

The Old Irish Goat



Author Raymond Werner has spent over 50 years exploring the origin and evolution of feral goats in Europe and is a founder of the British Feral Goat Research Group. In recent years Raymond has been a regular visitor to the Burren region where he has identified the presence of significant numbers of what he considers to be a rare landrace breed of 'old Irish goat'.*

"In this weather, they're usually up on top of the mountain," the farmer told me as he pointed to a distant plateau guarded by a seemingly sheer cliff-face. "There is only one way up", he added, "but my boys will guide you to the top." This 'one way up' took us through a belt of thick trees and along a secret rocky path that soon had us scrambling over the skyline wall to be confronted by a moonscape of limestone pavement interjected by crisscrossing drystone walls.

Within five minutes we had the goats in sight. There were at least a hundred of them feeding peacefully along a slope about half a mile away. Even a very stealthy approach had alerted the herd to my presence, the older females coming forward in the manner of deer to investigate whilst the main body of the herd bunched and then milled around behind them. These were the most wary feral goats I had yet encountered; more wild and shy in fact than the true Wild Goats I had studied in the White Mountains of Crete the year before.

Their impact was instant and stunning as they sorted themselves out into family groups and made off in a raggedy line across the horizon. The billies moved around in a generally undisciplined way until they got the point and followed the matriarchal lead. This herd was all colours and patterns -

Above: Large herds of feral goats are still a common sight in the Burren. Striking in appearance - and smell - these herds often contain a variety of breeds from 'old Irish' goats to more modern dairy breeds, and everything in between.

* adapted to/shaped by a particular environment

white, black, grey, fawn, light and dark brown, mahogany and pied - their sheer variety emanating a kaleidoscope of light and shade as they moved off and then strung out like a necklace of multicoloured beads.

I quickly realised that following closely behind these goats would get me nowhere at all. They knew every undulation of the terrain, knew how to stay safely ahead without tiring, and had a better chance of studying me all day than my studying them. My strategy became one of being around without seeming to be overly curious. Within four hours they had adjusted to my general presence; two hours later I was able to sit within one hundred yards of the herd whilst it grazed. The ground was carefully and mutually chosen, however, the broken area between us giving me no chance to make a near approach, and they knew it.

Feral herds like this one were common on the Burren until about five years ago, and are still seen today, although the total population has been reduced by about 85% since then. In the herd I was watching, there were several distinct types: a very modern looking dairy goat, usually but not always of Saanen type; two types of more generalized Swiss goat; a 'scrub' goat, and goats that generally resembled or were distinctly of a very ancient breed of goat known as the 'Old Irish' type. Clearly, as is the case generally on the Burren, this herd had originated with the "native" breed of the area, the Old Irish Goat, with changes over time as modern goat stock were introduced over a period of 50 years or so.

The Burren itself is nothing less than an open-air museum, rich in archaeological remains. Visitors are drawn into a pageantry of the past that includes wedge tombs, round towers, fortified farmhouses and hill forts. Here, they will learn of the first farmers, Megalithic builders, workers in bronze and the richness of a Celtic age and its continuance. All this is interlaced with huge geologic upheavals, abundant evidence of the Ice Age, and the meeting of Arctic and Mediterranean flora.

But the Burren has many other attributes as well, one of the most striking being the feral goat. The goat is so integral to the history of the Burren that communities over the ages would hardly have survived without it. It was the goat that initially helped open up the landscape to farming, following which they settled down to provide meat, hair, hides, fat and milk as an undemanding, almost predator-proof, animal that consistently helped to stave off starvation when all else around the poor farming family had failed.

So important was the little Irish goat - locally known as 'the poor man's cow' - that it has been symbolic of The Burren and its traditional way of life since earliest times. Hundreds of kid cró's (huts) and enclosures are still visible in the Burren. Sadly today the goat has come to be seen by many as a nuisance, an attitude that has contributed to the decline of the Old Irish goat.

Recent research suggests that the Old Irish goat is a living example of the type of goat that pre-dates the sea-faring cultures that introduced the Neolithic to western Ireland. The

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The 'poor man's cow', the old Irish goat is characterized by its small size; long body; long and dished face, even in males; small and pricked ears; long coat with under wool that tends to make it stand out and harsh coat, not silky.

Large herds of goats can sometimes cause problems for farmers - grazing and spoiling areas of grassland and knocking walls. This has led to some conflict and highlights the urgent need for an agreed management strategy for these goats.



