

FEATURES

The Yak Track

by Patrick White

Families partner to bring Himalayan herd to Vermont

Photos by Patrick White.



The formation of the Vermont Yak Company uses intensive management grazing, and the yaks are herded back to the barn area each night to increase human interaction and make herd management easier. The member families take pride in having returned animals to this former dairy farm in Waitsfield, Vt.

“Yak are cold hardy, they don’t require as much land as traditional grazing herds and they have a rugged, independent personality. In other words, they’re perfectly suited to Vermont,” says Kate Williams. Yak, which are native to the Himalayas, might be a natural fit in the Green Mountains, but last year there wasn’t a single yak in the state—and only a few in New England. That changed in spring 2008 when Williams, her husband Rob and two other families partnered to form the Vermont Yak Company in Waitsfield and took delivery of a herd of 21 yaks.

“It was just so thrilling to be starting this new venture,” Williams recalls.

While the learning process continues, the success of the Vermont Yak Company is beginning to validate the original vision of its founders.

The idea of bringing yaks to Vermont began when Williams was visiting her brother’s Icelandic sheep ranch in Montana and saw a yak he had recently purchased. “They had just slaughtered another yak and we got to help him sell the meat at a farmers’ market. It was a really fun experience because people really like the meat. And we discovered that we really liked the meat and so did our kids. So, we started thinking on that trip about the idea of bringing yak to Vermont,” she recalls.

The Williams family had experience with vegetable growing and had long been active in the area’s localvore movement, but had no experience with farm animals. They also lacked the land necessary for grazing. “But, we really liked the animals, so we decided to do some serious research explore some different options,” she explains.



Yaks are native to the Himalayas and have proven to be well-suited to the mountains of Vermont.

After considering purchasing the necessary property, they had a fortuitous encounter with Dave Hartshorn, a neighbor and organic vegetable grower who operates Hartshorn's Farmstand in Waitsfield. Hartshorn's family had in the past owned another neighboring farm and he had been talking with the current owners of that farm—Susan and Ted Laskaris—about using the land for grass-fed beef. "When he heard our idea about yak, he immediately thought it was great. So a few weeks later, all three families got together for a dinner," Williams says. "We got some yak meat from my brother and had yak meat five different ways!"

Everyone involved was convinced that they could build a market for the product and make raising yak a profitable enterprise. Thus, the Vermont Yak Company was born. The newly formed, three-family (including five children) LLC next located a "starter herd" in Minnesota, and before long 21 yaks were trucked to Waitsfield. "One neat part of the story was how excited people were to see animals back on this land," says Williams. "The day the yaks arrived, some older farmers from throughout the area came to see them and they thought it was great."

The Vermont Yak Company soon added another seven yaks, purchased from a farm in Massachusetts. "We decided if we were going to do this, we wanted to really do it," says Williams of the quickly expanding the herd. It also helped ensure that there were sufficient animals to provide meat to sell.

Yaks typically are slaughtered at age 2 or 3 years. The group worked with The Royal Butcher in Randolph, Vt., which reported no special challenges in working with its first yak. Six animals were slaughtered last year, producing more than 2,500 pounds of meat, most of which was sold at the Waitsfield Farmers' Market, and some purchased by local restaurants or direct from the farm. "There was a great reception from the local community. We sold completely out last year," says Williams.

There were a couple of important marketing decisions to make prior to selling the meat. For starters, says Williams, "We agonized over our pricing. It's a premium product, so we looked at grass-fed buffalo pricing for guidance. And, we offered a 20 percent localvore discount at the farmers' market. We had our first customer tell us that our prices were too high, but he later came back to tell us he was wrong and loved the meat so much that he bought \$300 worth."

In addition to the other expenses of purchasing and maintaining the herd, the Vermont Yak Company found that the pricing structure needed to cover the cost of an expensive federal stamp. "Yaks are considered an exotic animal, so to get the USDA certification, the slaughter process has to be federally inspected. We paid an arm and a leg for that last year because we thought it was important to have that USDA stamp. It actually cost us more than the slaughter," Williams explains.

