

Have You Herd? – A handy reference for Barns Ness Sheep Checkers



1. Background Information to the project

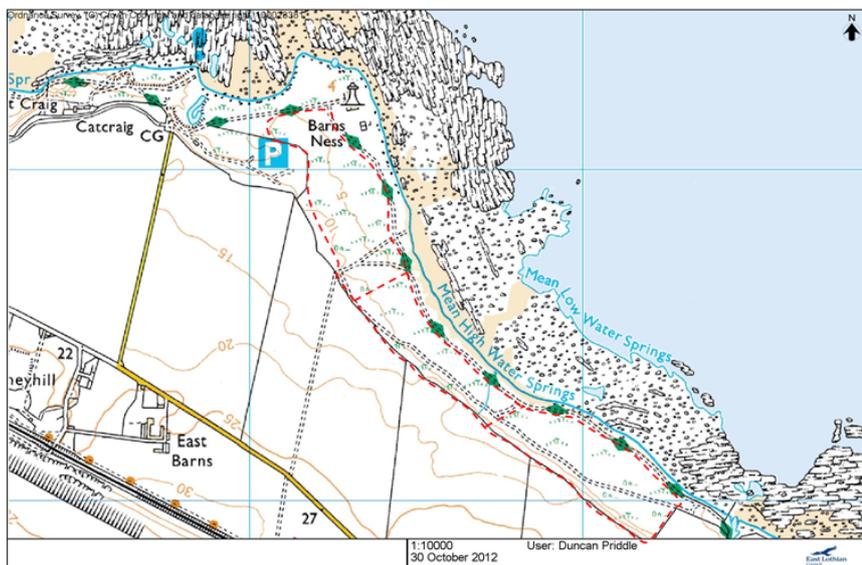
The Barns Ness – Skateraw grasslands represent a fine area of unimproved coastal grassland. By this we mean grassland that has no history of agricultural chemicals having been put onto it or other techniques employed aimed at 'improving' the agricultural yield of the area. The only management of the site in living memory has been the grazing of the grasslands, at varying levels, by farm animals alongside the local rabbit and deer population.

As a result, the grassland area has been allowed to maintain a wonderful mix of native plants that have been lost at other locations around the coast, either to development or agricultural tweaking. Because of this, these grasslands receive a high level of nature conservation protection – being designated a Site of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI). East Lothian Council has a duty to ensure that these grasslands (and all SSSI's) are kept in a favourable condition.

But there's a problem. About 15 years ago, the economics of stock farming took a nose dive and many areas that were previously grazed, suddenly found themselves bereft of nibbling. In consequence the more rank and coarser (dare I say 'common') grasses began to dominate the habitat, at the expense of the more specialist coastal flora. Something was needed to rectify the problem. We could mow the grasses, but that would be both difficult, expensive and also leave a load of decomposing cuttings that would require to be cleared.

Instead, grazing the land once again seemed an obvious solution. This brings us to where we are now. We have a friendly farmer and stock manager – Hugh Hamilton and John Robertson respectively who were keen to find some winter grazing land for their flock and were also interested in the conservation aspects of the project. So, they get the land for grazing, we get the grasses eaten down and the sheep get fed. Everybody wins! Well sort of. Doubtless as this is a 'new' thing happening at Barns Ness some peoples' noses will be put out, especially as we have put in such a big new fence.

The fence has 3 subdivisions – fields (or paddocks) into which the sheep will go and be rotated throughout the winter, in the desire to ensure just the right amount of nibbling goes on.



2. Checking the sheep

There are a few basic things to check when you are out lookering, which can be divided between things to do with the sheep directly and things to do with the site infrastructure itself

The checks you will need to carry out are very simple and straightforward. They basically involve **counting** to make sure all the sheep are present and checking that they appear to be in **good health**. The best way to check the sheep is from a distance using binoculars. This is so that they can behave naturally without being disturbed and you can observe whether any are acting funny indicating that they are unwell. Also, when you get close to them, their instinct is to bunch up together making counting them very difficult. A good way to count them is as they are moving in a line, but anything goes so long as you can count up the correct number.

