shearling ewes indicates that a healthy proportion of ewe lambs are being retained for breeding. These proportions year by year are clearly of great significance for the survival and future strength of the breed.

Finally, may I take the opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to this survey, which I hope will be of interest and some practical benefit.

John Jones