

Irreplaceable cows

Subscriber - Country Wide



Remote Timahanga station in western Hawke's Bay has a range of climates where Corriedale sheep are raised along with beef cattle and deer.

Russell Priest reports.

Timahanga Station's weaner steers were once renowned at weaner fairs for their quality and temperament, however that all came to an end when tuberculosis was discovered on the station in 1981. From that point on all cattle leaving the station had to go straight to slaughter resulting in major changes to the cattle policy.

Ditching the 1000-strong breeding herd was not an option as cows were an irreplaceable component of pasture management. Finishing all cattle born on the station was the only other viable alternative. Today Timahanga finishes all steers as 2½-3-year-olds and surplus heifers at 2½ – not an easy task when growing seasons are short and winter temperatures frequently in their minuses.

Before TB was detected on the station Timahanga formed part of a buffer zone between Turangi in the north where TB was present (endemic) and Hawke's Bay in the east.

Alan Roberts, Timahanga's owner believes it came in via ferrets, stoats and weasels after a large fire in the area destroyed a lot of the standing vegetation resulting in a plague of rabbits. His argument is reinforced by the fact that while the area has been extensively trapped for possums no TB lesions have ever been detected. The station's TB status is C7 which requires all cattle to be tested once a year.

When developing the station Alan's father wisely left vegetation (manuka, kanuka and other small natives) in the gullies where sheep can seek shelter and find feed.

Timahanga Station (10,740 hectares – 5100ha fenced) is on the Napier-Taihape road. It is home to owner Alan Roberts (46), his wife Karyn, two children and their grandparents Jack and Jenny Roberts. The station also employs five fulltime staff.

Timahanga is a micro-climate subject to quite different weather. Being more than 16km long with a 300m difference in altitude from top to bottom it can be raining at its lowest point and fine at its highest. Extremely cold temperatures can be experienced in winter when the surrounding ranges are covered in snow and the daily six-hour dose of sunlight is not enough to thaw the heavy frosts. In the summer it is a haven for flies presenting a constant challenge for sheep so an intensive fly prevention programme using an electronic eye jetting race is followed.

Timahanga weather is more akin to that of Hawke's Bay except that the area is normally summer safe. Winds from the west are mainly dry with the occasional showers while those from the east are moisture-laden. South-easterly weather is the worst being both cold (sleet and snow) and wet.

Last year the station lost 3000 lambs as a result of the prolonged spell of easterly weather that hit the east coast of the North Island at lambing time. In 2017 a fall of 1.5 metres of snow was recorded at the top of the station. This lay on the ground for 10 days resulting in the death of 150 cows.

Normally if heavy snow is forecast cows are moved on to paddocks where they can be fed hay. When developing the station Alan's father wisely left vegetation (manuka, kanuka and other small natives) in the gullies where sheep can seek shelter and find feed.

Rainfall varies from 1000mm at the northern end to 1500mm at Pohokura which tends to get more showers from the west and southwest. The station is well sheltered from this direction.

Annual dressings of fertiliser, particularly superphosphate have been applied over a long period. PHs range from 5.7-6.2, Olsen Ps 12-62, sulphate sulphurs 6-89 and potash levels generally a bit low.



Alan standing in a large land-locked lake.

About 900 tonnes of dicalcic super is applied to the easier-contoured areas with a lime-flour slurry fortified with minerals applied by helicopter to the steeper hogget country.

When Alan's father Jack took over the station in 1964 it was in three paddocks and covered in scrub. The latter was removed by root raking however this disturbed a lot of the shallow topsoil and exposed the infertile pumice. The next 25- 30 years were spent restoring the fertility using regular dressings of superphosphate.

Nowadays minimum tillage is used to annually grow 10ha of swedes and kale for the deer and renew 15ha of pasture. Alan is intending to establish plantain in the pastures by adding seed to the annual application of fertiliser. Plantain is known to readily take up minerals from the soil.

Water is abundant on the station with stock needs being met via storage dams or natural streams. A large land-locked lake provides water for a gravity-fed system to troughs at Pohokura.

Little pasture growth occurs during June, July and August but picks up in mid-September.

The station has four sets of cattle yards, three sets of sheep yards and 220 paddocks. It also has two large rotten-rock pits supplying crushed metal to maintain the station's roads.

Beehives generate a significant rental income but the bees' role as pollinators is regarded more important than the income.

Cattle bounce back

Timahanga's breeding cow numbers have steadily climbed back to where they were (1000 cows) before the devastating loss of 150 cows in 2017. Unfortunately at that time the herd was doing its three-month (June, July, August) wintering stint among the scrub and was not able to be mustered out on to grassed areas where hay could be fed.

Hereford, Angus and South Devon bulls are used across the herd to capitalise on hybrid vigour.

"The crossbred steers seem to finish at heavier weights than the straight Angus," Alan says.

About 65% of the cows are black and 35% white headed.

