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Ray Shatney uses a metal comb to groom Cinnamon Raisin as her calf Raisin Cain waits his turn Friday at Shat Acres farm in Plainfield. The pair of Highland cattle won the Grand Champion Cow/Calf award recently at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, the largest Highland show in the world. Adult male and female Highlands both have horns.

Leading the herd

Local couple take to the show ring and lab to boost cattle breed

By **ERIC BLAISDELL**
STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — Ray Shatney and Janet Steward have some of the best cattle in the country.

The pair recently returned from the 2014 National Western Stock Show in Denver, where their cow Shat Acres Cinnamon Raisin and her baby bull Shat Acres Raisin Cain won Grand Champion Cow/Calf.

Winning with their cattle is nothing new for Shatney and Steward: Their home is filled with trophies, awards and ribbons from shows across the country.

Cinnamon Raisin won the same title in 2011, when she did it with twins, something

Steward says hadn't happened in 106 years. Raisin Cain also won his division this year.

The breed they raise is called American Scottish Highland — brownish-orange cattle with long hair and big horns that you may have seen grazing in some of the state's pastures.

Their cattle are spread across the couple's two farms, one in Plainfield and the other in Greensboro Bend. The Greensboro Bend farm holds around 100 head that are used for breeding and beef, while the Plainfield farm is home to the 10 animals that will be used for showing.

Shatney's father, Carroll, acquired his first Highland cow in 1967 after a friend who

owned it died. Steward said that animal was a descendant of the first registered Highland cow in the country.

Shatney said his father fell in love with Highland cattle and would go to local fairs and show the animals as a way to help pay his taxes. Shatney said his father would take Highlands and Ayrshires, another Scottish breed, to local fairs and usually would find no one else showing those breeds.

"If you were the only one there and if you had half a dozen of all different ages, you'd win every category," he said. "It was pretty good money. Even if it was \$12 or \$14 for

Herd

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first place, it would add up over time, and if you do eight or nine shows, that's how they paid their property taxes."

Now, Shatney and Steward's grandchildren help show the cattle, and the shows are more about raising the value of the cattle's offspring than making money winning ribbons.

Still, the market for champion offspring isn't a big one. Highlands are slow-growing, Steward said, taking an extra year before being ready for slaughter, compared with the typical Angus beef you buy at the grocery store.

"There aren't enough people who are (raising them) commercially so that they have the value that, say, a champion Holstein is going to have," she said. "Very few people are selling (Highland) beef. They are a beef animal, but for most of the people (showing Highlands) it's just a beauty contest."

To make a living and make the farm sustainable, the couple have to sell the beef. And Steward said the meat is extraordinary.

"The drawback (of Angus) is the meat doesn't have the flavor that the Highland meat has because they're older," she said. "When people say, 'This tastes like what I remember beef tasting like,' it's because the Angus have been so genetically altered to grow faster, to produce quicker, to get bigger so that

they can be slaughtered quicker, the meat doesn't have a lot of flavor."

Highlands also eat all kinds of species of plants instead of simply grain or grass, she said, and that also adds flavor to the meat. Their trademark shaggy hair plays a role too, she said, eliminating the need for an extra layer of fat under their skin for warmth in winter. Any fat they have goes directly into the meat.

Steward is working to scientifically prove that Highland meat tastes better than other types. She is the chairwoman of the beef marketing committee for the American Highland Cattle Association and is working with the University of Missouri on studies to quantify what makes Highland beef different. She said they are testing for tenderness, palatability and a lipid profile that measures the

different fats in the meat compared with other beef.

"So that we can say, 'You're right, it does taste leaner because it has this much less fat than other beef' or 'You're right, that steak was tender because in tests it was discovered the fibers are actually different,'" Steward said.

"All the data we have so far from this scientific study is pointing to one of the most dramatic things is the tenderness of Highland beef, which is amazing because these are totally unaltered beasts. They're basically the same as they've been for thousands of years, and the fibers in the meat are actually different."

The couple sell their beef under the name Greenfield Highland Beef (that's "Greensboro" and "Plainfield" put together). Steward said she and Shatney sell the beef at farmers markets

in central Vermont, to Hunger Mountain Coop and to some restaurants in Montpelier.

Besides the meat, Steward said, the cattle have some other special characteristics. They are survivors that will eat scrub brush and turn areas of brushy land basically into lawns. They get along great with people, although they have a very strong pecking order determined by the size and length of their horns. If the animals are separated for even an hour, once they are brought back together they beat each other up to re-establish who is boss, she said.

Steward attributes those habits to the breed's being basically genetically unchanged from the cows that roamed the hills of Scotland thousands of years ago.

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Janet Steward grooms Cinnamon Raisin at Shat Acres farm Friday in Plainfield.