



SHEEP FOR BEST RETURNS *and country*

Tekapo's Glenmore Station is combining multiple income streams to create a resilient business.
Jo Grigg reports. Photos by George Empson.

WHEN THERE ARE 55 tonnes of wool to sell, having a keen return buyer is crucial to sustainable returns.

For Will and Emily Murray, Glenmore Station, their Merino breeding programme is all geared towards the end market. They are looking to produce authentic quality and maximise their genetic investment.

The largest cut of the clip, 150 bales of 18.5 micron wool, is contracted to Norwegian-based outdoor garment retailer, Devold. The Murrys are the public face of the 12 Devold grower-suppliers, with the Devold website homepage featuring the family mustering a mob with a mountain backdrop.

The couple feel they share Devold's values of uncompromising quality, and being gentle

on animals and the environment. The contract provides a premium on the price of the day. Emily describes the three-year rolling contract as a critical part of their business.

"It gives us the financial certainty to plan, as wool makes up just over 30% of our income."

The high altitude and sometimes extreme climate lend themselves well to producing 18.5 micron wool. Micron hasn't really changed in the past 10 years, says Emily, but meeting their Devold micron specifications is a part of the sire selection decision-making process.

As well as satisfying their wool buyer and chasing maximum total wool and meat income, the Glenmore sheep breeding programme has to appeal to commercial Merino farmers. Glenmore Stud (started by

Jim and Anne Murray in 1976) now sells 120 rams each year.

Will and Emily see the twin goals of wool for Devold and profitable genetics for ram clients as identical. Historically, the focus has been putting on as much wool on sheep as possible. However, over the past seven years the Murrys have "plained up" their ewes. Coefficient of variation (CV) measures variability, with 15% considered very uniform wool while 30% is highly variable. Glenmore's clip is typically 18.7%.

"We have maintained wool weight, micron and nourishment while increasing staple length and growth rates of young stock," says Emily.

Commercial ewes clip 6kg. Developing 300ha of pivot irrigation has been critical

to growing young stock and realising their genetic potential. Having a plainer type of Merino that is well-fed has resulted in large increases in scanning and lambing performance. Lambs weaned to commercial ewes mated ranges from 90% to 115%.

Of the 7300 ewes run on Glenmore, 850 are studs. Two years ago they diversified into Poll Merinos to complement the horned stud.

“The Polls have higher growth rates in young sheep and we utilise fat and eye muscle testing to help identify sires we want to use.”

Will said they are treading carefully as the horned genetics have proven themselves on Glenmore country.

“We are very aware that our summer country is reasonably challenging, with the Cass Valley at over 2400 metres, with two metres of rain annually. It can also be very dusty on windy days due to the shingly slopes.”

Around 2500 mixed-aged ewes are lightly stocked up the valley from weaning until autumn. There are about 12 natural boundaries up there, so mobs are small. In April, eight musterers spend five days camping out on the autumn muster, bringing the ewes home before the first snow.

“Nourishment has been key in keeping the dust out, therefore the horned Merino will always have a place on Glenmore.”

The 300ha of irrigation provides a great deal of flexibility and resilience to the seasons.

“We no longer have to rely heavily on the oversown country whilst hoping for rain. We know we will make enough silage for the winter even if we have a dry summer,” says Emily.

The stud ewes are lambbed in paddocks in

their individual sire groups. Mobs are kept to around 30 so mothering up for pedigree recording is easy. The irrigation paddocks are perfect for this and large haybales are put out to provide shelter from spring storms. Once tagged, they are mobbed up and run on lucerne through to weaning.

The commercial ewes are lambbed on the improved country and some dryland lupin paddocks. After weaning, the four-tooth ewes are run around the paddocks while the older ewes go up the Cass. The cattle are an important management tool for pasture quality and worm control on the irrigation.

GENETIC COACH GREAT INVESTMENT AT GLENMORE

Having a trusted genetics coach to explain and encourage is helping Will and Emily navigate the somewhat-tricky world of sheep genetics.