The steep fee left the group looking for other options for the second year of sales. “We talked with the people at the state of Vermont meat inspection program and they agreed to put a letter on file so that even if the packaging isn’t stamped, any restaurant or person with questions could see that it’s a federally certified facility that we’re working with. That would eliminate the federal fee.”

Based on its first year successes, the Vermont Yak Company took delivery of 14 more yaks from Montana in May. “There are three more breeding females, but they’re mainly steers—2-year steers and 1-year steers,” says Williams. The farm also welcomed a number of newly born yaks from its existing herd. “We’ve gotten to the point where we’ve got a great herd, with good breeding females,” she adds. Given the success in breeding, aside from perhaps buying an occasional bull or breeder, the farm shouldn’t need to purchase any additional yaks. The short-term goal is to maintain a herd of about 50 to 70 yaks.

The group uses intensive management grazing, with the herd moved to a new pasture area every three days or so “They seem to be growing very well on our grass. We’re learning that they probably fatten up a little more quickly than the yaks in the West,” says Williams. Each night the herd is brought down to a lower pasture near the barn. “We do that mainly just to handle them a little more, and make them less skittish around us,” she adds.

All of those involved with the Vermont Yak Company have day jobs, so they’ve put together a schedule of responsibilities on the farm. For example, the herding of the yak and related duties are divided by morning and afternoon shifts and by day of the week, with all three families contributing. And, each member of the group also contributes their personal expertise, whether in farming or marketing, etc., where appropriate.



Kate Williams stands with “Baby Jane,” one of the yaks that was bottle-fed and now is comfortable with human contact.

In the winter, the yaks stay near the barn and are fed hay. While they remain outside, the former dairy barn has proven to be a perfect place to store hay and includes a covered shelter area on one end that the yaks take advantage of on particularly cold, wet days. In the first winter, the group found that the yaks required about 10 pounds of hay each per day. “And we learned that we need to separate out some feeding stations for the weaker ones, or those lower on the totem pole,” Williams says. “Some were getting more than they needed, while others weren’t getting enough.”

The yak do have a certain feistiness and “spirit” to them. So far, the group has bottle-fed a few newborn yak, and these are much more at ease around people. “We’re talking about perhaps bottle feeding more, because then we would have a herd that we could handle a little easier. Right now, it’s challenging to worm them or to do the hooves,” says Williams. Having a more compliant herd

would also open up the possibility of combing out the yaks for fiber production, something she says that local weaving and spinning community has been eagerly asking about. Vermont Yak Company has enlisted Stowe large animal vet David Sequist for periodic assistance. "He's been very helpful, and answers many of our questions over the phone. He's been very interested in the yaks."

There have been learning moments for the Vermont Yak Company. The first—after Williams' young son was "flipped over" by one of the yaks—was to develop a high respect for the yaks when herding them. "We always carry a large stick now. We've never had to use it, but it makes us a little more intimidating to the animals," she explains. Also, the first herd of animals arrived in spring and some were already pregnant (the gestation period is eight and a half months). So, one of the baby yaks was born in cold, wet November and wasn't able to survive in the early winter weather. In the future, the farm plans to separate the bulls from the rest of the herd from November until early July to ensure that births occur the following spring.

Williams credits the International Yak Association (www.iyak.org) as having been a terrific source of information. Other yak farmers have also readily shared guidance and experiences. "It's a very small community—there are only about 4,000 yaks in the country. The vast majority are in the Rocky Mountains and the West. There are yak experts out in Montana and they're very helpful. Anytime we call with questions they call us right back," she says. "We've learned so much already and it's been an unbelievable experience."

Yak Facts

Yaks (*Bos grunniens*), a member of the bovine family, have handlebar horns, shoulder humps, horse-like tails and long hairy skirts hanging nearly to the ground. Yaks are divided into the following categories:

1. Imperial: black with a black nose.
2. Black: black with a gray nose.
3. Trim: black with white trim, usually on the forehead, feet and tip of tail.
4. Royal: black and white (similar to Holstein markings).
5. 5 Golden: dun coloring over black
6. Woolly: longer and thicker hair coat

Source: International Yak Association (www.iyak.org).

Patrick White is a freelance writer and editor who is always on the lookout for interesting and unusual stories.

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