

Sherana Sheep Report No 15
“Twelve Years with Clean Skin Sheep”
and other things.”

July 2011.

For a print ready copy of this newsletter or if the pictures do not appear in your copy click the link below:
<http://damaras.com/newsletters/sh-110804-twelve-years-of-cleanskins.pdf>

STOP PRESS: Moat goes to the Ekka (again!).

Already Sherana is in a lather of preparation for Mother-of-All-Things to have a holiday in the big smoke. The word has spread among the flocks about this marvellous EKKA Heaven where sheep get fed good hay twice every day, where there is no frost on the morning grass, no dingos in the night, no freezing rain, no cold winds and no Rouseabout doing unspeakable things to innocent sheep.

So everyone is smiling at Moat and saying things like: "Take me, I need some TLC", or "Look at my beautiful baby" or "I promise to be people-friendly, and not butt stupid kids".

Ekka is usually a place where townies come to gawk at bushies and both go away feeling superior. But Judy would also like to see some sheep lovers, especially those who like clean-skin meat sheep and may want to buy some.

We will have about 9 sheep there, including damaras, dorpers/meatmasters plus lambs and bottlies (but they are not for sale).

Look for them all near the animal nursery in the Sheep and Wool Pavilion.

Celia looks likely to go to the Ekka. Have a look here for another chapter of "Celia's Story":
<http://damaras.com/newsletters/sh-110801-celia-story.pdf>

And if you only want to look at pictures, see our new album at:
<http://www.damaras.com/album/index.html>

Or browse a great South African damara web site:
<http://users.iafrica.com/m/mw/mwdatru/index.htm>

1. Experience is Important

We got our first sheep in 1999. Before that, neither of us had ever owned sheep.

However, a very young Rouseabout had helped his older brother-in-law look after small mob of merinos in the 1950's. They were drenched with nicotine and bluestone using an empty beer bottle as a drench gun. The drench was dipped out of a metal bucket which soon got coppered from the bluestone. We also clipped fly blown sheep with old hand clippers and applied some powerful insecticide from another beer bottle. Occasionally one was grabbed and butchered for meat. (I watched all this and grimaced). I hated those merinos. We had no sheep dog and when I was sent to get them in, they gathered in a circle-of-safety in the middle of the paddock and just went round and round. I think that is when I learned to swear properly.

Thus Rouseabout felt he was quite an expert in sheep.

Mother-of-all-Things also had experience of merinos (from a good distance). On her Uncle's large cattle property at Nebo were a mob of wild merinos, remnants of one of the great flocks that dominated most Queensland grazing properties when Australia rode the sheep's back. These sheep lived in dingo/spear grass country and had never been mustered, crutched, shorn or drenched for maybe 40 years. They did look a bit shaggy, and certainly needed a haircut, but they survived. Uncle Arch used to shoot one for meat occasionally. Years later we realised what valuable genetics had been concentrated in those survivors, but by then it was too late. We are not sure what happened to them in the end.

So there we were. Two very experienced sheep people about to import some funny looking "sheep" never before seen in Queensland.

After twelve years we now know how little we knew then. Maybe we have made most of the mistakes that two people can make in a decade, so things will be plain sailing from here on.

2. Gazelles, Hippos, Mules and Heinz Sheep

Our main aim in sheep breeding has been to breed a line of zero-care meat sheep which cope well with the Australian environment. We have not yet succeeded, but in the process have learned a lot about a few sheep breeds. This includes, in order of appearance on our property – Merino, Damino, Damara, Dorper, White Dorper, East Friesian, Wiltshire Horn and Meatmaster.

Currently we have three breeding flocks – pure Damara, pure Dorper and Meatmaster, and mainly use pure damara or pure dorper rams in all flocks.

The Merino came first as carriers of our first pure damara embryos. They were exactly as I remembered merinos - stubborn, brainless, woolly, fly blown and prone to die for any excuse. Spear grass and maggots were an annual problem. We clipped a few fly blown ones with very sharp hand shears, managing to first clip bits out of the sheep and then bits out of Rouseabout's fingers. But most of them gave birth to these funny looking coloured damara lambs and, like mothers everywhere, loved and looked after their cuckolded kids. They have given us an abiding hatred of woolly sheep, so we now cull every sheep that does not shed any wool cleanly. We sold all of the merinos as soon as their lambs were weaned.

