

PROGRESSIVE CATTLE

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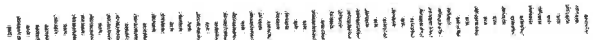
Forage Girls Farm

A mother-daughter duo raising
Scottish Highland beef

West Edition

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A mother-daughter duo:

Raising Scottish Highland beef at Forage Girls Farm

Olivia Sip for *Progressive Cattle*



The Browns raise Scottish Highland cattle and crossbreed with Angus for quicker development.

Grit and resilience describe Shawn and Molly Brown, a mother-daughter duo raising Scottish Highland beef cattle at Forage Girls Farm in Hertel, Wisconsin. While running a cattle ranch has its challenges, the Browns share the rewards ranch life has to offer.

Why Highland cattle?

The Scottish Highland is known to be one of the oldest cattle breeds in the world. Originating from the harsh conditions of Scotland, it meant only the fittest animals survived. "Their double-hair coat makes them very cold hardy, so they don't increase their feed intake in the winter until much colder

temperatures compared to other beef breeds," explains Molly. "They are still characterized by their hardiness and longevity, which is why they do so well here in Wisconsin."

Highlands are excellent foragers and do well on a grass-fed, rotational system, explains Molly. "A couple of their traits that are really important to us are their docility and the fact that they have good calving ease compared to other breeds." Molly also explains that they value their overall appearance and the look of their horns, which are helpful for predator control. Since they are a heritage breed, they are slow growers, so this is why the Browns have started crossbreeding

some of their Highland females with Angus. "The calves grow faster, which helps us be able to process them sooner than we do with the purebreds," says Molly.

The Browns raise their Highlands as grass-fed and grass-finished beef on a rotational grazing schedule in the summers, while hay is fed in the winter months. Brown stresses the importance of offering free-choice minerals and salt because every pasture is different and can be deficient in important nutrients cattle need. At Forage Girls Farm, free-choice kelp is also offered to steers a month before processing. While Highland beef is naturally tender, kelp helps intensify both meat flavor,

tenderness and overall health. The kelp is limited in salt since the cows go through it quickly, and it isn't as cost-friendly. For steers, it is offered free choice for one month before processing. "It's one of those things where it's hard to measure the results of these minerals; they aren't cheap, yet you can't accurately measure if they are worth it because you don't know if you are preventing certain illnesses with them or the problems you are preventing," explains Molly. "We always get really good feedback that our beef has really good flavor, so it would be scary to stop doing what we have been doing as far as minerals and kelp because what if that really is contributing?"



Images provided by Shawn and Molly Brown.

ABOVE: The Browns opened their farm store, Forage Local, in the summer of 2024.

RIGHT: Molly Brown holds a young Highland calf.



Forage Girls Farm is also a member of the Quality Highland Beef program. To name a few qualifications within this program, animals are purebred or at least one-half Highland; animals have been raised and handled in a humane manner in accordance with Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines; and animals are raised without any added hormones, anabolic steroids or subtherapeutic feed antibiotics.

Facing adversity

Brown's parents originally introduced Highland cattle to the farm while Molly was in college at the University of Wisconsin – River Falls. They purchased their first four heifers in 2016 and their first bull in 2017. After Molly graduated college in 2017 with a degree in animal science with an emphasis in meat animal management, she moved back home and started getting more involved in the farm. While working for her parents, she bought a few of her own cows and started raising feeder pigs during the summer and selling them processed in the fall. In

2018, her parents divorced and her mom was ultimately awarded the cattle. Molly and her mom partnered and bought the property they now live on through a USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan in 2020.

"It was a very rocky time for my family in general, and FSA loans do not move quickly." She also explained that the COVID-19 pandemic occurred during the middle of the loan process, which slowed things down. "When my dad filed for divorce and wanted me out of my house, my whole life was uprooted. At one point before we found our property, my mom and I had someone come to look at it and potentially buy the whole herd of cattle." For Molly and Shawn, it really came down to asking, "How badly do we want this, and how much do we believe in what we're trying to do here?" "The entirety of my parents' divorce took over four years, and it was really rough," says Molly.