About 700 Angus and white-head cows go to Angus bulls, 200 Angus cows go to Hereford bulls and 70-80 CFA/B-mob cows go to South Devon bulls on November 20. All cows are cast-for-age at 10. Bullout date for the two-year heifers is November 27 and for MA cows is December 7. The mating period for the MA cows is 55 days and for the two-year heifers 45 days.

A small unregistered Angus stud of 40 cows supplies backup bulls and about five main-stream bulls for the herd.

Cows are mustered out of the scrub in late August and set stocked for calving on saved pasture on easier contoured paddocks where they can be fed hay. The station annually makes about 1300 (nine-bale equivalents) bales of hay using a contractor to do the whole job.

Overall calving percentage (cows to bull) is 90%.

The herd has an important pasture grooming role over spring/summer. Besides maintaining pasture quality the cows clean up the grass and clover in paddocks badly infested with Californian thistles before they are mown with a mulching mower and eaten by the cows. They appear to like them when they get older and sugar levels are at their highest.

"Calis are our number one weed on the station and some years we will mow them twice. Our tractor driver can spend up to two or three months a year mowing them."

Alan has released beetles to assist with control of the thistles but in view of the large numbers around this year he is questioning how effective they are.

At marking, calves receive a copper bullet and any wet-dry cows are identified and go in the B mob. They are culled if they transgress again.

Calves are weaned in April and drenched orally. Weaning weights average between 240-250kg. At TB testing (end of May) weaners are split into sex mobs and given a copper bullet, a selenium injection and a dose of Eclipse pour-on. They will receive three further drenches throughout the winter finishing in October/November.

Cows are not drenched however R3 in-calf heifers receive an ostertagia drench at pregnancy testing in April.

Cows go to work cleaning up pastures immediately after weaning. The early part of winter is spent in mobs of 200 following age-group mobs of ewes through paddocks before being released into the undeveloped scrub areas.

Alan is a fan of big cows as he believes they are more resilient in his environment so is not concerned about them possibly being less efficient. Cows displaying bad feet are rigorously culled as are any dry cows.

Temperament is Alan's number one bull selection criterion followed by above average 600-day weight figures.

He favours a good balance between fertility, carcase and growth traits.

Angus bulls have been sourced from Mt Marble stud for many years while Herefords are bought from Koanui stud. Okahurau stud has traditionally supplied the South Devon bulls. Alan likes the South Devons because of their temperament, extra bone, growth and the solid coat colour they leave in their progeny.

The average price paid for bulls is about \$10,000.

One advantage Alan gets in not selling calves at weaning is the opportunity to follow their progress through to slaughter. However since many of his dry cattle are on clean-up duty from mid-to-late June to Labour weekend supplemented with hay, they don't do as well as similar cattle who are on "chocolates" all their lives.

Rising three-year steers kill out at 320-330kg while cull heifers do 270-280kg. All cattle and lambs are processed at Silver Fern Farms and Affco plants.



Single shepherd, Daniel Smith and his team of workers.

Farming for wool

Unlike most North Island sheep farming enterprises Timahanga derives 40% of its sheep income from wool. Corriedales have been run on the station for about 45 years. They are free-moving, easy-care sheep that don't mind cold temperatures but don't like wet feet so the free-draining volcanic soils suit them.

They also don't like being disturbed at lambing. Therefore after vaccinating all the ewes with 5-in-1 in August and drenching the younger ewes they will not come into close contact with humans again until docking. Wild pigs are a major problem at lambing actively seeking out lambing ewes and eating lambs as they are born.

Alan's grandfather Lawrence Roberts used to breed Halfbreds using rams from his English Leicester and Merino studs. Too much variation in the wool led to Alan's father crossing them with Corriedales to stabilise the wool type and micron range.

Today the station runs an unregistered Corriedale stud of 600-650 ewes to generate rams to service a 12,300 commercial Corriedale flock. About 20 rams are sold to two other commercial Corriedale breeders in the North Island. The wool on Timahanga's Corriedales is better structured to cope with a higher rainfall than is their namesakes in the South Island.

Alan gets his stud rams from Mt Adde stud in Blenheim. Wool is his number one selection criterion. He targets rams with high yielding (75% plus), 24-micron fleeces that are of good colour and brightness with some tip (avoids flat, black tipped fleeces) and good architecture to allow water to move through and out of the fleece.

All the wool produced at Timahanga

is under contract. The 24-24.5-micron lambs' wool (\$12/kg clean), the 25.5-micron hogget wool (\$11-\$12/kg) and the 28-micron ewes' wool (\$10/kg) is contracted to Merino New Zealand. The medium-to-strong ewes' wool is contracted to Godfrey Hurst for carpets and the Utiku Woollen Mill takes the 30-31-micron ewes' wool for knitting yarn. Over the whole wool clip of close to 100,000kg the station averages \$8/kg.