With the merinos we also got a flock of F1 merino/damara cross ewes (in the west some call these sheep "Daminos"). They also were mostly very woolly, but were far different from pure merinos. Damaras have very strong concentrated genes and so change any other breed very quickly towards damara characteristics. We used these F1 ewes to breed up a line of clean shedding cross bred ewes. We have been quite satisfied with these sheep once they got to at least 75% damara and thus getting rid of most of the wool. They are hardy, good mothers, very good eating, not fence crawlers and like damaras, easy to handle. Generally tall and rangy like damaras.

Damaras are our very favourite cleanskin sheep, and we know more about them than other breeds. More on that below.

We have a love/hate relationship with Dorpers, but we have persevered with them and know a lot about them. They are compared to Damara below. Mother-of-All-Things describes the two breeds thus – "Damaras are the gazelles of the sheep world, Dorpers are the Hippos".

A few years ago we got a few pure Wiltshire Horn ewes – it seemed a good idea at the time. Wiltis have two features we thought were useful in a Meatmaster mix – very good strong upright black hooves, and very clean shedding. But after giving them a good try we have decided that their bad features outweigh the good. They are loner sheep, do not flock well – when we went to get the flocks home at night, all damara and damara cross would be in one flock ready to come home. The wiltis would be up on the side of the hill, on their own, watching MOAT yelling loudly "You rotten Wilti, get down off the hill and come home with the mob". They also are woolly sheep so their fleeces get filled with spear grass. Then the pure wiltis shed their fleece so completely that they are bald for a while and get sunburnt. They also do nothing to improve the damara frame – they tend to be tall and rangy like greyhounds. They have very strong horns, even the ewes, and unlike the small horns damara ewes have, Wilti horns are very strong. Finally they have a temperament a friend of ours described as "fractious" – the mules of the sheep world. So we have got rid of all Wiltis – that was another lesson. But they have left a trace of their passing in our flocks - we still have some ewes with a tiny bit of Wilti which does improve hooves and shedding.

The East Friesians were a mistake. We got a couple accidentally. They were woolly sheep and terrible fence crawlers. They did not stay here long.

Finally Meatmaster.

Eventually we will have only two breeding flocks – pure damara and Meatmaster (or "Improved Dorper"). More on Meatmasters below.

3. Our Favoured Sheep Breeds Compared

DAMARAS

After all our experiments, Damara and Dorper and their crosses are the only two Cleanskin meat sheep breeds worth keeping, in our opinion.

Damara Advantages:

- Very easy on fences – seldom get thru even poor fences
- Fertile and good protective mothers
- Lambs stick close to their mothers
- Flock well and thus easy to move if you understand where to move and stand
- Work the whole country well – climb hills and eat longer grass plus weeds and some scrubby bushes
- Are not destructive like goats - seldom ringbark trees, do not climb things
- Not greatly troubled by blow flies, buffalo flies, cattle ticks or spear grass
- Survive worms better than other breeds we have tried
- Their meat is the best of all sheep and beef we have tasted
- They cross easily with all other sheep breeds and improve all meat breeds

Damara Disadvantages - there are only three:

- They do not look like a sheep is supposed to look, and have that tail
- They are different to handle (more on that below)
- They can be stressed more easily, which can affect meat quality

Damaras are a wild natural breed and every characteristic they have allows them to survive tough environments, predators and parasites. So they are observant, easily startled, suspicious, quick on their feet and have only one big rule – stay with the mob, run with the mob and always aim to get in the centre of the circle of safety.

So they are different to muster, draft, load and transport. They can gallop over people and stick in the corner of yards and truck to be dragged out one by one. Easier to handle than other sheep when you get the right facilities and techniques, but harder until you learn all the tricks needed to get them to want to go where you want them to be.

Once you learn about them, and they learn about you, things are easy.

DORPERS

We got our first dorpers in a stud auction sale. Rouseabout liked the cute sheep with black faces and white bodies. Mother-of-All-Things still asks at times why we got them.

Dorper advantages:

- They look like a sheep is supposed to look.
- They are fashionable and known and liked by meat buyers
- They can become very docile and friendly
- They fatten easily
- Meat and fat tends to be firmer and so cuts up nicely for butchers
- No awkward fat tail that butchers are not used to

- They are supposedly zero-shear sheep. (Unfortunately, some are great hair sheep but too many have thick curly poorly shedding wool.)

