



Wildlife Trust for
**Beds, Cambs
& Northants**

A Guide to Highland Cattle

Highland cattle are hugely popular where they graze on our nature reserves, often more so than the reserves' wildlife! Known in Scotland as 'Hairy Coos,' their popularity is probably down to their visual appeal – many would argue that they are the cutest of all cattle breeds. They are the friendliest and most docile of livestock, although this isn't to say that you shouldn't take care when near them. Do not approach them if they have calves with them – they are fiercely protective of their young – or if you have a dog with you.



History of Conservation Grazing

Our landscape evolved hand-in-hand with keystone species – our woodlands, meadows, heathlands and grasslands were shaped by the grazing patterns of large herbivores such as red deer and native ponies. The balance of these herbivores within habitats was kept in check by natural predators, allowing plant species to colonise and thrive with herbivore movement.

The increase of human influence saw the replacement of these wild grazers with domestic animals such as sheep and cattle. As herd

sizes increased and management changed, the need for grassland increased and other habitats such as woodland disappeared. This led to problems of overgrazing and compaction of grassland habitats, culminating in a loss of biodiversity.

Why do we graze?

Conservation grazing seeks to bring balance back to these ancient habitats. Through the careful selection of, and management of, large grazers, natural regeneration is enabled by virtue of their particular grazing habits. Using the right grazers at the right time reduces the

number of vigorous plants that out-compete more fragile species, and creates micro climates and areas of bare ground (by trampling and disturbance from lying down) beneficial to invertebrates, for which dung is a valuable resource! The resulting increase in diversity of plants and animals species has a knock-on effect all the way up the food chain, benefiting butterflies, bees, bats, birds and more.

Why Highlands?

Highland cattle are hardy grazers – they will eat a wide range of vegetation unpalatable to most cattle – and can live outside in all seasons and weathers. In spring they eat the succulent shoots of weeds which we would otherwise have to control. They are also relatively light in weight and reduce poaching of the ground – poaching by heavier breeds can cause bank erosion of watercourses. And, as mentioned above, they are fairly docile and easy to manage.



**See overleaf for some
Highland cattle facts**

Ten facts about Highland cattle



1 Highland cattle descend from the Hamitic Longhorn, which was brought to the UK in the second millennium by Neolithic farmers.

2 Originally, Highlands came in a variety of colours – red, ginger, black, dun, yellow, white, grey and tan – with the smaller black animals being classified as a separate sub-breed, the Kyloe. On a visit to the Highlands, Queen Victoria is said to have stated she preferred the red cows, leading to selective breeding resulting in the vast majority today being of the familiar red hue.

3 Highland cattle were historically of great importance to the Scottish economy, with cattle raised for meat sold in England.

4 They are among the longest lived of cattle – 20 years is not uncommon – and cows are known for often breeding beyond the age of 18 and raising 15 or more calves in their lifetime.

5 Although a group of cattle is usually called a herd, a group of Highland cattle is known as a 'fold.' This is because in winter cattle were traditionally kept in open shelters made of stone, called folds, to protect them from the weather at night.

6 Highland cattle have an unusual double coat of hair. On the outside is the oily outer coat, the longest of any cattle breed, covering a downy undercoat. This makes them well-suited to conditions in the Highlands, which have a high annual rainfall and sometimes very strong winds.

7 You can tell the difference between the two sexes by their horns. A bull's horns often grow forwards or slightly downwards and have a much wider base, whereas a cow's face upwards and are longer and finer at the tip.

8 Highland cattle have spread far and wide because of their popularity – Highland cattle societies have been started in Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, France, Switzerland and Norway. There are folds of Highlands in Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, Estonia, the USA, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Poland and the Faroe Islands!

9 The Highland cattle registry ("herd book") was established in 1885. This is the oldest herd book in the world, which makes the cattle the oldest registered cattle in the world.

10 Highland cow pregnancies are typically 9-10 months in duration, similar to human pregnancies. The milk produced by mother Highland cows for their calves has a higher fat content compared to that of traditional dairy cows.

If you are not already a member, please consider joining the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire. We work to ensure that our three counties are a better place for wildlife and people, by caring for nature reserves and encouraging people to get to know the nature on their doorstep, like Highland cows!

Thank you



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This is to certify that you have
**adopted a
highland cow**

Highland cattle *Bos taurus taurus*

Known as Bò Ghàidhealach in Scottish Gaelic and Heilan coo in Scots, these iconic and extremely photogenic creatures, with their distinctive horns and long, woolly, wavy coats, are hugely popular with visitors to our nature reserves.

They are important and valued members of our Reserves Teams and the impact of their grazing is crucial in helping us achieve our conservation aims.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. I. Jackson', with a horizontal line underneath.

Matt Jackson, Director of Conservation

