

OUT ON THE RANGE

An island in the Hebrides. Words & photos by Elaine Fletcher



“CREX CREX.” The rasping sound of the rare corncrake calling. With every jarring sound we are reminded that we are in a governmentally adjusted environment. Even here, on this lonely Scottish west coast island, we are beset with regulations.

We manage this 7,000-acre estate on the Isle of Colonsay, one of the most remote, windswept, but beautiful and fertile islands in the Hebrides. There are six farms and, not so long ago, they all had a family working and living there. The farm on which we live even had milk cows once. Now, they are all run by my husband as one unit, with just me as the hired hand. One of the farmhouses is now let throughout the summer to the beast that is easier to milk—the tourist. They aren’t as much work, bring in more money, but aren’t so good to look at.

We are paid by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to keep out of our silage fields until so late in the season that the crop is virtually worthless. This saves the ground-nesting birds, like the corncrake, but

it also means that, being September, the chances of having two rain-free days on the trot are reduced! We also then have no aftermath of grass for fattening the lambs. So they have to be sold younger for little more than the cost of shipping.

We are paid, in effect, to farm badly. The payment from the RSPB is supposed to be for extra cake for cattle, to compensate for the low quality of silage. This might work on the mainland, but we have to pay an extra \$90 a ton for shipping the 32 miles across the sea. However, we are willing to go with the flow (flow or go!), provided our charges—2,400 head of Scottish Blackface sheep and 125 mother cows, plus followers—won’t suffer. At sale times, each lamb costs \$2.85 just to get it to the mainland.

Supplies coming to the island for the people is as much of a problem. With only one small general store on the island, most folks phone an order to the mainland store, which packs it and puts it on the boat. Last week we were charged \$28 for shipping a \$25 box of

groceries to us.

Through the winter, there are three boats a week, but they are cancelled all too often. One week they were all cancelled owing to the storms, so we had no mail, milk, fresh fruit or provisions.

The mains water and the electricity came to the island in 1985, bringing the generators to a rumbling halt, to lie, like some half-forgotten beasts, piles of rusty bones from another era.

There are 90 adults living on the island, 60 of working age, some working on the mainland who visit their wives once a week. Children are shipped off to school and can’t get home, even at the weekend, as there is no boat on a Sunday to take them back.

They told us before we came that, in this paradise, there are no foxes, snakes, deer or moles. The island is virtually vermin-free! But they didn’t say there are rats as big as cats and snails as big as Catherine wheels. Between them, they eat everything growing or stored.

Come the summer—having beaten, or at

least placated, the government (having been told where we are allowed to spread our slurry, dispose of dip, silage wrap, etc.), after drying out from the six months of solid rain, repairing the damage from 90-mile-an-hour winds, healing the bruises from a million knocks, kicks or horn bumps—we face the bigger obstacle...the tourist.

They arrive at Easter with cars jammed with goggling children, in-laws, outlaws and tons of food. They come from another world where no one has to reverse a car; they can't go back two yards to the passing places when they meet you towing a livestock trailer. They live in a world where gates are for parking in, not entrances to fields. They spring out and lunge at you with a camera, without bothering to ask if you mind, snap it in your face like you're some kind of freak show, then move on to the next attraction. They either stare at you open-mouthed as you ride past, or look the other way when you greet them.

They watch your dogs perform wonderful feats of stamina and control over rocks as sharp as needles, to bring in sheep as wild as goats. Then you glance to where they are huddled watching and realize, with shock, that they are horrified and think you have lost your dogs, and that they are out of control, which is why you were whistling to them. After all, dogs belong on the end of a leash, don't they? Not a mile out on a rock face.

Then there are the other folk who can't understand why your dogs are riding on the back of the four-wheeler going home.

"Are they screwed on?"

"Nope, just screwed up!"

"Don't you ever let them off for a little run?"

"Nope, I just keep them on the back to keep the mat from flying away!"

I try to explain that they have just gathered 1,500 acres of rough ground and if they had to run behind the four-wheeler the four miles back on hot blacktop road, they wouldn't be able to stand up, let alone do the rest of the afternoon's work. Their dogs need a good run; our dogs need a good rest because they run for a living.

Well, the summer is over, the sheep are sheared, the silage baled—then as suddenly as it came, the sun disappears behind that eternal cloud, and with it the swarms of visitors, all waving and shouting.

"Bye-bye, we've had a wonderful holiday. Aren't you lucky to be here all the year round! But we have to go back to work! See you next year...." ■



ABOVE: Highland cattle graze on the Isle of Colonsay, one of the most remote, windswept, but beautiful and fertile islands in the Scottish Hebrides. BELOW: Gordon Fletcher shears the sheep in July. BOTTOM: Elaine with lamb. OPPOSITE: Scottish Blackface sheep, a few of 2,400. (See dogs, page 3.)



GORDON FLETCHER