

a year on a Merino property

Merino sheep are bred for their fine, soft wool and New Zealand merino products are world renowned for luxury and quality. These attributes are not added during manufacturing, they come from merino wool's natural characteristics which are in turn influenced by the way the animals are raised on some of New Zealand's toughest, but most beautiful farmland.

Is there a typical Merino farm?

There is no such thing as a typical New Zealand merino farm, although most merinos are found in the South Island in conditions that would challenge other types of stock. Merino properties range from 120 to 40,000 hectares; from flat land to steep mountains and may have as few as 2,000 animals to as many as 20,000. Generally the bigger properties are those near to the Southern Alps where rainfall is higher. These farms are more likely to run a higher ratio of other stock such as cattle and deer, and will have greater numbers of merino wethers (castrated males) which are hardier than breeding ewes.

The further east you go, the drier, smaller and more intensive properties become. They will run fewer, if any, wethers, and are more likely to have invested in irrigation which enables them to provide high quality green feed all year around. These properties may mate some of their ewes to meat-breed rams thus diversifying their income between fine wool and meat.



The farm year

Although merino farms vary greatly in size, altitude and stock numbers, the animal management follows the same seasonal routine.

SPRING: Shearing begins. Lambs are born on 'easy' lower-hill country with good feed supplies and access for the farmer who may need to supply supplements such as hay or silage depending on the season. Meat-breed lambs which have been reared on farm may also be shorn before sale.

SUMMER: During the summer the lambs will be weaned, tailed and drenched if necessary. This is the time of year when sheep can suffer 'fly-strike' so they will be checked regularly. Ewes and wethers will be moved onto 'summer country', generally high altitude, shady blocks which are too cold in the winter.

AUTUMN: Lambs need good quality feed to grow well so they will be kept on the best feed, which is typically on lower blocks of land that can be topdressed and oversown (fertilised and sown in better quality pastures). As autumn progresses, the ewes will come back onto these blocks too so they can be 'flushed' before the rams go out and tupping (mating) occurs.

WINTER: All stock will be shifted onto 'snow-safe' blocks where supplements can be fed out and where they can be reached and shifted quickly if major storms are forecast. These blocks will be at lower altitudes and on the sunny faces of the hills. Once again, the hardier wethers will be placed onto the slightly harsher country.

What about shearing?

Variations in season and nutrition influence merino fibre growth; for example, fibre tends to grow more slowly in winter. These variations mean that the best time to shear is at the end of the winter, when there is about to be a large change in feed which will in turn result in a change in wool quality.

As a rule the ewes will be shorn first, at the end of winter before lambing. The shearers will use a 'cover-comb' which means that a good covering of wool is left on the animals - think a number four haircut instead of a number one! This remaining wool is

sufficient to keep the ewes warm, but as they are cooler than they would be with a full coat on, they will still seek shelter for their lambs. Shorn ewes are placed in sheltered paddocks and given supplementary feed until lambing. Some properties still blade shear – another technique that ensures good wool cover. Hoggets (one to two year old ewes) are shorn next, and finally the wethers.

What else?

Farming is a year-round operation. Sheep need crutching, dagging, drenching and dipping. Old and unsuitable animals must be drafted off and sold, while the ones that produce the best wool are selected and kept. Other stock such as cattle and deer need to be managed, paddocks must be fertilised and oversown, greenfeed crops sown on irrigated land, and hay and silage must be made or bought in. Depending on the size of the property the farming family may do all this work themselves, or they may employ a mix of permanent and seasonal workers.

Tools of the trade

Most farm transport these days is done via a four-wheel drive truck or motor bike, although horses will still be used on some properties, and a lot of time is spent on foot. Mustering is likely to involve contract musterers, each with a team of dogs. To

save time, musterers and their dogs may be taken up to the highest parts of the farm via helicopter; they can then walk down slowly behind their sheep.



Living on a high country farm

Some high country properties are very isolated and children are home schooled or sent to boarding schools. Others are closer to small towns and the children can go to the local primary school. Four-wheel drive vehicles and satellite dishes mean families are less isolated than they used to be; schooling can be done using the internet and so can some shopping. However, most services are still a long way away and an appointment with the bank, accountant or doctor can require a day trip or more.