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goat was in Ireland before the land bridge that made Ireland an island disappeared, and almost certainly before the majority of its present "native" deer stock. This challenges the general assertion that the feral goat cannot be considered a "native" species as its ancestors were introduced by man. Feral goats in general on the Burren, as elsewhere in Ireland, are a vital part of the "wild" fauna and living history: an "artefact" as important as any inanimate object that is dug out of the ground in terms of reflecting the history of Ireland and its agricultural development.

Around 10% of the goats seen on the Burren in the spring were distinctly and phenotypically of the old Irish type. If this is reflective of the feral goats of Ireland in general, there is yet time to save this ancient breed. Time is running out rapidly, however, as breed introgression and random removal of feral goats continue. The fact that the young animals seen did not generally reflect the pure type would suggest that there is a short window of opportunity if we are to isolate and safeguard a phenotypical population of the old breed.

This old Irish goat is a member of what's known as the Northern Breed Group, other members of which are found elsewhere in North West Europe. An attempt to save a remnant of the Old English Goat in domestication was begun in 1920, but it was too late, and the last few expired in the early 1950s.

The Dutch began a serious but belated attempt to save the Old Dutch goat when only four were left, and had to use other breeds to try to breed back to the original type. The Old Icelandic goat is safe, but there are only 340 and they are inbred. The Old Norwegian goat was 'improved' with Swiss breeding; the Old Danish goat is no more; the Old Swedish goat exists as a single herd in Germany. There may be two or three hundred Old Welsh goats living as feral stock in Wales, and the Old Scotch goat is now only feral, and there may be as few as 1,500, even less, all of which are facing a precarious future. Given the general state of these members of the Northern Breed Group in general, the preservation of the Old Irish Goat as a pure form is a matter of extreme urgency.



The only safe way to ensure the future of the breed is to select stock of the old type and to place these in areas where they can safely exist as feral animals.



The kid cró (hut) is a small hut used to house young goat kids. Traditionally a number of kids were kept captive in these huts, released by night to suckle their mothers. Reared in confinement and in darkness, the resultant 'milk kids' had a soft, sweet meat and were a very popular Easter dish. This tradition died out 40 or more years ago but these fascinating little structures are still commonly seen, reflecting the historical importance of goat farming in the Burren.

But how do we do it? It is just possible that populations of the old type still exist, and these need to be identified very quickly in an all-Ireland feral goat survey. The only safe way to ensure the future of the breed is to select stock of the old type out of the generally mixed herds, and to place these in areas where they can safely exist as feral animals. National Park areas are an obvious choice, but isolated areas, even islands, could be considered. Later, the breed could be used in the context of wildlife parks, farm parks, and even historical sites.

Before this, however, due to the urgency of the matter, animals need to be taken into 'captivity' to form a foundation stock for such a project*. This would require the temporary rehoming of goats with sympathetic goat keepers/breeders, preferably in a paddock/free-range situation. A herd book would need to be started, and a programme devised to broaden out bloodlines. Such a project could be implemented with around 30 females and 15 males, and might need to involve as few as 10 to 15 holding sites, with some having small mixed groups and others a single male.

The feral goat in Ireland is of immense aesthetic, historical, practical - and potentially economic - importance. They portray the history and traditions of a region, and living examples are as important as the remains of the settlements that they sustained in this context.

Within the feral herds there are goats of a 'scrub' type that may have potential in land management; the use of the old type of goat in managing heathland and scrub being a current issue in the United Kingdom. But above all, there is a very compelling and urgent need to preserve the Old Irish breed as a genetic and cultural resource. The Old Irish goat is the ancient breed of the nation, and the symbol of its past. The loss of traditional goat breeds elsewhere in Europe is irreversible but, fortunately, the Old Irish goat can yet be saved. For the successful development and implementation of a rare breed conservation programme however, local and national support is essential. ■

** In 2007, the Heritage Council allocated a Local Biodiversity Grant to a Burren farmer to help with the erection of a 20-acre enclosure to secure a number of Old Irish Goats. This work, and a subsequent workshop on Old Irish Goats, was also funded by the BurrenLIFE project. For more information please visit www.burrenlife.com*

On an immediately practical note, if anyone with knowledge of feral goat herds in various parts of Ireland could send on information to include numbers, sex and kid ratios and any known history, along with photographs that could be used to analyse the type, a useful start could be made on an all-Ireland survey that would help to identify the continuance of the Old Irish breed throughout the land. Please send any records or comments to the author, Raymond Werner, at raygillwp@hotmail.com