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Funds for study into well-being of upland sheep

I am pleased to say that my team has recently been awarded internal funding from SRUC which we will use to support two new PhD students. They will focus on gaining a better understanding of two issues that impact directly on hill farming productivity.



It is generally assumed that hill sheep are less exposed to internal parasites. However, SRUC's Disease Surveillance Centre in Dumfries has observed that ill-thrift in hill ewes in southern

Scotland is often associated with high worm burdens and anthelmintic resistance in those worm populations.

One of the PhDs will therefore help identify the scale of anthelmintic resistance in hill flocks through a questionnaire to both farmers and veterinary practices. Individual focus farms will also be used to identify the degree of parasite challenge and assess the benefits of any changes made to their to parasite control strategies.

This PhD will be conducted in association with colleagues in the parasitology research group at the Moredun Research Institute together with veterinary expertise drawn from both the University of Glasgow and SRUC.

Blackloss is the term used for the unexplained losses of lambs on extensive grazings in the Highlands of Scotland, usually noted by hill farmers and crofters as occurring between marking the lambs after lambing and gathering them back in from the hills for autumn sales each year.

Predation by wild birds such as white-tailed sea eagles or the impact of high parasite burdens or infectious disease are often presumed to be behind these losses. But the balance between these factors is unknown as the losses generally occur unobserved out on the open hill.

The limited studies conducted to-date have indicated that most lambs found in sea eagle nests have been taken as carrion. However, more recent work has confirmed that in some cases white-tailed eagles are bringing freshly dead lamb carcasses to the nest.

The other PhD will therefore help identify more accurately the underlying factors leading to blackloss. It will also seek to help quantify the part that white-tailed sea eagles in particular play in those losses.

This PhD will be conducted in association with veterinary colleagues at the University of Edinburgh and SRUC together with ecological expertise and support from Scottish Natural Heritage.

I look forward to updating you on the findings of both these areas of research over the coming years.

Davy McCracken
Head of SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre