

Outwintering cattle in a damp corner of Scotland

Speaker: Heather Close



Littleton Farm

- West coast of Scotland
- Total farm area 136Ha.
- 117Ha is pasture, 14Ha woodland.
- Glacial till – clay 22% across farm, sandier towards the sea, siltier away from it.
- 40m-145m above sea-level
- 30 yr average rainfall is 1072mm.





The Herd

- 40-50 cows + followers
- Mixture of Aberdeen Angus and Hereford - traditional types
- 45-day bulling period
- Calve from mid-April
- Cows carry calves over winter, wean in Feb/Mar.
- 100% pasture fed with high Iodine bolus twice a year

The Grazing System

- No artificial fertilizer since 2018
- All animals outwintered since 2019, cows since 2011
- Cows moved daily (ish) for 10+ years; 2-3 times a day in winter, less in summer
- Mainly on deferred grass, but bales unrolled to supplement when needed
- Fields subdivided into 1Ha paddocks
- Increasing rest periods since 2020 – now most fields are grazed 2-3 a year
- 30 days rest absolute min (parasite control)



Benefits of this system

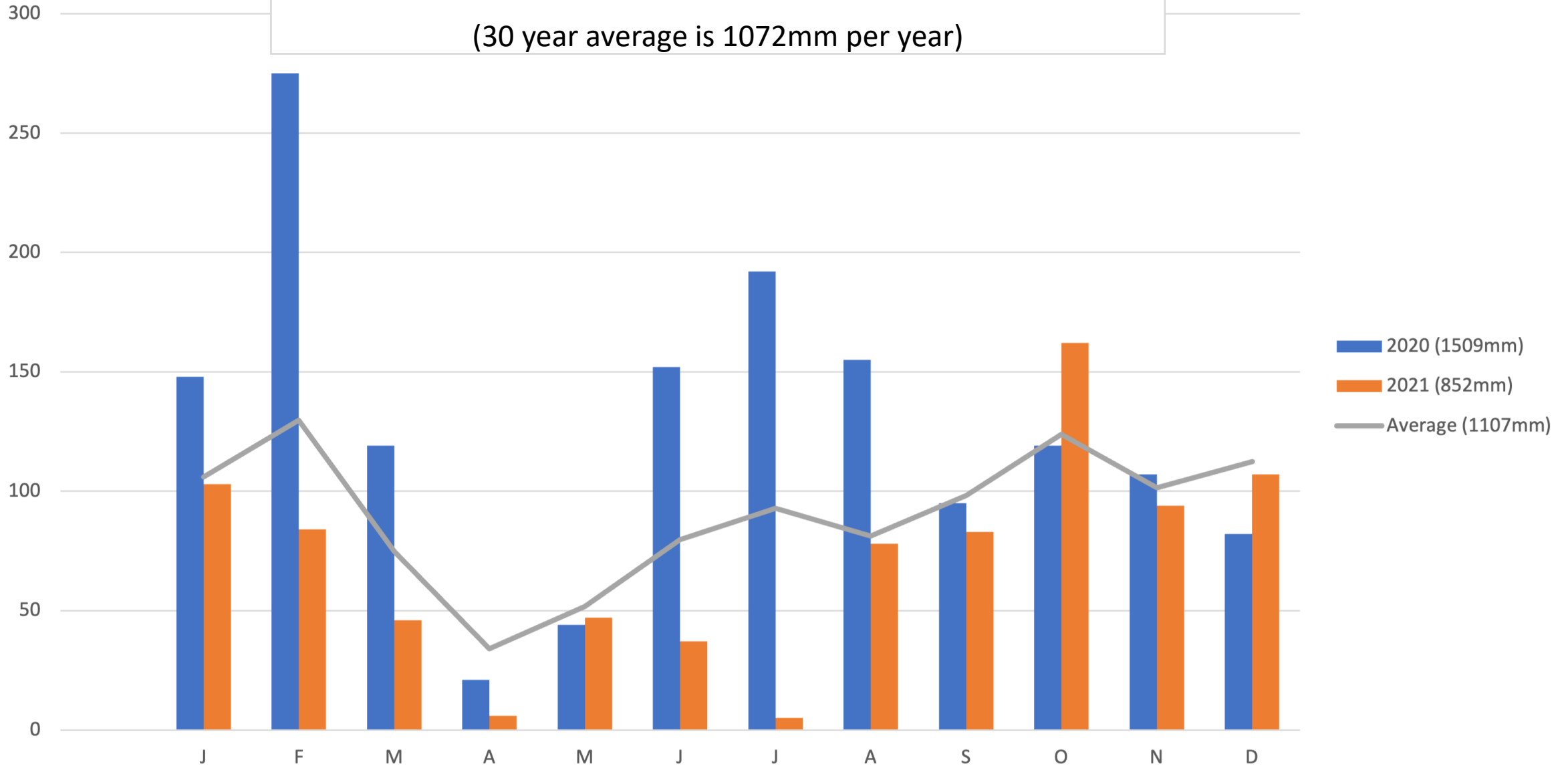
- Limit exposure to commodity price swings
- Relatively low cost
- Resilience – this increases as soil health increases
- Haven't had to treat for parasites other than liver fluke in over a decade
- Reduced liver fluke presence over last few years – longer grass?

