

Old English Goat Society

Newsletter 89

May 2012



The first of Charlie Parker's "Hillgill" kids.

Chairman's Chunter.

April has been most enjoyable as I heard from proud owners each reporting births of the most beautiful kids ever seen, often with delightful photos. Most kids have probably arrived by now, although mine is not due till the middle of this month. I haven't heard from all the herds I think have been breeding, I expect some will be waiting for late stragglers too. If necessary I shall be badgering the rest of you later!

I like to mate my nanny kids when they first come into season, when they are about six months old, but if they are born in May or later they probably won't be well enough grown. Left to themselves, nannies would usually get pregnant in their first rut, at about six months; although in a harsh environment they would probably lose the kid and perhaps not survive themselves. On the other hand, a nanny born to a well fed and cosseted mother, with lots of milk, and equally cosseted herself, is well capable of carrying a kid, or even two, successfully, and continuing to grow herself at the same time. She will announce her intention very vigorously indeed when the rut starts, so one reason for following this rule is to shut her up!

I rather think that nannies are at their noisiest in rut when they are young, and get more discreet as they get older. Some of my very senior ladies would just give a quiet murmur and lead me to the gate and so towards, she hoped, a billy. This makes good sense, because in a normal herd the billies would know the senior nannies, while a new kid has to establish her availability. I saw something similar in monkey societies I used to study.

Of course goat keepers have usually not bred nannies until their second rut. The goatling is a product of domestication, and to my mind is a nuisance. Without putting energy into pregnancy and lactation, she has nothing to do but escaping and destroying things. I suppose the idea is she grows bigger and eventually gives more milk, but with proper feeding, I doubt if that is true.

Notice board

John Whittle reports that Whernside Tabitha has had twins (one of each) by Clarkshill Ted.

Judith Greene's Angrholm Rowan has had twin females by Clarkshill Littlebilly and Whernside Nellie (known at home as Ellie!) had a single female by Clarkshill Sam.

Congratulations to the happy owners and to all the other members - news of whose kids has not yet reached the editor!

Error! In the 2011 Year Book Judith Greene's telephone number should have two sixes on the end. My apologies for that. Ed.

AGM - Sunday 24th June 2012. Format as usual – turn up any time from mid-morning onwards – always lots to talk about and catch up on before the actual meeting starts after the shared lunch. Do bring your surplus items of equipment, small tools, books etc. – they may be just what someone else is looking for – needn't be goat related – many members have other livestock and gardens. If there is anything you'd like discussed please let the secretary, Denny Pearson know so that she can put it on the agenda.

Also, if you let me know by 30th May, I could publish a list of items likely to be available. Ed.

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POLLED MALES IN FERAL HERDS.

RAYMOND WERNER, DECEMBER, 2011

Feral goat populations, particularly if they are of landrace type, are typified by being horned. There are, however, some herds in which polling occurs, a good example being the feral goats frequenting the Gliders, in Snowdonia.

The mutation for Hornlessness or polling will occur from time to time in all horned species, along with deer. In goats it is generally assumed that it originated in the Alpine goats of Switzerland, reaching the British Isles by way of importations of goat stock from the early Twentieth Century onwards that traced their descent to Swiss and Anglo-Swiss breeds that are based upon the Saanen and Toggenburg.

It has been shown, however, that the Icelandic goat (which is related to the Old British or British Primitive breeds) is sometimes polled, and that its polling gene is the same as that found in the goats of Western Europe generally, which includes Switzerland. As the Icelandic breed was introduced during the Settlement period of 874-930 AD, and has been maintained in isolation ever since, the polling mutation in general must have arisen prior to the Ninth Century. This gives meaning to the fact that the British Primitive breeds in their pure form were sometimes polled, although polling as a factor in present-day feral herds is more correctly associated with the escape or release of domestic stock of Swiss type in recent times.

The effect that polling in feral males has on feral herds of mixed breed origin is quite interesting. Horns in feral males are perceived to be a means of defence or attack during the rut, and with the implication that their overall size and shape (dorcass horns are more impressively larger than the scimitar horn when viewed head-on) is an important factor in male dominance. Thus, by implication, a polled male has been 'disarmed', which suggests that the polling mutation is at best neutral, serving no purpose, or else leaves the animal at a distinct disadvantage during the rut. Not so, in fact.

A hornless male will keep in better condition and be more mobile than his horned counterpart whose ever-growing horns will require a supply of nutrients and minerals that could equal or exceed the requirement of a nanny in kid or with a kid. 2.

