

Care and Maintenance of Highland Cattle

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1. Introduction

Highland cattle are one of the most iconic and resilient cattle breeds in the world. Originating from the Scottish Highlands, they are uniquely adapted to thrive in rugged environments with minimal input. Their thick double coat, robust health, and calm disposition make them a favorite among homesteaders, small-scale farmers, and regenerative agriculture operations. While they require less intensive care compared to some modern breeds, a well-informed approach to their maintenance ensures optimal health, productivity, and longevity. This guide provides comprehensive insights into how to properly care for and manage Highland cattle.

2. Shelter and Housing

Highland cattle are among the hardiest of all breeds, capable of enduring snow, wind, and rain without the need for elaborate shelter. Their outer hair sheds rain and snow, while the dense undercoat insulates against cold. However, shelter is still essential-particularly for calves, older animals, or during extreme weather events. A simple three-sided barn or a natural windbreak using trees or hay bales can suffice. Providing dry bedding like straw during winter helps prevent stress and hoof-related illnesses. Shade is critical during hot months to prevent overheating, especially in warmer climates where Highland cattle are less naturally suited.

3. Feeding and Nutrition

Highlands are excellent grazers and browsers. They can subsist on rough pasture that other breeds may reject. Their efficiency reduces the need for supplemental feeding during most of the year. However, in colder climates or during winter, quality hay becomes essential. Aim for 2% of body weight in dry matter per day. Mineral supplements should include calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, selenium, and salt. Free-choice loose minerals are preferred over blocks for more even intake. In some regions, copper toxicity or deficiency may be a concern-consult a vet for region-specific guidance. Fresh, unfrozen water must always be available, even in sub-zero temperatures, via heated troughs or insulated buckets.

4. Grooming and Coat Care

Grooming isn't required for Highland cattle to remain healthy, but brushing builds trust and helps spot issues like lice, skin infections, or wounds. Use a stiff brush to remove debris and loose hair from the coat, particularly after winter. Check the forelock (bangs) for burrs or debris that could cause irritation or eye infections. Long coats also obscure visibility of body condition, so hands-on checks of spine, ribs, and hips are helpful. In summer, inspect for ticks around ears, neck, and underbelly, especially in areas where

tick-borne diseases are prevalent.

5. Hoof Health

Though generally less prone to hoof issues due to their moderate size and strong conformation, Highland cattle should still be monitored regularly. Muddy, wet environments increase the risk of foot rot and overgrowth. Provide dry loafing areas, rotate pastures, and avoid overstocking. Trimming may only be needed annually or less often if terrain includes gravel, hills, or rocky areas. Signs of hoof issues include limping, standing on toes, swelling, or foul odors. Catch early to avoid joint infections or chronic lameness.

6. Parasite Control

Internal parasites (worms) and external pests (lice, ticks, flies) can impact weight gain, fertility, and general health. Conduct fecal egg counts seasonally to assess parasite burden. Deworm only when needed, rotating drug classes to avoid resistance. In colder regions, lice can proliferate in thick coats-inspect the neck and withers in winter. Use pour-on treatments, dusts, or natural options like diatomaceous earth. Fly control is crucial in summer; fly masks, mineral tubs with insect growth regulators, and proper manure management help limit fly populations.

7. Health Checks and Vaccination

Routine veterinary care ensures herd longevity and biosecurity. Annual vaccinations should include protection from blackleg, leptospirosis, IBR, BVD, and possibly rabies depending on region. Maintain records of vaccinations, illnesses, injuries, and treatments. Observe cattle daily for signs of illness: drooping ears, nasal discharge, off-feed behavior, labored breathing, or unusual posture. Handle cattle quietly and calmly to minimize stress during health procedures. If you plan to sell meat directly, adhere to withdrawal times for any medications used.

8. Calving and Reproduction

Highland cattle generally calve with ease thanks to their pelvic structure and small, vigorous calves. First-calf heifers may still need assistance, so observe them closely. Signs of labor include swollen vulva, mucus discharge, and nesting behavior. Provide a clean, dry area away from the herd. Dip the calf's navel in iodine to prevent infection. Calves should stand and nurse within 2 hours. Monitor maternal bonding and ensure the cow accepts the calf. Avoid breeding heifers until they are at least 2.5 years old for safer delivery. Maintain a controlled breeding program to manage genetics and spacing.

9. Fencing and Handling

Highlands are docile but strong. Proper fencing is critical-especially in areas with predators or traffic. Electric fences work well if animals are trained to them, and three-strand systems are typically sufficient. Use well-designed handling facilities with safe corners and secure gates. Highland cattle respond well to low-stress handling techniques: move slowly, use body positioning, and avoid loud noises. Build trust by spending time with your herd regularly so they associate humans with safety, not stress.

10. Conclusion

Caring for Highland cattle involves both an appreciation for their natural instincts and a commitment to proactive management. With proper attention to housing, nutrition, grooming, healthcare, and handling, Highland cattle can thrive for 15-20 years. Their unique character, environmental resilience, and contribution to sustainable agriculture make them a valuable breed for beginners and experienced farmers alike. Whether you're raising them for beef, pasture improvement, or simply the joy of stewarding such noble animals, Highland cattle offer deep rewards for those who care for them with respect and knowledge.