- Need to trim feet is very rare
- Cows fitter at calving
- Haven't had to treat calves for pneumonia since we moved weaning from Oct/Nov to Feb/Mar.
- We **enjoy** being out there in nature, moving the cows. Except maybe in a wet February ...



Extremes of rainfall at Littleton over the last 6 years

(30 year average is 1072mm per year)



Rain

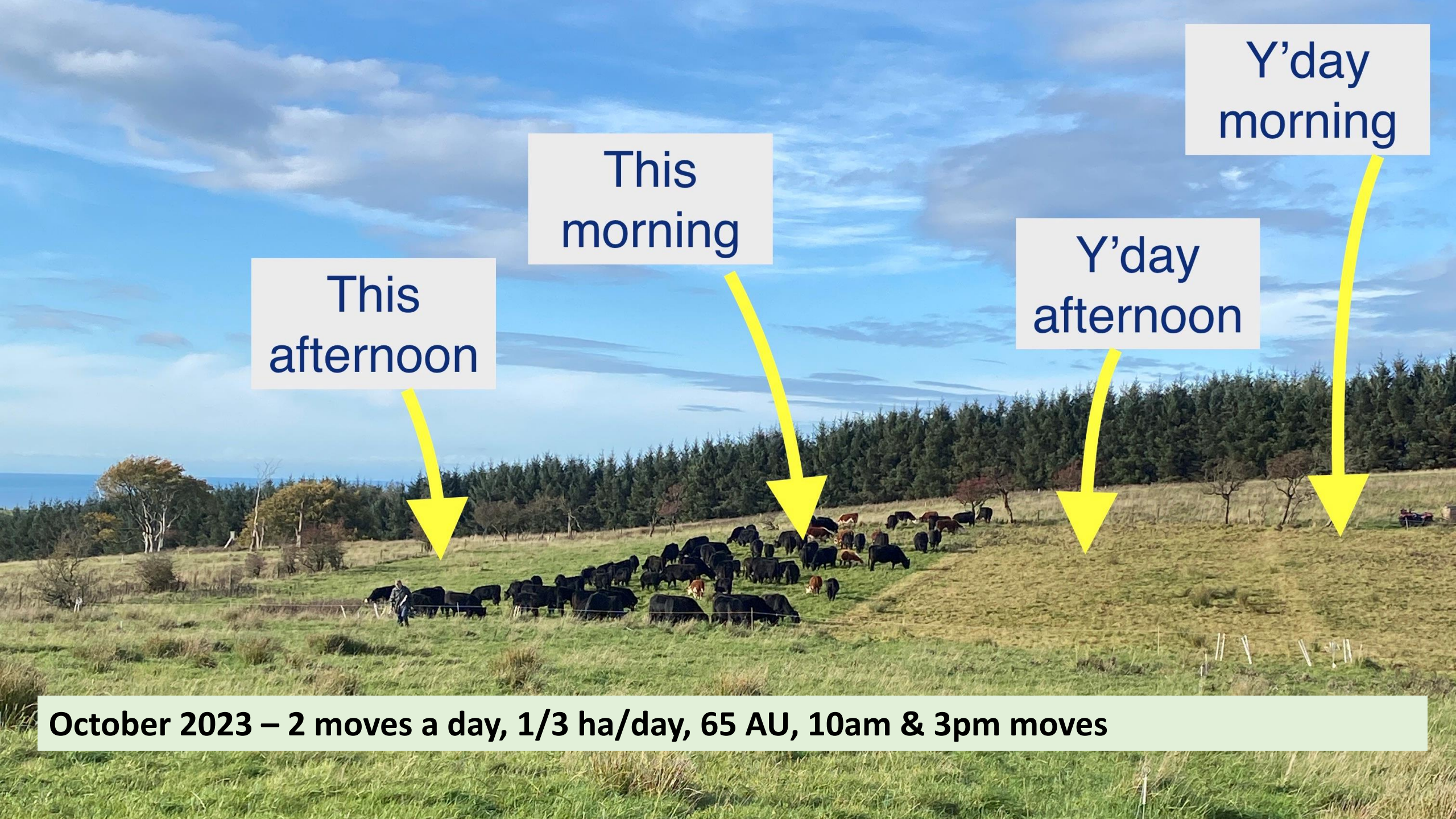
- More challenging in winter, when grass isn't growing
- Portable water troughs reduce poaching
- Multiple moves a day
- Grazing tall grass works best for us, helps hold the cows up



