

## HIGHLAND CATTLE BREED HISTORY\*

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The highland breed of cattle has a long and distinguished ancestry, not only in its homeland of western Scotland, but also in many far-flung parts of the world. One of Britain's oldest, most distinctive, and best known breeds, with a long, thick, flowing coat of rich hair and majestic sweeping horns, the Highlander has remained largely unchanged over the centuries. Written records go back to the 18th century and the Highland Cattle Herd Book, first published in 1885, lists pedigrees since that time.

Originally there were two distinct classes; the slightly smaller and usually black Kyloe, whose primary domain was the islands off the west coast of northern Scotland. The other was a larger animal, generally reddish in color, whose territory was the remote Highlands of Scotland. Today both of these strains are regarded as one breed – Highland. In addition to red and black, yellow, dun, white, brindle and silver are also considered traditional colors.

Archaeological evidence of the Highland breed goes back to the sixth century, with written records existing from the twelfth century. The first recorded importation into the United States occurred in the late 1890s when western cattlemen recognized the need to improve the hardiness of their herds. Earlier importations are likely to have occurred since large numbers of Scotch/Irish immigrants came to this country early on but the absence of a registry precludes any definite proof. The American Highland Cattle Association registry was formed in 1948.

The animals are referred to as Scottish Highland cattle, Scotch Highland cattle or Highlanders. Regardless of where they are located today, Highland cattle can trace their ancestry to Scotland. Importations of Scottish stock, embryos and semen in the US and Canada have served to assure continuation of the Highland pool in North America.

**Outstanding Beef Quality:** Unlike other breeds, Highlands are slow maturing, making the meat tender, flavorful and succulent. In a study at Manyberries Research Station, Canada, groups of Hereford, Highland and Highland/Hereford crosses were tested. The Highland group produced 2000 pounds more beef than the Herefords. The Highland/Hereford crosses produced 6000 pounds more than the purebred Hereford group.

Highland cows will average 900-1200 pounds when mature. Bulls will average from 1500-1800 pounds depending on forage conditions. A study by the Scottish Agricultural

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\* Content taken from the American Highland Cattle Association and the Highland Cattle Society of Scotland.

College determined that Highland beef is lower in fat and cholesterol and higher in protein and iron than other beef breeds.

**Hair Coat:** The double hair coat (long, coarse outer layer and soft wooly inner layer) is one of the most notable differences between Highlands and other breeds. The coat reduces the need for expensive barns and shelters.

Due to the double hair coat, this breed does not need a heavy layer of backfat for insulation. This allows the animal to marble naturally on low input forage while producing lean, low fat, high quality cuts of beef.

Highlands shed out earlier in the spring and produce less hair in a warmer climate, making them suitable for a variety of environments.

**Easy Handling:** Highlands have a long history of living with humans. Early Scots would keep the family cow(s) inside their homes during the winter. A woven wattle fence would separate the animal's living areas from that of its owners, with both sharing the added warmth. Highlands tend to be docile and calm and do not stress easily. They are easy to work with despite their long horns. The horns are used primarily for knocking down brush to graze, predator control, and scratching. Horns on females are generally upswept and finer textured than those on the males. Male horns are more forward pointing and massive.

**Exceptional Mothering and Calving Ease:** Highland cows are noted for being highly devoted and protective mothers. They are noted for calving ease. Due to small calf size (60-70 pounds), calving difficulty (dystocia) is less common. They are remarkable for their longevity: many Highland cows continue to breed to ages in excess of eighteen years having borne fifteen calves. Cows that produce into their late teens reduce the need for frequent herd replacement. They are great mothers.

**Browsing/Grazing Ability:** It is on the vast areas of poor mountain land with high annual rainfall and bitter winds that Highland Cattle thrive and breed where no other cattle could exist. Making the most of poor forage, calving outside and seldom, if ever, housed, they make a real economic contribution to hill and upland areas. The breed is exceptionally hardy with a natural and unique ability to convert poor grazing efficiently. The versatility of the Highlander led to a great upsurge in exports to the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Austria, Holland and South America. Highland Cattle can be found foraging 10,000 feet up in the Andes.

*Kinne Brook Farm is an equal opportunity provider.*