



# High country

Lake Heron Station, Canterbury

**NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND HILL COUNTRY HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN EVOCATIVE, INSPIRING PART OF AOTEAROA'S LANDSCAPE AND PART OF OUR NATIONAL IDENTITY WITH ITS WIDE-OPEN SPACES, STUNNING VISTAS, AND DOWN-TO-EARTH PRACTICAL PEOPLE AS ITS STEWARDS.**

IN AN INCREASINGLY URBANISED world, the draw of this wide-open landscape has not diminished, and if anything – it's grown stronger.

Station owners operating in a dynamic, ever-changing landscape have been compelled over the years to reassess and adjust how they run their expansive properties to remain viable, amid climate change challenges, government regulations and shifts in expectations on how the high country is looked after.

For John and Rose Acland of Mount Peel station up the Rangitata Gorge in Canterbury, there are four generations before them who have faced the

challenges the high country brings. For John, his family and staff, the focus of this generation is to run a grass-based sustainable expansive operation that will see the station well into the next five generations.

The station stretches for 20km up the Rangitata Gorge with the river a natural boundary for country that graduates from the foothills to 1,500m above sea level at its highest point.

The spread of altitude and a generous 1,700ha of flats along with 2,500ha of grazable hill country gives Mount Peel the ability to be a focused, commercial stock operation that encompasses sheep,

beef, and venison. That good balance of flat land is also enhanced with a regular 1,200mm of annual rainfall, making it ideal for both breeding and finishing.

Family investment in a dairy unit on the flat country near Mayfield also matches well with the station, where the dairy unit's calves are wintered. The dairy farm also provides a source for the 400 Friesian bulls the station runs, a stock class that provides a level of flexibility when it comes to quitting animals depending on feed levels.

Their weight gains have been enhanced in recent years, thanks to the use of sexed semen in the dairy herd and use of

Charolais genetics which has allowed the use of more beef genetics.

The station's location and spread means it can run Romneys, with 9,500 Romney cross ewes and 3,000 replacement hoggets with the cross coming from Suffolk and Beltex, a heavily muscled Texel offshoot.

He says the station's mix of 'a third, a third, a third' across the three livestock classes has held up well over the years, but he's not averse to re-examining the mix as markets shift.

"I guess having been here for 150 years and weathering the many ups and downs, you do learn to move with the times and get smarter in how you adapt to the challenges we get," he says.

Deer are the third livestock type Mount Peel runs and fit well on the station's summer-safe country.

"We run the hinds on the hills which are summer-moist country, the grass doesn't start growing until well into October, so the deer fit in well here."



Mustering at Mt Peel Station, Canterbury

**"HAVING BEEN HERE FOR 150 YEARS AND WEATHERING THE MANY UPS AND DOWNS, YOU DO LEARN TO MOVE WITH THE TIMES."**

JOHN ACLAND, MOUNT PEEL STATION OWNER

The Aclands have been heartened by the reversal in fortunes the venison sector has started to experience post-Covid, when the global pandemic hit the sector hard shutting down restaurants and hotels that were a key market for the high-value red meat.

"We are seeing the schedule come back to nearer \$9/kg, this is closer to where it needs to be, even if it's still off its high of \$11/kg," says John.

Over 1,300 velvet stags also contribute to Mount Peel's stock income, with the South Korean velvet market proving to be a solid performer as New Zealand's reputation as a quality supplier has grown over the years.

The family has enjoyed a strong relationship over the past 35 years with the same family-operated business that has bought Mount Peel velvet consistently over that time.

At the heart of Mount Peel's commercial operations is a focus on grass-fed protein production, and this is underpinned by

a gentle environmental footprint with the family working hard to maintain and build the station's sustainability.

The station has 300ha of regenerating native bush, and a further 250ha of plantation forestry that offers the opportunity to offset the station's carbon emissions and qualify for New Zealand's emissions trading scheme (ETS) carbon credits.

With its generous flat country, minimal soil disturbance is assured with low till technology to help build organic and carbon levels and to minimise topsoil loss in the frequently strong nor'westers that blow through the Rangitata Gorge.

The family has also invested heavily in water trough systems to minimise incursion by stock into waterways and has fenced off over 20km of waterways, incorporating an extensive planting of deciduous and native trees throughout the property.