Why multiple moves?

- Fresh untrampled grass 2-3 times a day
- All cow classes run together, the extra moves reduce competition
- More even distribution of manure (hills)
- An early break stops the youngsters taking things into their own hands and jumping fences ...





This
afternoon

This
morning

Y'day
afternoon

Y'day
morning

October 2023 – 2 moves a day, 1/3 ha/day, 65 AU, 10am & 3pm moves

Automatic Solar Gates

We don't physically move the cows 3 times a day.

Instead, we use a solar powered automatic gate.

The brand we use is Battlatch (as shown).


Pensagro, a different style of automatic gate is another option.



But what if
it's really
REALLY wet?

- ⚠ Moving cattle at least daily if you can
- ⚠ And/or increase the size of the paddock
- ⚠ Reduce use of back fencing
- ⚠ If wet and windy or cold then we give extra haylage to keep their rumen firing and allow access back to shelter/wind break

Mistakes – and mother nature – happen.
REST and RECOVERY is the answer.



Mud – it happens.

Here's an early mistake of mine 🤦

There was a heavy downpour and I moved them to a new paddock, but then shut them in, and as you can see the paddock was on a slight incline so the water pooled at the bottom ...

But by May it didn't really look any different from another paddock.



Recovery is even better with a little help ...



I spread wildflower seed ...
(didn't graze in the summer to allow the flowers to set seed)



Feb 2023 ... this is why we are careful with gateways when wet. We'd had 175mm rain in 3 weeks – and this was a slight hollow.



Cattle husbandry - daily checks

Rumen fill



Dung scoring

(<https://onpasture.com/2019/10/07/manure-scoring-what-comes-out-tells-you-what-went-in-and-what-to-change/>)

👉 Adjust grazing – increase paddock size or add haylage



👉 Rumen's doing well
👍 👍





Tips for getting started

- There is no “right” way, every farm and farmer is different – context is everything
- Start slowly – if you currently house over winter then start with extending the grazing season
- Watch your cows – rumen fill, dung score, mooing – they will let you know if the grazing needs adjusting – quiet cows are happy cows
- Keep a record of where you graze and for how long – this will be useful for the following winter
- Plan for a 2 months grazing buffer: you’re learning a new skill plus nature likes to throw curveballs.
- This can be a barn, or a wooded area, or extra haylage you can roll out on the fields. There are many options but have a Plan A, B, C & D.



Thanks for listening
Any questions?

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