



Gathering the hill on a good day like this is a rare treat. Nel and Ray enjoy the challenge under most conditions, but with winds frequently reaching 90 miles an hour, and sometimes exceeding 100, we are often forced to take cover from the dangers of flying debris. Any item not fixed down, and many that are, become potentially lethal missiles. Our neighbor's full water trough, formally a heavy metal household bath, blew away last winter. Had he encountered it that day, he wouldn't have lived to tell the tale.

OUT ON THE RANGE

SHEEP, DOGS & SCOTLAND

Farming on the edge. Words & photos by Elaine Fletcher.

BOOM! The Ministry of Defense cannons roar out their threats. Its range adjoins our land, and it also purchased a small square within it, from which to fire cannons across the strait. My husband, Gordon, gazes out of the farmhouse window at the Atlantic, nothing but black froth today until the North Pole. We are at 58 Degrees North here. A glimmer of light shows from the other window towards Hudson Bay, nearly 4,000 miles away.

The Aberdeen Angus cattle are barely visible in the gloom as we set off to bring “in-lamb” ewes

home. Our collies, a vital part of our life, jump into the pickup and we make for the headland, where my dog, alarmed by the noise, cowers. It's the week of Exercise Joint Warrior, when many nations converge to practice torpedoeing the land and aerial bombardment. This is the only place in Europe where they can drop live 1,000-pound bombs. But today it's the cannons that concern us. I approach the gates and plead for a brief lull.

“Please, sir...”

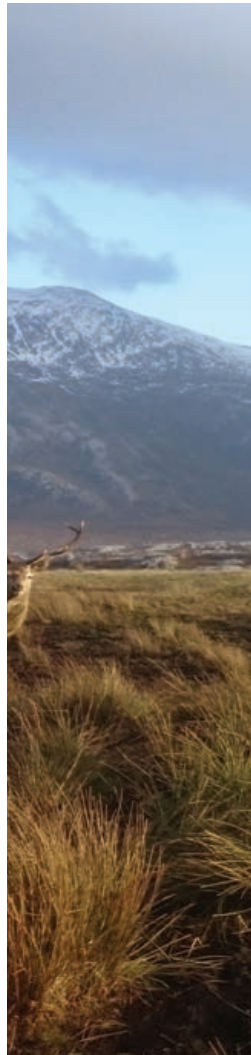
Boom! The sergeant fires his wordless response, and I leave Gordon and his calmer dogs



Millie is an inexperienced border collie that has recently come to us needing work. She is learning quickly, and tiring slowly! She's working a mixture of lambs and old ewes that are near the farm for extra care and feed. The blue mark is the farm's identification mark. It's made with thick greasy keel and stays on all year, but is easily washed out of the fleece after shearing. We can tell from a distance that the sheep are ours, as our 3,500-acre unfenced land is bordered by other landowners with different color keels, enabling us to spot strays, shed them off, and return them to their own ground. The Atlantic Ocean is behind our farmhouse, next stop North America.



Garry is a young dog sired by Jock Welsh's Tanhill Sam, a frequent trial winner. He stayed with us while his owner was competing in the trial circuit. Here he is learning how to hold lambs quietly in a corner.



ABOVE: Tain is a bustling wee town where we service our four-wheeler (shown at right). The garage also sells tractors. I am dreaming here, comparing the lovely new ones with our aging John Deere at home! TOP RIGHT: Our usually forgiving Aberdeen Angus cattle took one look at Gordon modeling his new luminous extreme weather onesie and fled. It was never worn again! RIGHT: Elaine shears.



Some of our homebred Cheviot rams are ready for the famous annual Lairg ram sale. They are trimmed, sprayed, washed, and have a black paint lot number branded on their backs. The sale is held just before the rams are turned out with ewes in October. Folk come from all over Britain to purchase the best rams. Ours sold well, the best making over \$3,000. We can't retain them here at this age, as they are related to the young sheep but they are sought after by farmers requiring docile, hardy and easily fleshed sheep. In the background stands Balnakeil House, originally built as a monastery in 720 by an Irish saint seeking to bring Christianity to the area. It was later rebuilt as a mansion, holding a criminal court. The condemned were hanged from a tree nearby. Bought by the Elliots in the 1900s, it's now let on a weekly basis to holidaymakers, none of whom have seen the resident ghost, the green lady, who walks the corridors at midnight!



Red deer abound in these barren hills, providing hunters from all over Britain with many days of good sport and landowners with additional income. The salt-blasted rank grassland bursts into life again in spring, and glows with the colors of many rare mountain flowers.

to clear that corner.

Heading back along the track I meet a few members of the U.S. military. They are the nicest, most courteous guys I've ever met. They stop to ask if they can touch a sheep, so I shake a feedsack and an old ewe ambles up to eat from their hands.

"Wow! That's the most exciting thing we've done all day!" one jokes. We laugh together as the last light fades. ■

When Elaine Fletcher sent these photos in December, she wrote: "It's evil weather here, the shed doors are threatening to take off! We had to open them back to save them. The pickup is crammed in the sheep shed to save it from flying bits of roof. The electricity is still on luckily. Your soldiers are great, much more polite than ours. Anyone who calls me Ma'am has my bet!"



On finding a neighbor's ewes had strayed onto our ground, I gathered them up with Ray and herded them into our hill barn. I left them temporarily to get my cell phone from the pickup, and on returning found that Ray had somehow persuaded them all to jump up onto the shearing platform. She looked very pleased with herself.