Also, as polling in feral herds is more closely associated with goats of Swiss type, their better condition due to horn lack is echoed by their usually short coat, hair growth echoing horn growth in its nutritional and mineral requirements. As if this were not enough of an advantage, the largest feral males in herds with significant introgression will be those that are more notably Swiss in origin, meaning that a polled Swiss-type male is not only likely to be in better condition (no horns and short coat), but up to 50% larger than its British primitive counterpart.

Certainly, the horned male may have the advantage if cornered by dogs, although the advantage will be with the polled male during the breeding season as he may well serve a disproportionate number of females and then, when the weather turns really harsh, survive by wintering on his fat.

It should be noted, however, that there are two types of polled males, dependant on whether they are homozygous (PP) for Hornlessness, or heterozygous (Pp). Because the dominant gene for polling is associated with a sex-change factor that is recessive, more than half of the PP males will be sterile, those that are not being between six and seven percent more prolific than either heterozygous polled males (Pp) or horned (pp) males. Their sexual development is normal, even so.

What needs to be born in mind, when considering the balance of horned to polled males in a feral population, is that the polled condition may lead on to something akin to a social disaster if it rises above 5% polled. This is due to the fact that a polled feral female, when served by a PP polled male, may produce an intersex kid that starts out female, but then develops as a pseudo-male that is apparently male, a pseudo-female that is apparently female, or a pseudo-hermaphrodite that is obviously intersex. This is in a ratio of 1:1 in female conceptions, and 1:4 overall. Likewise, a polled feral female that is served by a Pp polled male will produce an intersex kid in the ratio of 1:4 female conceptions and 1:8 overall.

It is possible to tell whether a male kid will develop horns or not, and if it is homozygous or heterozygous if it has the polling condition. Horned (pp) kids have a hair-whorl on each horn bud that will almost always indicate the future appearance of horns. In polled kids, there are two bony knobs on the skull. In PP male kids these protuberances are noticeably well-rounded, well separated, and lacking in scurs. In Pp male kids these protuberances are shaped like two beans and join in the shape of a “v” that points forwards. There may also be scurs that are between two and three cms in length. It is quite possible to distinguish these differences by three months, although it will generally be more accurate at five to six months.

The first English Goat Breeders' Association (1920) acknowledged that the Old English goat could be polled, albeit not commonly, and its rarity may to some extent be illustrated by the fact that when the breed went feral along the Border Hills, there was hardly a known case of Hornlessness amongst these herds. Interestingly, the Old Irish goat would seem to have been more typically polled than the Old English, and a hornless improved type of Old Welsh goat was developed prior to importations of foreign goat stock that included hornless animals.

Polling raises an interesting question in relation to the breed points of the OEG goat. On the one hand, there is the issue of inter-sexuality in polled goats, and it should be remembered that the Swiss, who championed hornlessness in their goat improvement, and who once believed that the Alpine goat was a naturally polled type in which the appearance of horns indicated an unwanted ‘throwback’, have now gone back to horns. On the other hand, the practise of disbudding kids in modern goat breeding culture means that goats without horns are generally thought of as the norm. Wedged in between, is the fact that any attempt to preserve or recreate our old landrace breed should be aware of the fact that it was either horned or polled, even if the latter condition was by no means typical.

So, *authenticity* might cry out for some polling in terms of preserving or recreating an old breed; *hermaphroditeism* might be an argument against including polled animals; *disbudding* might be a convenient way of avoiding horns; and with the dairy breeds being hornless, visually at least, horns are certainly a way of *promoting* a breed as different.

Apropos of the last comment, when the Old English goat was still being shown in the 1930's, the public was particularly struck by the fact that the breed was typically horned, the comment being that these were 'real' goats!

Letter to the Editor.

Thought you may find this of interest, perhaps, for the newsletter.



Charlie kept a skin back from an Old English wether which we sent along with some Soay skins to Devonia tannery. We have used them before, it's not cheap but they are very good; it was interesting to see how the goat skin turned out. It is very good and has made a lovely rug; we are pleased with it. Some other members may be interested if they haven't tried this already,

Gina Parker.

Editor's note: It certainly has made a lovely rug. Thank you for that, Gina and Charlie.

I have another friend who has used the same tannery and says "what a wonderful job they do."

If anyone else is interested you can contact them at:-

Devonia Products Ltd. Mardle Way, Buckfastleigh, Devon TQ11 0AG Tel.01364 643355 or by email at sales@devoniaproducts.co.uk

Also, Thelma Rowell has used Nicki Port, Lesser Netherton, Harewood End, Hereford HR2 8LA. Tel: 01989 730 615. Nickiport@virgin.net for sheepskins.



"The Scapegoat" by Holman Hunt. Google images.