

= Boreray sheep =

The Boreray is a breed of sheep originating on the St Kilda archipelago off the west coast of Scotland and surviving as a feral animal on one of the islands , Boreray .

The breed , also known as the Boreray Blackface or Hebridean Blackface , was once raised for meat and wool , but is now used mainly for conservation grazing . The Boreray is one of the Northern European short @-@ tailed sheep group of breeds .

It is the rarest breed of sheep in the United Kingdom . It is the only breed classed as " Category 2 : Endangered " by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust , because fewer than 300 @-@ 500 are known to exist .

= = History = =

Until the late eighteenth century , the domesticated sheep throughout the Scottish Highlands and Islands belonged to a type called the Scottish Dunface or Old Scottish Shortwool , which was probably similar to the sheep kept in the whole of northern and western Europe up to the Iron Age . A local variety of Dunface was kept on the two main St Kilda islands of Boreray and Hirta by the crofters of the islands , who lived on Hirta , the largest island of the St Kilda archipelago .

In the mid @-@ eighteenth century the crofters ' sheep were described as being " of the smallest kind " , with short , coarse wool , and all having horns ? usually one pair , but often two pairs . At that time there were about 1 @,@ 000 of these sheep on Hirta and about 400 on Boreray .

In the late nineteenth century the crofters ' sheep were cross @-@ bred with Scottish Blackface sheep , which by then had replaced the Dunface throughout mainland Scotland . The other breeds descended from the Dunface include the North Ronaldsay and the Shetland .

Before the evacuation of the St Kildian inhabitants , these sheep were farmed . However , when the St Kilda archipelago 's human inhabitants were evacuated in 1930 , the sheep of Hirta were also removed and in 1932 they were replaced by Soays , which still live there as well as on Soay itself . Meanwhile , the remaining sheep on Boreray were left to become feral ; these became the only survivors of the crofters ' sheep , and one of the few surviving descendants of the Dunface . This means that they are the original , unmodified sheep that used to be farmed on the island . In the 1970s half a dozen of them were exported to form the basis of a breeding population on the mainland , but the majority of Borerays still remain on the island .

= = Characteristics = =

The Boreray should not be confused with the Soay sheep , also from the St Kilda archipelago , nor with the Hebridean sheep , which was formerly called the " St Kilda " , although it is probably not in fact derived from the St Kilda sheep . Soay sheep are smaller than Boreray sheep , their ewes weighing between 20 and 23 kg . Their fleece is normally black , opposed to the white or tan of the Boreray . The Boreray is also known by the names Boreray Blackface and Hebridean Blackface .

Despite being partially derived from a long @-@ tailed breed (the Scottish Blackface) , Borerays display characteristics which group them with other northern European short @-@ tailed sheep . They are amongst the smallest sheep in the British Isles , with mature ewes weighing 28 kg (62 lb) and standing 55 cm (22 in) at the withers .

They have naturally short tails , which do not require docking . They also moult their fleece naturally , rather than having to be shorn annually , though older individuals do not moult as easily and may require additional shearing . Fleeces are grey or creamy white on the body , though darker individuals occur whose colouring is similar to the Soay sheep . Rough in quality , the wool is mostly used in the creation of tweeds or carpet yarns . A tweed is a rough surfaced coarse cloth , typically made in Scotland . Its colour is a mix of flecked colours . The face and legs are wool @-@ free and black and white , with the proportions varying between individuals .

Both sexes of the Boreray display horns . The horns on the ewes tend to be less thick than those on the males and while they curve they do not spiral beyond 360 degrees . Mature rams can grow

especially large , spiral horns which may be used for crafts such as making shepherd 's crooks . The horns on the rams have been described as " striking and majestic " by one farmer of the breed .

= = = Population = = =

In 1999 the population was estimated to be at less than 84 , with 74 ewes . In 2002 , there were between 92 and 100 animals , with 92 ewes and the male population estimated to be less than 7 . In 2012 , 204 ewes were registered in herdbooks . According to the Rare Breeds Survival Trust , there are fewer than 300 @-@ 500 sheep in the UK , so they are classed as " Category 2 : Endangered " . They are the only breed in this category , and therefore the rarest breed of sheep in the United Kingdom .

= = = Use in Farming = = =

The breed was primarily raised for meat and wool , but due to its rarity it is now raised for conservation purposes , if raised at all , as most of the population is thought to be feral .

Due to the native conditions of where it evolved , the Boreray is very well suited to conservation grazing , which is grazing that uses livestock to improve biodiversity and achieve nature conservation in a given area . However , the Rare Breeds Survival Trust believe that this could be further capitalised on if the breed is developed further .

= = = In Literature = = =

In his book The complete countryman , Alan Titchmarsh says that ' a good many people keep rare breeds , such as the Soay and Boreray ... for pets ' . This can indicate that the breeds are gaining mainstream acceptance .