At shearing each fleece is graded by a professional classer for its micron, length and colour. Ewes are wigged and receive a full crutch and belly wool removal before tupping and a full-wool shear in June using cover combs. Removing only the fleece wool at this time and leaving the belly and crutch wool reduces the chances of hypothermia and improves the ewes' mobility at lambing time and possibly lamb survival. Lambs are shorn in January and ewe hoggets in September. Sheep are shorn before being sold to minimise the amount of valuable wool leaving the station. Contract shearing costs close to \$5/sheep.

Being a dual-purpose later-maturing breed Corriedale lambs are sought after by traders for finishing in the winter and early spring. Those lambs not finished on the station by mid-May are sold store to established buyers in Taupo, Hawke's Bay and the South Island. This year's first draft of 1074 male lambs in late March averaged 19.2kg. Most lambs grade YL.

Most of Timahanga's store stock is sold online through Hawke's Bay company StockX.

Surplus ewes also find a ready market. Cast-for-age R7 ewes this year made \$140 and some cull four-tooth ewes fetched \$200. These prices are unheard of at Timahanga and Alan believes people are chasing them for their wool because coarse crossbred wool prices are so

low.

Mating begins on the station on March 25 with the two-tooths, three and four-year ewes and the studs. Rams go out with the remaining ewes on April 1. The mating period is 35 days. Only the studs and three-year ewes are scanned with the former achieving 160% and the latter 145%.

Lambing begins on August 20 with the younger ewes and the studs at Pohokura while the five and six-year ewes start at the top of the farm a week later.

“We lamb about a month earlier than our neighbours because we are a lot lower in altitude (Ngamatea 250m higher), have good lambing shelter and manage to avoid most of the late storms.”

Lambing percentage is normally in the 120-125% range.

Timahanga’s 280 Red deer herd originated from feral deer trapped at the bottom of the farm in the 1980s. One cut of velvet is taken off the 130 spikers produced before they are killed at 18 months at about 60kg (\$540). The herd achieves about an 80% fawning. Some older surplus hinds were sold last year

for \$680.


Farm facts


- Owned by the Alan Roberts Family Trust.
- 67km north east of Taihape.
- Wool contracts average \$8 over 100,000kg
- 10,740ha (5100ha fenced, 2025ha QEII covenant, 3615ha undeveloped scrub).
- Large Angus and Angus Hereford cow herd.
- Finish all steers and surplus heifers.
- Only Corriedale stud in North Island.
- Red deer breeding/finishing herd.


Stock numbers


- 12,800 ewes (including 3100 two-tooths)
- 4200 ewe hoggets
- 300 ram hoggets
- 150 MA rams
- 950 cows
- 450 R2yr heifers
- 450 R1yr heifers
- 40 R3yr steers
- 450 R2yr steers
- 450 R1yr steers
- 47 MA bulls
- 280 MA hinds
- 110 R1yr hinds
- 114 spikers


 [Beef](#)

 (<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/irreplaceable-cows/?share=facebook&nb=1>)

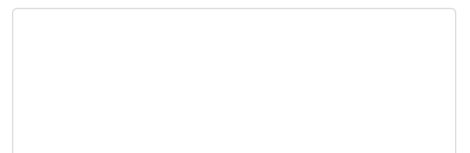
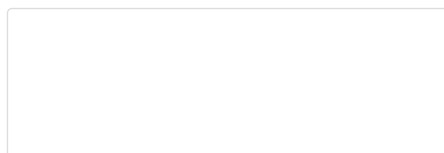
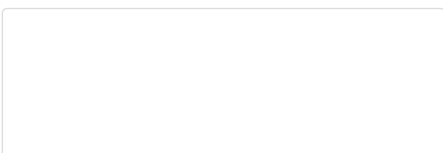
 (<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/irreplaceable-cows/?share=twitter&nb=1>)

 (<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/irreplaceable-cows/?share=pinterest&nb=1>)

 (<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/irreplaceable-cows/?share=tumblr&nb=1>)

 (<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/irreplaceable-cows/?share=google-plus-1&nb=1>)

RELATED STORIES





(<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/numbers-drive-the-business/>)

Numbers drive the business
(<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/numbers-drive-the-business/>)



(<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/nutrition-nz-flavoured-earth-and-health-index-needed/>)

Nutrition: NZ flavoured earth and health index needed
(<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/nutrition-nz-flavoured-earth-and-health-index-needed/>)



(<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/dual-species-crop-fusion-for-flexibility/>)

Dual-species crop: Fusion for flexibility
(<https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/dual-species-crop-fusion-for-flexibility/>)



[Contact us \(https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/contact-us/\)](https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/contact-us/)

[About us \(https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/about/\)](https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/about/)

[Advertising \(https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/advertising/\)](https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/advertising/)

[FAQ \(https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/faq/\)](https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/faq/)

[Terms and Conditions \(https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/terms-and-conditions/\)](https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/terms-and-conditions/)

[Privacy Policy \(https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/privacy-policy/\)](https://nzfarmlife.co.nz/privacy-policy/)

in (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/nz-farm-life-media/about/>)

Copyright © 2019 NZ Farm Life Media | Website by [MRD WEB \(https://mrd.co.nz/\)](https://mrd.co.nz/)