

# **The Feral Goats of the Valley of Rocks, Lynton, North Devon**

Raymond Werner, May 2007

For me, June will mark forty years of continuous study of the feral goats of The Valley of the Rocks in North Devon. When I first visited the valley there were only five goats, all mature and of Swiss type, the billy being infertile. Their home range was restricted to the rocky cliff face called Rugged Jack on the seaward side of the valley, and we spent time together in rain, hail, blizzard and sunshine as I studied their population dynamics as a student of agricultural history. One particular memory is of the way in which the large Jackdaw population of the valley would collect hair from the backs of the resting goats for nesting material. Sadly, it is now many a year since I have either heard or seen a Jackdaw wheeling above the valley or hopping from rock to rock in their uniquely cheeky fashion.

In 1970, an attempt was made to revitalize the herd by introducing a young and polled male of 'Saanen' type, but by then the females were post-productive and the little herd died out, one by one. The council then introduced a small number of goats of British Saanen type. Numbers increased, both by breeding and the dumping of unwanted stock in the valley. By 1976, there were eleven goats, all white, including a large, horned male and two polled males. The remaining eight animals were a rather motley crew comprising hermaphrodites, geldings and dairy type females with big udders that both lactated freely and caused visitors to complain about their state. Added to this, the horned male gained a reputation for trampling kids, whilst picnicking families were panicked by the 'bully-boy' tactics of goats seeking a fare share of their sandwiches. Perhaps the last straw was the way in which the whole herd would wander freely into the town to enjoy the gastronomic benefits of the fresh flowers left in the cemetery. What to do about the goats became a Lynton preoccupation, and it was finally decided to replace the herd with genuine feral goats, the reasoning being that a 'wild' herd would behave themselves impeccably and both avoid people and confine their activities to the valley.

Through the auspices of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, three genuine British Primitive goats, one male and two females, were introduced into the valley in December, 1976. These goats came from the College Valley in Northumberland, are generally known as the Cheviot goat, and the intention was to manage them as a rare breed and continuing tourist attraction. One of the females was pregnant at the time of the introduction, giving birth to a male kid in the spring of 1977.

Frustratingly, the three Saanen type males were not removed as intended, goats continued to be dumped, and so the first kids conceived in the valley were crossbreds. Predictions were made about the difficulties that would ensue if the Swiss-type stock wasn't removed and crossing continued, and when these came true, it was belatedly decided to attempt a restoration of the Cheviot stock to their original purity by way of a breeding programme. This remained the policy in place from 1983 until the outbreak of foot and mouth disease halted the programme in 2002.

Interesting as the more recent history of the Lynton feral goat may be, its earlier history is, if anything, even more fascinating. The Lynton goat is alluded to in the Domesday Book, and the fight between a sheep and a goat- lean, black and long-horned in Lorna Doone (1869) is set in the valley of the Rocks. Wild goats were at one time encouraged in the valley, but, as Cooper remarked in his guidebook of 1853, it is 'some years since it was found necessary to destroy them, as they killed so many of the sheep by butting them over the adjacent cliffs'.

The more recent association between the valley and feral goats began in 1897, and when Sir Thomas Hewitt, whose estate abutted the valley and home eventually became the Hoe Hotel, released either some or a pair of goats to go wild. Stories as to why he did this vary: because he wearied of looking after them, to enhance the beauty of the valley, and so on. More recent evidence, however, would suggest that the original stock came from the royal estate at Sandringham, Norfolk. Should this be the case, the goats that roamed the valley during the first half of the twentieth century were cashmere goats originating from Queen Victoria's royal herd in Windsor Great Park. These cashmere goats originated in Persia, from where a herd of four-hundred was imported into France in 1819. They were seen in Paris by Sir Christopher Tower in 1823, and he managed to procure a pair and return them to his estate at Weald Hall, in Essex. Sir Christopher presented a pair of his cashmere goats to King George IV in 1828, thus marking the beginning the royal herd. There could even be a link between the Lynton feral goats and the Royal Welch Fusiliers, as a pair of goats from Windsor Great Park were acquired by the Mostyn family around 1897, and released to run wild on the Great Orme, Llandudno, North Wales, as a means of providing the now-famous goat mascot for this regiment. This Sandringham tradition seems to be quite well-established, and I have seen postcards of the Lynton herd taken in the early twentieth century that show horns very like the peculiar twist found in the royal herd and the Royal Welch Fusilier mascot billies.