Dorper Disadvantages:

- Many are not good shedders and need shearing in spear grass country
- A few get fly blown in matted wool in wet weather
- They are more troubled by spear grass than damaras
- Their legs are often too short and they puff easily – can't walk as far or fast as damaras
- Predators find and catch them easier than damaras – they are slow, white and more trusting
- They tend to flog out the short grass areas around water points but do not work hills as well
- They can be very obstinate in the crush and spit out the drench more often
- They are more susceptible to worms, probably because they favour short grass areas
- Their meat is drier and tougher than damara
- There is a lot of variation in the breed – we have culled a large number for too much wool, poor hooves, short legs and worm susceptibility.
- They have more lambing problems than damara – lambs tend to be bigger.
- They challenge fences more – try to push through or crawl under

MEATMASTERS – the Heinz Sheep

We generally define Meatmasters by the 25:25:25 rule. At least 25% damara, at least 25% dorper and no more than 25% any other breed. We aim for a hair sheep that sheds perfectly, has a tall strong frame, good hooves, retains the flocking instinct but with a reasonably relaxed temperament. The damara-dorper cross goes closest to this ideal and we now have many ewes that meet our strict criteria. But we are still culling those that fail the tests. This seems to be automatically ridding our flock of fractious and sometimes woolly Wiltshire blood.

4. Planting Lambs

Rouseabout has conducted a practical experiment in raising lambs without needing the old fashioned ram and ewe procedure. He tried to grow a lamb tree by planting a lamb.

It happened this way. Rouseabout was engaged in his usual hobby of fixing fences built 20 years ago and now getting slack. He decided a gate post needed relocation, so pulled the old post out leaving a deep round hole in the ground. With the job half done, another priority arose, and the hole was not filled in.

At sundown, Mother-of-all-Things brought sheep out of that paddock, but could hear a tiny bleating behind her somewhere. She searched everywhere as she does when a lamb bleats within 1 km of her well tuned ear. She slowly traced the sound to the new fence work, then to the hole. Deep in the open post hole she saw the nose of a baby lamb that had fallen backwards into the hole. She dragged out a dirty stressed baby.

Rouseabout disappeared about then. The lamb testing experiment was promptly terminated before the lamb had a chance to take root and grow, so we will never know whether the procedure was successful.

5. Our Experience with British Alpine Milking Goats

There are three distinct breeds in the ovine world in Australia – Goats, Damaras and other sheep.

In the goat world there are Dairy Goats (a very refined upper class and well behaved bunch), Boer Goats (the respectable hard working meat goats) and the ferals, who have adapted best to survive Australian conditions without help.

We think our goats are the aristocrats of the Dairy goats – British Alpines - tall, regal, glossy, black ladies who seem to have established a place on Sherana. (Using terms like "black ladies" probably marks Rouseabout for "re-education"?)

They are pampered, fussy, hard to feed, need plenty of minerals, bucks are a nuisance and they take a lot of work. But MOAT approves of them, and we get a continuous supply of fresh healthy un-pasteurised, un-homogenised milk, so they are here to stay.

We have also discovered how to make Quark cheese, and have managed, at great expense, to make half a glass of goat's cream. If anyone knows where to get a good goat's milk cream separator, let us know.

A Goaty Question

Question: What do you get from a Pampered Goat?

Answer: Spoiled Milk

6. Raising Orphan Lambs

We have now become expert at making sure mothers raise their own kids. We try not to get bottlies, but occasionally deliberately take one twin off a poor mother in a drought. This is what we have learned after raising many lambs:

- Do not bother raising rams – it is easy to make them vicious as they grow up, and they may not make the grade anyway. And MOAT will complain if you suggest eating them. Turn them into wethers before they are 4 weeks old.
- Do not raise one lamb on its own – it will become neurotic and bleat every time you disappear.
- They are a lot of work and expense so make sure you accept that.
- But the ewe lambs grow up to be quiet, friendly sheep, nice to have in any flock.
- Wean them at 3 months and put them back in the weaner mob. Ignore their piteous bleating every time you appear - they must learn to become sheep again.

7. Making Rams into Wethers

This is another field in which we hope we have made all the mistakes and now know how to do it properly.

We started using small rubber rings. They work fine for small lambs up to about 2 months old. But we lost a few older sheep – somehow infection got back past the rings that must have been too weak.

So we tried a burdizzo. Hard work grovelling on the ground, no sheep lost, but about 10% ended up rams anyway.

Then we bought a new bigger stronger ring emasculator. Turned out it was no bigger than the old silver one we had. And then its handle broke.