The station's natural beauty also incorporates some of the South Island's most valued historic buildings. These include the Church of the Holy Innocents, and the station's main homestead, an elegant English-designed manor.

With one eye on overseas market trends, and another on stepping lightly in the hill country, the Aclands are confident Mount Peel is well positioned to remain the iconic, viable, high-country business it has been for at least another 150 years.

"It is the same for us as it is for most farming businesses, it's a case of keeping your chin up and costs down. We have seen plenty of cycles before and we need to remain resilient to ride them out," says John.

## GRAMPIANS STATION, NORTH CANTERBURY

Further north, inland from Culverden in North Canterbury the Reed family is providing an inspiration for a younger generation of farmers that the high-country life can prove an interesting, busy blend of business, family, and creativity, despite the distance from town.

Grampians Station is a 3,500ha operation lying between 350m and 1,600m above sea level, spanning the typical range of South Island station country, from reasonably forgiving flats to medium-steep country, to tough, high shingle tops.

Its expanse of typical country, makes it an ideal platform for proving the Grampians Angus stud cattle that form a valuable income source, and have done since the stud was formed back in 2003.

“As a kid, I always had this fascination with cattle, and Dad let me work for a couple of calves to start off with, and from there I bought into some cows with him. Once we had a good commercial herd of 600 breeding cows we picked the best out of them and started Grampians Angus stud from there,” says Jono.

The stud’s key point of difference is a focus on strong maternal lines that deliver clients sound, easy-doing cows that can produce a calf that reaches a weaning weight of about 50 percent of its mother’s weight in good time.

The tougher winters on the Grampians test them well, and their ability to quickly convert feed and grow out calves through summer means the Reeds have built a solid core of loyal buyers bidding at their annual bull sale, while also picking up new clients over the years.

Overall, Jono has worked to deliver clients a good all-round performing animal, one that is adaptable, and capable of looking after itself and its offspring across a range of conditions.



Jono and Sarah Reed with their family on Grampians Station

**“CUSTOMERS REALLY LIKE THE STORY BEHIND OUR BLANKETS, HOW THEY ARE FROM OUR FARM, OUR SHEEP, AND HOW WE FOLLOW THEIR CREATION EVERY STEP OF THE WAY.”**

SARAH REED, GRUMPY MERINO  
FOUNDER AND GRAMPIANS  
STATION OWNER

Alongside beef, the station’s 5,500-head Merino account for 60 percent of the station’s livestock numbers. Grampians’ flock’s high-value, fine micron wool is one source of several in New Zealand that the Norwegian clothing company Devold sources its traceable, quality fine wool from for the manufacture of its high-value woollen garments.

After encountering some challenges supplying their client during the pandemic, and being locked down with three small children, Jono’s wife Sarah was prompted to come up with another use for their high-quality Merino wool.

Her grandmother’s passion for fine wool blankets was her inspiration to create the Grumpy Merino brand of fine knit blankets alongside wool yarn for dedicated knitters.

However, Sarah’s ethos to source the blankets from Grampians’ flock did not just extend to the wool. She has looked hard at every stage of the manufacture, committed to ensuring all the scouring, yarn and manufacturing processes remained here in New Zealand.

“It was not easy when you really started to look. The industry has lost a lot of processors over the years, but we are happy with how it has come together.”

Sarah says product design is the one part of the process she has found most challenging personally, but that doesn’t show in the beautifully crafted fine wool blankets hewed from the fleece of their 17.5-18-micron hogget flock.

Last year, they also started making woven blankets, in a chunkier, heavier style while also using the adult flock’s wool for the knitting yarn which now includes three colours, natural, petal pink and Dutton navy blue. She has also built in some inspiration for knitters, providing knitting kits and a variety of patterns for them to call upon.

Now in her third year of business, she has built a strong following, with sales still largely within New Zealand but with fledgling interest from overseas.

“Our customers really like the story behind our blankets, how they are from our farm, our sheep, and how we follow their creation every step of the way. That is right from mustering the sheep in for shearing, through to packing up the blankets made from their wool to send to them.”



