Quantification and causes of lamb losses in hill flocks: the case of the Scottish Highlands – black loss & bog asphodel

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Lamb losses represent an animal health, welfare and economic challenge to the sustainability of extensive hill sheep farms and their rural communities.

Identification of the extent (quantification) and possible causes is difficult due to the nature of the environment.

Methods: recording in the SRUC HMRC’s Kirkton & Auchtertyre flocks; EID tagging in five Highland & Island (H&I) sheep flocks; questionnaire surveys of Highland & Island sheep flocks and at sheep events

Black loss: defined here as losses of lambs otherwise unaccounted for in the marking to weaning period

Plochteach or yellowses: hepatogenous photosensitisation in Scottish lambs associated with bog asphodel (Narthecium ossifragum) ^

Further investigation of causal factors for ‘black loss’ in lambs is needed, from which mitigation measures can be identified and control strategies developed. Bog asphodel and plochteach may be a contributory factor.

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Postal questionnaire survey*  

SRUC Auchtteryre

Five H&I flocks*  

Postal questionnaire survey*  

SRUC Kirktan & Auchtertyre flocks

West Scotland high hill flock 2013 - 2016
Scottish blackface (SBF) 375 – 420 breeding ewes

Scottish and northern sheep events – 50 participants 2015
Kirktan - W. Scotland low hill flock 2013 - 2016
SBFs Number of lambs tagged per flock in a year: range 194 - 693

0% 10% 22.5% 41.4%

Range of black loss within a flock

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Reported Mean % Incidence, "Good" and "Bad" Years, by Area*

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Where are my sheep?  

Where are my sheep?  

Where are my sheep?  

Why have they gone?  

What can we do?  

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¹Tongue et al. (2016) Vet. Rec. doi:10.1136/vr.104010
²Pollock et al. (2015) Vet J. 206, 275-283

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