Health signs to look out for

You certainly don't need to be a vet to do this. Most of it is common sense and we can usually recognise an animal that seems unwell. Here are a few things that you should look out for:

- **the signs of good health in sheep.** These include general alertness, free movement, active feeding and rumination and absence of lameness, visible wounds, abscesses or injuries.
- **signs which indicate ill-health in sheep.** These include listlessness, abnormal posture and behaviour, lameness, diarrhoea, persistent coughing or panting, scratching and frequent rubbing, rapid loss of body condition, excessive wool loss, and being apart from the flock.
- ... If you are in **any doubt** about an animal's health then please contact John /myself/ Laura

Looking after sheep in this way is known as 'lookering' and those who do it 'lookers'. So if you've ever thought of yourself as a bit of a looker, now's your chance to show it!

If you can't count all the flock?

It's always good to get a precise count for the flock, this being the only way to ensure all are present and correct. It is not always easy, or possible to achieve this, however, but you should start out with this intention. Nonetheless if, despite a couple of goes, the flock are moving in such a way so as to make counting impossible, do the best you can and report back in your email later to that effect – e.g.

'I could only count 145 (out of a total of 148), but they kept walking back and forwards in front of each other and I've checked the field to see if there were any injured animals and could not find any'.

3. Checking the site

The main concern, of course, is sheep getting out of the grazing area. Fortunately an escaped sheep – or even a few – don't like to be away from the main flock, so even if sheep do somehow get out, they are likely to be feeding adjacent to the area 99% of the time. But, to ensure none of this happens, when you are out check the site for the following;

- Kissing gates – are they all secure / working properly?
- Fence – is it secure, has it been cut / tampered with?

- Stiles – are they all working ok?

In addition, a cursory glance at the **water troughs** should let you know if they are working ok. They should re-fill automatically, so if empty, this would indicate there's some sort of problem to resolve.

The only other thing to check when out looking is to do with other people – specifically **dog walkers**. Hopefully people will all respond positively to the signs (always worth checking the signs are in place) and behave as requested. If you do, however, come across a dog owner who is letting their dog disturb the flock, please inform them politely, but firmly, of their responsibility to control their dog. If you have no joy getting through to them, leave it there and give one of us a call.

4. Reporting Back

Once you have returned, weathered but content from your looking, all I need from you is a text or an email to indicate either that everything is ok, or that there was some issue that needs flagged up.

5. Developing your skills

Some of you may be interested, in addition to the tasks involved in looking, in assisting in other tasks that have to be carried out on the sheep from time to time, such as cleaning out their hooves and other animal welfare tasks. This is entirely optional though John did indicate he'd be happy for anyone to help him, it's just a case of letting us know.

6. Your Safety

...comes before everything else. Before we let you loose on checking, you'll be made aware of any hazards on-site, though none spring to mind. Do always take heed of **weather conditions** – no one should go out in stormy / thundery or blizzard conditions. The sheep will survive and we can look at them once the weather improves.

Do **dress appropriately** for the conditions, however. Always take

- a spare layer
- wear boots
- have waterproofs
- hat / gloves
- take some food and drink if you need it

Take a **mobile phone** and have agreed a call-out (buddy) plan either with me or your nearest and dearest – again I can cover this during the induction.

Risk assessment. I'll cover this during the site induction, but basically this is a formal mechanism to ensure you are made aware of the above safety issues and a couple other bits and pieces as well.

Many thanks for your help with the grazing project and enjoy yourself out on site!

Duncan Priddle, Countryside Officer

Useful Contacts

Please contact either of us if you have any problems or queries to do with the sheep.

Duncan Priddle, Countryside Officer
01620 827459 (office hours)
07881 668276 (mobile)

If there are serious problems with the sheep please contact the grazier (see below).

John Robertson, Stockman, 07765 772197
Hugh Hamilton, Farmer 07770 940454

Emergency contacts are

Dunbar Police 01368 862718
Links Vets 01620 862262