Eighteen months ago, Will Gibson, neXtgen, was hired to be their genetics coach and encourager, as Gibson puts it, and the Murrays say it has been money well-spent.

Gibson visits Glenmore about five times a year to help navigate the collection, analysis and selection of Merino genetics, for both stud and commercial flocks.

With so much going on in their high-country business - pastoral lease, environment policy changes, feed management, tourism, wool and ram marketing - having someone to keep the genetic recording on track has been a God-send.

“We really value his input and he is good at explaining things in farmer’s language, as he is a farmer too,” says Emily.

Since starting at Glenmore in 2019, he has

GLENMORE STATION, TEKAPO

- Will and Emily Murray - owned Glenmore Station Limited since 2002
- 19,000ha between Forks and Cass Rivers
- 11,000 Merinos wintered (600 horned stud ewes, 250 polled stud ewes, 6500 commercial ewes and 4500 hoggets)
- Merino rams to all ewes for 14 days, then swapped with Romney rams
- 1000 half-bred ewe lambs sold as capital stock in autumn
- 1000 half-bred wether lambs shorn and killed by end of May
- 1000 Merino wether lambs sold store in March
- 1400 Merino wether lambs wintered and killed in spring
- 2400 Merino ewe lambs wintered, 900 sold as capital stock in spring
- 700 stud lambs retained
- 18.5 micron wool, commercial ewes clip 6kg, hoggets clip 3.2kg at 17.4 micron
- Lambs weaned per ewe mated (commercial 90-115% average)
- Clip contracted to Devold (outdoor garment retailer in Norway)
- 800 deer and 320 breeding cows
- 300ha centre pivot with prairie grass/red clover/lucerne/timothy/ cocksfoot mix
- 500ha dryland paddocks, variety of species (includes 150ha lupin/ cocksfoot mix)
- 2500ha oversown tussock country
- 15500ha unimproved
- Altitude: Homestead 750m, rainfall 600mm. Head of Cass Valley 2400m, rainfall 2000mm
- Hunting, skiing, accommodation business



Will and Emily Murray discuss their ram selections with neXtgen Agri genetics ‘coach’ Will Gibson.

assessed all existing pedigree records and EBV data and explained what it was showing about different breeding lines. He helped explain the relevance of results from the Central Progeny Test that Glenmore was involved with in 2018.

He also has helped with creating a robust electronic recording system of stock production. The Murrays now use EID tags on all stud stock and record all stock data into KoolCollect. This programme is cloud based and data is sent to Sheep Genetics in Australia for processing. It sends back estimated breeding values (EBVs) that the Murrays then use as a classing tool.

Although it was daunting at first, Emily says it is incredibly satisfying to have KoolCollect working well and seeing the results in each year's progeny.

"Building a foundation of good data collection is important," Will Gibson says.

"At weaning I check that tagging of lambs is done properly and help teach staff."

Glenmore now has the training wheels off, Gibson says, and Will or Emily will only ring just to check up on things.

Gibson and the Murrays decide together what data to collect and this is then sent back in report form to the Murrays, via Merino Select.

"It is a really exciting thing for Glenmore to get EBVs that are really useful for them – in particular, wool weight."

"The power of it is when you record the females – this is the backbone."

Sending rams away to be compared with others, in similar conditions, has been revealing.

In 2016 rams from Glenmore joined the Central Progeny Test at Mt Grand. This showed that they were the top wool cutters for breed and micron range and had average growth rate and body weight figures.

"Now we know where we are."

Will has also taken up the chance to join in on neXtgen Agri on-line webinar sessions, run by geneticist Dr Mark Ferguson.

ELEVATED RACE OFFERS BEST VIEW FOR REPLACEMENTS

Every breeder has a preferred system for selecting ewe or wether replacements.