During the First World War the goats were managed by shooting, whilst towards the middle of the last century the billy kids were ringed, leaving only one 'herd billy'. Elderly residents that I spoke to in the late 1960's recalled a 'belligerent billy' having to be shot between the wars, and also the tradition that if the goats were ever taken from the valley or died out, then a disaster would befall the town. They even said that this superstition acted in the goat's favour, particularly when the town council were discussing 'what to do about them'. Quite when the original goats of possibly cashmere breed died:-out isn't known, although photographs of the herd taken in the early 1950's show white, long-homed and long-haired goats that might be of cashmere type. It would seem that for much of their more recent history, the goats were managed at around twenty to twenty-five, and if guide books are anything to go by, they were often quite elusive with no guarantee that visitors would have seen them.

Coming back to the present, it is a great pity that these goats only seem to hit the news when something goes wrong: their forays into the local gardens and allotments; the failure of the fencing and cattle grids to contain them; a recent attempt to poison them with peppers.

In reality, there is much good to report about the presence of feral goats in the Valley of the Rocks. These goats, along with the recent introduction of eight Exmoor ponies, are part of a land management scheme to restore the valley to coastal heathland, and both the goats and the ponies have the potential for generating tourism. Back in the 1990's, and with the founding of the Lynton Feral Goat Preservation Society by Joyce and Eric Salter and myself,

the aim was to promote the Lynton feral goat in a variety of ways, much of it revolving around tourism, meaning education. There was a permanent exhibition in the town hall, which was the springboard for creating a local museum; feral goat walks took visitors around the valley to see not only the goats but the spectacular beauty of the valley itself; there was signing to link the goat with the history of the area; schools- both primary and secondary- were involved with the goats, including competitions and examination work; various organizations were invited to Lynton to see the goats in situ to discuss land management schemes and grazing projects; the feral goat proved almost as popular as the Exmoor pony in promoting the area through postcards, and the goats were used to promote the history and heritage of both Lynton and Exmoor. Sadly, the work was disrupted by the foot and mouth outbreak of 2002, although the potential remains in place.

I was again in the valley this month. Each visit is like a homecoming, with the spectacular castellated rock formations of Shelley sandstone all around: The majestic Castle Rock with the 'White Lady' at its pinnacle; Rugged or Ragged Jack, originating from the little boy of that name in Lynton who missed Sunday school so regularly to wander the valley that he was turned into the rock formation bearing his name as a punishment; Mother Meldrum's cave of Lorna Doone fame; Wrington Bay with its colony of Fulmer Petrels and Peregrine Falcons taking the pipits above the cliffs; the North Walk, a path along the coast six-hundred feet above the sea with wonderful views of Wales only eighteen miles away, and Hollerdale Hill, gorse and bracken strewn with Chimney Rock rising on the coastal side .

And, within this setting, the goats. At this time of the year, there are still large numbers of females with their kids on the sea cliffs, although a group of up to fifty was moving around the valley during my visit and the mature billies were still within the cover of the trees. Overall, their behaviour reflects that of the wild goat, and is fascinating to study.

To date, only one place in the British Isles encourages tourism through feral goat holidays, and this is in Scotland. Here, at the other end of the country, a second potential remains. Hopefully, and in the not too distant future, the fencing and cattle grids will be sorted out; the goats safely contained, and the gardens of Lynton will be safe from marauding billies. When this happens, and the difficulties lie in the past, it is to be hoped that the feral goats of Lynton will be seen for what they truly are: pioneers in using their species in land management conservation and a tourism potential that reflects our heritage and history. They may not be purebred British Primitive goats, but they look enough like the breed to give visitors an idea of what our old, traditional breed of goat looks like. Even this links with the area, for the Valley of the Rocks is a dry glacial valley, lying parallel to the sea, that was formed during the Ice Age. And it was the extreme conditions at the close of the Ice Age that moulded both the Exmoor pony and the British Primitive goat: cold weather animals that are bulky, short-legged, and small-eared with harsh, thick, double coats. What the Lynton feral goat is, even so, is feral. And not only feral, but accessible. They therefore offer a rare opportunity to study a wild animal in a spectacular environment without the pain usually attached to this: miles of yomping over broken terrain, blisters, hours of searching and a fleeting glimpse of the feral herd as it laughingly gallops over the next hill!