Then tried a new one we saw at Ag Show. Another big failure – no bigger than old one, but had very strong rubbers that work on our old silver machine. Managed to return it for a bigger model – the Eze Bloodless Castrator.

It has very strong rubber rings that need the strength of Hercules (or the help of MOAT) to load (until you get the knack). But it copes very successfully and easily with large testicles. Recovery of sheep seems quicker.

So now we have two emasculators – the old silver pliers type that works perfectly and easily on small lambs up to about 2-3 months. And the EZE Bloodless Castrator from Technipharm in New Zealand that will cope with any ram (or a bull even, if you have a Stock Still).

8. "Falcon" joins the team.

We have a caravan on Sherana and recently placed an advert in the local papers for a part time caretaker/helper. Got lots of calls, mostly unsuitable, but the first caller sounded good. After a day looking at one another we shook hands on a deal.

Our new helper is a keen sheepman and willing helper. Immediately started rising with MOAT in the dark and frost well before sunrise. He watches every sheep process asking questions: and is very observant - sees sheep with injuries, bottle jaw or new lambs, so we have named him "Falcon", with the eagle eyes.

We have discovered the secret of Falcon's eagle eyes - he runs on coffee and cigarettes – he is now secretly designing a cappuccino machine that will go on a quad bike.

9. Sheep Safety

We all know that Teakays (wild damaras we obtained from Longreach) are dangerous sheep, liable to come thru the crush at chest height. So do Wilti's at times

But recently Rouseabout was incapacitated for 10 minutes by a mild mannered ewe (I tried for two days off, but got knocked back). The incident happened when a usually quiet ewe decided to make a leap just as I was leaning over to drench her. Pow in the face with a horny head and a beaut busted lip. Blood everywhere. That sheep got her ears boxed. ("Don't blame her" says Moat "poor thing was just frightened".)

Had to check from some expert friends whether it should be recorded as a lost Time Injury, and immediately came under official interest.

First came the letter below:

Sheep Safety

Dear Mr Forbes

I have heard about your recent experience with dangerous sheep. That concerns me, so I'm forwarding some helpful information for you.

You probably don't have warning signs posted, so one is attached for your use.

Additionally, you may not be aware of the dangers of sheep poo, so information is attached about that.

Finally, an illustration on the correct way to transport sheep is attached.

We city rule-makers know everything, and just want to help out our country citizens. After all, we are from the government, and we are here to help.

Mr Bob Noxious, Bureaucrat-in-training, Department of Sheep Safety.



Beware of Sheep Poo.



The Correct Way to Transport Sheep.

Then came this letter from our bush lawyer.

Dear Rouseabout

I assume that MOAT was supervising. Therefore she should have foreseen the foreseeable danger to you from unrestrained wild animals. Just by listening for more than 10 minutes to any commercial radio station and you would be provided with the name of a firm just waiting to use your sad situation to buy each of the partners a new BMW at the expense of your Workers' Compensation policy holder.

Secondly, a tipoff to the AWU that MOAT was not employing union labour would have led to a safety inspection of your workplace. In a matter of minutes it would emerge that you had not been trained in accordance with Part X Subsection (i) of Section Y of the relevant National Sheep Training Standard; there was no written record of the fact that you had been appointed; nor was there a written record of your pre-work hazard analysis.

Moreover, detailed testing of your Personal Protective Equipment would provide evidence of a serious breach and the union would be able to launch a prosecution, pocketing half of the proceeds plus costs.

All of the above would provide compelling evidence for the proceedings in the above mentioned damages action.

Hope this helps

Your Bush Lawyer.

10. Floods, Worms, Ticks, Flies and now Carbon Taxes

This year of the big wet has produced a flood of water and a flood of parasites (as well as the government flood counsellors).

First came the worms, who love wet short grass. We use a variety of anti-worm tactics – paddock rotation, mineral nutrition, grazing with cattle, and as a last resort, chemical drench.

We have given up any regular whole-of-flock chemical drenching. We drench all sheep with minerals but only those few that show clear symptoms of worm infestation get chemical drenches. Then it is important to move quickly. There are four useful symptoms for worms:

1. They look lethargic, no energy, ears droop, fall behind the mob.
2. They develop "bottle jaw" which is a soft sloppy looking swelling under the jaw.
3. The whites of their eyes (and their gums) become very pale, no pinkish healthy look. (Dorper bottoms change from pink to grey or white.) If there are no blood veins visible under the eyelid and the white is ivory white with no pink showing they are in desperate straits and need drenching IMMEDIATELY.
4. The last stage – their heads start swelling.