Will uses a classing race, 20 centimetres off the ground, which helps give a good view of each sheep. Of the 2400 straight Merino ewe hoggets, Will aims to keep 1500. To identify the keepers, he takes time to check each sheep. From a distance he watches it run into the race, to view their heads and underlines. The person pushing up the sheep into the race

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checks hocks, from the rear view.

Will then steps up and checks the fleece along the side of the sheep, looking for nourishment, fibre length, crimp and freeness. His ideal ewe hogget fleece has a bold crimp with a bright white staple and a well-nourished free skin.

"I'm also looking for a good size bum for meat and muscle."

He drafts three ways; any definite culls go straight out, the good sheep stay in and then the third 'maybe' mob is run through a second time.

At the end of it, Will walks through each mob, picking out faults such as short necks,

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The Murrays class sheep on a dry warm day, with no frost, as this can affect the fleece movement.

poor hocks or pasterns. These sheep have a chance to breed as two-tooths and are then culled again as four-tooths, mainly on poor constitution. Will expects to remove 100 of the 1500 at this stage.

“Because we breed a sheep ‘true to type’, classing our ewe hoggets is getting more difficult. We are still proud of the sheep we cull, and it is a great feeling selling them as a line of capital stock knowing they will perform well.”

He classes on a dry warm day, with no frost, as this can affect the fleece movement.

EYE, EBVS AND EXPERTISE

Will and Emily use three tools in selecting stock - eye appraisal, estimated breeding values (EBVs), and the extensive knowledge of Australian sheep classer Chris Bowman.

Bowman has been their wingman for 10 years, following Gordie McMaster’s retirement.

“He has made a real impact, as he knows the Australian bloodlines very well and has seen these genetics play out in the next generation,” says Will.

It was under his direction that Glenmore used a horned Nurstane ram in an AI programme in 2020 and a Gray’s Hill polled ram. The Nurstane ram was judged Australian Supreme Merino Ram in 2017 and Will describes both his EBVs and wool as outstanding. Over the previous four years Glenmore stud ewes were put to Wanganella rams, with a reputation for carcase performance. Coonawarra sires also had an influence.

Bowman visits Glenmore twice a year. January sees him out selecting two-tooth rams for sale. He visits most of Glenmore’s ram clients to class their sheep, so knows their individual breeding goals and is able to select the correct type of rams for their needs.

“Essentially he lines up the right ram to the



Glenmore Station co-owner Will Murray and geneticist Will Gibson at work in the yards.

right property so his expertise is invaluable,” Emily says.

Some clients are happy for Chris to select their rams while others like to choose their own with Chris’ help, she says.

“A few like to come and go through the rams themselves and we are happy to accommodate these differing selection methods.”

Bowman also visits in March to class ewes and select rams for the upcoming stud joining. This includes sourcing ram semen for Glenmore’s annual AI programme.

Will admits to previous reluctance to fully engage with using EBVs, something he puts down to not understanding them fully. A new initiative, started 2020, is measuring and recording for the worm resistance EBV.

Footrot is not present at Glenmore so cull ram hoggets are sent away to expose them to footrot and measure the response. The data collected from these trials is being used to create a footrot breeding value.

Will and Emily say they are more

comfortable with using EBVs now as they can see the merit in knowing where the Glenmore Merinos line up against the Australian sheep genetic data.

“We are not trying to breed ‘curve bending’ sheep but a well-balanced, productive Merino. EBVs are one part of the equation. No ram will be sold unless it is constitutionally correct,” says Will.

He gives the example of buying a ram to decrease micron a little, to balance the big crimp Wanganella wool. The Wanganella bloodlines are living up to their reputation of being big bold wool producers with good carcase attributes.

The ribbons for Champion Medium Ram and Supreme Champion Fleece at the Wanaka A&P Show this year were both Wanganella genetics. A Glenmore ram with Coonawarra bloodlines won the 2019 Golden Fleece Competition.

“The win at Wanaka, based on what you can see and touch of the wool and the rams, was followed by good interest in our rams.”