Grumpy Merino wool blankets

## High-country stewards face new rules

Lake Heron Station leaseholder Philip Todhunter is hopeful the ability of the 160 leaseholders around New Zealand to effectively manage and look after their delicate farming environments has finally been recognised by New Zealand’s government.

Todhunter was a founder of the High Country Accord group, formed to give station operators across the country’s 1.2 million hectares of Crown lease land a voice as legislators worked to bring in the Crown Pastoral Land Reform Bill. That Bill is now officially in place as an Act from May last year.

The purpose of the original Bill was to help ensure sustainable pastoral farming in the high country would continue to maintain or enhance that country’s integral economic, landscape and cultural values.

Todhunter admits it has been something of a challenge to ensure the original Bill turned into an Act that would not endanger the viability and practicality of trying to farm in the high country.

“Really, the legislation created something of a complication. Regardless of having the legislation there, the high country was always going to be well looked after and the fact is it is in better shape now than it was 50 years ago.”

The original Bill had been riddled with requirements that would have made the lives of high country stewards difficult, including regulations around needing a consent to conduct fencing work, install a stock water trough, and even when wanting to clear invasive weeds.

“These were impacting properties where the footprint of farming is really quite light, often less than 1.5 stock units a hectare.

“Requiring run holders to seek consents simply was not going to enhance biodiversity or the environment. That was coming from their customers, many both tourists and overseas consumers who wanted – for their own reasons – to have transparency about how well stations look after their environment.”

Todhunter is confident the final Act has blunted some of the “sharp edges” the original Bill contained, and gives credit to previous Land Information minister Eugenie Sage for her support in ensuring the policy writers visited a range of properties to understand farmers’ perspectives.

“Some edges are still there, for example we do still need consent to do fencing – you can put the fence posts in but you cannot put the wires up without it!

“Most of the impracticalities have been

taken out, but it has yet to be tested given it only came in November last year.”

Another area of contention run holders have had to push back on is government policy around greenhouse gas emissions, covered under the He Waka Eke Noa (HWEN) partnership agreement.

Under pressure from the primary sector, the government announced prior to Christmas that it would accept all seven types of vegetation on farms capable of sequestering carbon, compared to its original intent to only accept two.

“This is still looking like a bit of work in progress, and the main concern is that while more vegetation is being accepted into HWEN, our pastoral leases and our tenure is not recognised under HWEN at present.”

High country blocks often do not have the wood lot type blocks recognised under the Emissions Trade Scheme (ETS) or HWEN regulations, but do have significant amounts of vegetation spread within the grazing landscape.

“We are hopeful something will be resolved on this, and something will also be created that recognises not only the sequestered carbon on leased land but also the increased biodiversity that comes with that. What you do not want is to take farming out of the picture.”

Todhunter said there is an anomaly when areas, particularly in the North Island, are seeing good pastoral land turn into pine trees, while the vast tracts of the high country with its natural vegetation are being ignored in carbon equations.

Of the 1.2 million hectares in pastoral lease, the Crown has advice estimating

between 330,000 hectares and 1.0 million hectares could be available for carbon sequestration, thanks to the high level of natural regeneration.

At present, only a handful of leases have exotic forests, and several have ETS-certified blocks upon them.

Station operators are also wrestling with freshwater regulations requiring stations under 500m altitude to fence waterways, often in places where the benefit would be negligible, and the expense high.

Station operators have been dutiful in identifying their more intensive areas of land use and fencing accordingly, including Todhunter’s own efforts around scenic Lake Heron.

“It is extremely difficult to make such standard rules in what is such a dynamic, ever-changing environment, with floods, landslides and slips all part of that landscape.”

Todhunter attributes the stations’ ability to tread lightly upon the environment as much to their own extensive farming practices, as to the growing tourism market that more stations are tapping into. Visitors are keen to experience the landscape and farming environment and expect operators to be conscious of stepping lightly.

Lake Heron offers extensive tourism activities from heliskiing in winter to the opportunity to bike ride through the farm and enjoy staying in a historic backcountry hut inland from Methven.

“And maybe surprisingly, we are getting a lot of Kiwis keen to come and experience life here, they would be about 40 percent of our visitors at present.”



Mustering at Lake Heron Station, Canterbury