The wet weather and the kangaroos have also encouraged cattle ticks. For the first time ever we have noticed some cattle ticks on sheep. They seem to be confined to weaner lambs (often in their ear) and do not thrive. The tick eggs were probably dropped in the sheep paddocks where we used the cattle to clean up worms. When the cattle left, the new crop of cattle ticks had no suitable hosts so tried the sheep.

It was also a bad season for buffalo flies. Some of the Wilti/dorper cross ewes shed completely in places and the buffalo flies chewed them a bit. A smear of Stockholm tar on the bare spot seemed to solve that problem.

And as if we do not have enough parasites to feed, Canberra wants to hit us with a carbon tax. If carbon is so bad, maybe there should be health warnings?

See: <http://carbon-sense.com/2011/05/04/carbon-health-warnings/>

And for those who think carbon dioxide is a pollutant see how "Carbon dioxide feeds the world":
<http://carbon-sense.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/carbon-dioxide-feeds-the-world.pdf>

11. More Wet Weather Woes

*I've just heard from a friend in central Queensland
He says it has been raining heavily for three days now.
His wife has done nothing but stare through the window.
If it doesn't stop soon he'll probably have to let her in.*

12. Damara Market Cycles

The damara market has gone thru one complete cycle in the twelve years we have known them. It started with all the excitement of new things, and prices and interest were keen. We paid \$3,500 each for our first 6 pure bred sheep, plus \$400 each for each of our 100 pure embryos – a huge livestock investment for us.

We soon started to get our money back – we sold rams for \$2,500 and ewes for \$500. Rams were sold at auction for fairy-tale figures in excess of \$10,000 (not by us). And there was real value there as the live export market loved damara – road trains of damara cross sheep left central Queensland heading south to go on boats to the Middle East. (We have never worked out why live sheep exports don't go from the much closer Queensland ports.) Then like so many industries, this trade was killed by bureaucracy – transport regulations pertaining to road transport of sheep killed the central Queensland live export sheep market.

The Australian sheep meat market was not ready for damaras – they were different in every way to the tame fat lambs the trade is used to. A Queensland breeder, Dudley Leitch, made a great effort to set up an integrated damara enterprise from sheep breeding, feedlots, abattoirs and butcher shops. Customers loved the meat, but this enterprise failed as it grew too quickly to cope with the world financial storms.

Market tops and bottoms can only be definitely established with hindsight. The collapse of the Leitch enterprise probably marked the bottom of the damara market cycle. Several other breeders gave up about then.

But in 2010-11 interest is suddenly returning with enquiries for breeding stock in numbers far larger than our flocks can produce. Enquiries from Indonesia, Philippines, Northern Territory, NSW and even Victoria are coming in, all wanting pure damaras.

Locally, the high prices for lamb have caused many people to breed a few for themselves. So at long last damara prices can be expected to increase. People already comment that our prices are too low, so we will take the hint.

13. Brief Cattle News

Our aims in cattle breeding are the same as those in sheep – easy care beef cattle producing tasty meat with minimal attention. After a lot of trial and error we have found Braford, Senepol, Red Brahmin and Jersey the most useful breeds. We have also tried Waygu, Simmental and Charolais and do not recommend them. We aim to produce poll cattle with quiet temperament that can cope with natural pasture, cattle ticks and buffalo flies with minimal attention. We are settling to a Braford/Senepol cross with a dash of red Brahmin and Jersey. We will now keep that breeding herd concentrating the genes that are successful. We do have some young bulls for sale for those interested.

14. The Importance of Nutrition.

All of our plants and animals get their mineral nutrition from the soil, and if your soil is deficient, your animals, your food products and you will also be deficient. Mineral nutrition is probably the most important aspect of maintaining animal (and human) health. It determines the animal susceptibility to all diseases and parasites.

So we need to understand the carbon cycle, the mineral cycle and the moisture cycle, take care of our soil, get good pastures, improve our grazing management and end every discussion with the Shepherd's Oath:

“All Sheep are Green”.

For new readers this slogan refers to:

<http://www.damaras.com/newsletters/200805.pdf>



Proof that "All Sheep are Green".

15. Mailing Lists

Remember to let us know if you change your email address, or if you do not want to keep getting this newsletter.

Bye for now.

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