

SOAY COUNT AND ROUND-UP 1995

By

EMMA PARKES

Lundy, Bristol Channel, North Devon EX39 2LY

INTRODUCTION

During the early part of the year it became clear that Soay numbers had risen above those which the island could sustain without the risk of damage to grassland and heather. Soay, which were known for staying towards the north end and keeping to the sidelands, were beginning to graze further south and were much more frequently seen on the island plateau. Certain areas, particularly Middle Park, were suffering from overgrazing and Soay were on occasion seen nibbling at the heather. As a result of these observations it was felt that the Soay first had to be accurately counted and then reduced in numbers as dictated by the census results.

SOAY COUNT

A thorough count was carried out on 12th April with volunteers in four teams who spread out to cover the entire island. Numbers and whenever possible age and sex was recorded (table 1).

	Adults			Yearlings	New Lambs	Totals
	Rams	Ewes	Unsure			
Pondbury	4	47	5	5	30	91
Middle Park	6	24	2	7	19	58
North End	2	62	5	12	48	129
Totals	12	133	12	24	97	278

Table 1: Soay count results -12th April 1995.

Very few young lambs were counted during the survey suggesting that the majority of ewes had lambed by this stage. Lundy's current grazing management plan allows for between 100 and 150 Soay towards the north of the island. It was therefore evident that a fairly drastic reduction in numbers from the 278 counted was necessary.

SOAY ROUND-UP

From the 4th-7th October, forty volunteers from the Mammal Conservation Trust (MCT) joined with Lundy Field Society volunteers and visitors staying on the island in the task of reducing Soay numbers.

The MCT provided all of the equipment and much of the expertise that helped the catch-up run unexpectedly smoothly. A long (approx. 400m) fixed net was set at right angles to Three Quarter Wall and sweeps were made first to the west and then to the east sides of this net. After four sweeps, two to the south and two to the north of Three Quarter Wall, a total of 126 Soay had successfully been caught. These sheep were taken to the sheep shed, put into secure pens and fed and watered. The day after catching, sheep were processed by a team led by Dr Josephine Pemberton from Edinburgh University. Age, sex, weight, limb length etc were taken for each animal (table 2).

<u>Class/Age</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean Weight Kgs</u>
Female Lambs	18	10.44
Male Lambs	24	12.54
Female 1 Year	14	15.07
Male 1 Year	5	19.00
Female 2 Year	26	18.15
Male 2 Year	5	25.20
Female 3 Year	9	19.56
Male 3 Year	2	22.50 one very light ram, may have been mis-aged?
Female >3 Year	22	20.59
Male >3 Year	0	-
Total	125 plus one aged 2 or 3 = 126	

Table 2. Summary of age, sex and weight data for 126 Soay caught (Pemberton 1995).

Of the sheep rounded up eight went off live to homes on National Trust land or private estates from Scotland to Essex. The remaining forty-six went for slaughter.

OBSERVATIONS

It was noted that the Soay caught were appreciably lighter than St. Kilda Soay weighed about six weeks previously; they also seemed easier to handle and calmer than an equivalent St. Kilda group (St.Kilda Soay Sheep Project 1995, pers comm). From the sample population of 126 Soay it became clear that numbers of rams, particularly mature rams, was unusually low. This may be due to rams being culled in favour of ewes in recent years.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT

The round-up, although successful, was a huge exercise and one which it is hoped will not need to be repeated in the future. Next year two accurate counts will be carried out after lambing to establish number and structure of the population; this will then be repeated annually. Small annual culls will then need to be carried out. By removing young ewes numbers can be kept down whilst still maintaining the integrity of the population. The aim is to maintain a population of feral Soay as naturally as possible without overgrazing the island and threatening heather and other flora.

REFERENCE

Pemberton, J.M. 1995. Lundy Soay sheep data set - notes.