When Molly and Shawn first met with the original owners about buying the land, they asked if they could put \$400,000 down. "We

said we would see what we could do, but in reality, we had maybe \$5,000 in the bank between the two of us and had no idea how we were going to make it happen," says Molly. "My mom couldn't be on the FSA loan due to being in the middle of a divorce, and I was bartending at the time and didn't have much income to show." They had to use market pricing for their cattle on the loan paperwork, which is a lot less than what they could sell them for. "Making the numbers work for the FSA loan was not easy, but thankfully our loan officer was great, and he worked with us until we at least made it look like we could pull it off," says Molly. The Browns

were able to close on the property in September 2020 and move all their cattle to it in November 2020. "Our family came up to help one weekend, and we moved all of the animals and all of our belongings with two trucks and two stock trailers back and forth for about three days straight."

Maintaining the land

At Forage Girls Farm, it has been a process of converting the land back to pastureland and building new infrastructure. The farm is just under 200 acres, a lot of which was wooded before it was purchased. "The people we bought it from had

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ABOVE: Molly and Shawn Brown started raising Scottish Highland cattle in 2016.



LEFT: The Browns chose Scottish Highland cattle for their cold hardiness, docility and calving ease, among other qualities.

A mother-daughter duo, cont'd from page 29

it logged right before we bought it, and thankfully they were willing to log it how we wanted," says Molly. The company that they used to log chipped the treetops rather than letting them lay on the ground, which left trees and clumps of trees to shade the cattle. "Highlands browse more than your average beef, which has been helpful for keeping the brush down and getting grass growing," explains Molly.

The land at Forage Girls Farm was originally pasture and prairie land. There are some warm-season grasses that try to come up because of what the land once was. The Browns have spread some grass seed mixtures and have also utilized brush mowing. "We are hoping to do some controlled burning this coming spring as well," explains Molly. When they purchased their land they hired a company to put in perimeter fencing because they were in a bit of a hurry to get the cattle moved, but they did

all of the interior fences themselves. The Browns also put in a second well, three all-season tire tank waterers and a few miles of aboveground water lines for summer water.

Now, with how they are set up, the Browns are able to move cattle to a new section every one to three days during the grazing season. "We also rotate them in the winter and feed hay in various sections that have access to the all-season waterers in order to spread the hay waste and manure around, which is really beneficial for building organic matter and fertilizing the soil," said Molly.

Raising cattle responsibly, together

Molly and Shawn both have gotten better at delegating to one another and letting each other run various parts of the operation while making decisions in those selected areas. This has been beneficial for time management, especially since

both Molly and Shawn work off the farm as well. Shawn manages the vet clinic in town, and Molly works remotely as a search engine optimization (SEO) specialist.

"I've joked that if anyone ever asks, 'When did you have time to do all of this?' the answer would be, 'On Sundays.'" The majority of the miles of fencing the Browns have put in was done on Sundays, and a lot of major decisions have been made during car rides or family dinners. "There's evenings here and there of sorting cattle after work, tagging and banding calves and a few late nights around the table doing the paperwork, the planning and record-keeping side of farming," says Molly.

Molly briefly worked in an actual office, which was not very sustainable; however, working remotely has been much more doable for her and for the farm. "I can be here to keep an eye on things, which

is beneficial during calving," she says. "Our 'nursery,' where we have the cows calve, is right outside the front of my house, so I'm able to keep an eye on how everyone is doing right from the dining room table."

At Forage Girls Farm, the Browns' goal is to continue to grow the herd, improve the grass and soil, and provide quality grass-fed, grass-finished beef; pasture-raised pork; and free-range eggs to their community. The Browns offer beef by the quarter, half, whole and by the cut. The Browns opened their farm store, Forage Local, featuring their beef and other locally sourced products sold directly on their farm, in the summer of 2024.

You can find Forage Girls Farm on Facebook, Instagram and their website (www.foragegirlsfarm.com).

Olivia Sip is a freelance writer based in South Dakota.