

Hardy Herefords hold undisputed domain over other breeds in the often harsh conditions encountered on the Alpine grazing areas in Victoria.

At least 95 per cent of the cattle which roam the unfenced wilderness of the High Plains are Herefords. The remainder carry a Shorthorn cross, a relic of the original herds of Beef Shorthorns which were predominant at the turn of the century.

It's tough country where toughness and hardiness in cattle and men are needed.

People like Mr John Soutter, owner of the Benambra Hereford stud have the outlook of the High Plains cattlemen which enables them to cope.

They know their country and their cattle and his advice to an owner taking stock to the Omeo Benambra-Ensay weaner sales sums it up.

"You can't sell those creamy red cattle up here. They must be big framed cherry reds. It is the toughness and hardiness the buyers seem to be looking for and the Hereford is the only one that can provide that up here," he said.

The weaner sales in mid-March and the grown cattle sales a month later have merged into the tradition of the area since the late 1940s when road transport offered an alternative to droving the mobs 100 miles south to Bairnsdale.

The three neighboring districts in East Gippsland nestle in the foothills of the Dargo and Bogong High Plains.

Cattle breeding in these parts is unique. They depend on the summer grazing of snow lease country, which conserves the pastures of the lower freehold country for over-wintering.

The snow leases, or alpine agistment rights, allow the high plains cattlemen to run between 250 to 500 breeding cows depending on the size of the leases which are unfenced allocations drawn on maps of the high plains and alpine regions. They are never traded, but passed down through the families.

Usually two to five neighboring cattlemen join forces to muster and tend their cattle in one big herd, which is confined only by valleys and escarpments.

Cows, calves and replacement heifers, but no bulls, are driven from the freehold properties to the snow leases during November. The distances covered range from 10 to 30 miles and take two to three days.

The Soil Conservation Authority, which controls the leases checks counts, ear-marks and brands.

During summer, a cattleman might check his stock once a month, camping in a bush hut for three to five days at a time.

Salt blocks or licks left near the mustering yards are an invaluable mustering aid for cattle grazing the mineral-deficient slopes.

The big musters begin in late February, and are timed for the the mid-March calf sales.

The rest of the cattle are returned to the freehold properties where older cows, cull cows, and grown steers not suitable for the previous year's calf sale are drafted off for the grown cattle sales.



John Soutter ... It's toughness and hardiness that buyers seem to be looking for, and the Hereford is the only breed that can provide it up here.



Bruce Commins ... fears that the phasing out of snow country leases by 1988 is the thin edge of the wedge.



Peter Faithfull of Omeo says heifers need an extra year to develop in the High Plains.

## Herefords, High Plains — and hopes

By BRIAN CLANCY

Over the past 20 years the trend has been away from grown cattle to the weaner sales, this is due mainly to effect transport savings for buyers.

Fewer-older steers on the leases mean more breeding cows can be run.

All cattle on returning from the leases are drenched for worms and fluke. Drenching is repeated in mid-winter and before cattle are returned to the leases.

Cows are calved down in June-July and re-mated from September to November. Heifers are mated to calve at three years.

Mr Peter Faithfull of Omeo, says heifers need the extra year to become used to the often harsh conditions, which include a lot of walking, hill climbing and droving.

The bloodlines of the Hereford bulls are relatively diverse with Lowanna, Tawonga and the local Cobungra stud among the more prominent.

Lines from further afield like Ardne or Yarram Park are not uncommon.

Despite the seemingly clockwork existence of the Omeo mountain cattle, the calf sales are under threat for two reasons.

East Gippsland's three-year drought, which has only just ended, cut deeply into incomes and stock condition. This year, calf sales of 8000 were down on the peak of 10,000 two years ago.

Some cattlemen, like the Faithfulls had to agist their entire breeding herd last winter in other parts of Victoria.

Second, but more seriously the existence of snow lease grazing is threatened by the controversy over claims that cattle are destroying the natural ecology of the Alps.

On one side, conservationists want cattle removed from the hills, and the Alps made into a big National Park, like that at Kosciusko. They say that since cattle were excluded from Australia's highest pinnacle regenerated wild flowers have become a major tourist attraction there.

The cattlemen, and their 100 member Mountain District Cattlemen's Associa-

tion think otherwise, arguing that cattle only graze the snow grasses and keep fire risks down to a minimum.

The debate has raged for years. It culminated with the recommendations of the Victorian Land Conservation Council in 1979. Diplomatically, the LCC trod the middle ground, outlining the benefits of cattle grazing, although taking heed of the conservationists reference to 'sensitive' alpine regions.

The LCC later received Government endorsement, for a proposal that all grazing above 1200 metres should be phased out before 1988.

This recommendation will affect only the higher snow lease country. It will mean the end of grazing leases for likes of the Kellys and Fitzgeralds who agist

on the upper levels of the Bogong High Plains.

They are naturally angry and hope for a Government reversal of the decision, or at the worst, compensation, so they can look for alternative farming land.

Mr Bruce Commins, of Ensay, whose family run cattle on the unaffected Nonning country, says local people fear it is the 'thin end of the wedge'.

In the short-term, there is a feeling that the Kellys and Fitzgeralds were 'political sacrifices'.

If it is the 'thin end' and the recommendation for 1200 metres is gradually lowered, the supply of the traditional calves will be a thing of the past, as the farmers will have to change their freeholds into other forms of cattle management and sheep, although they are even under greater threat from wild dogs and dingoes.



### Toolangatta Hereford Stud

"BRED RIGHT TO BREED RIGHT"

SIRES IN USE:

- BEXLEY CORRECT S. Bexley Constant 2 D. Bexley Cup Day 52
- BEXLEY AFFLECK S. Midgeon Taylor D. Cuppa Doreen 276
- CUPPA ALFREDO S. Malabar Flavius D. Cuppa Princess 8
- BEVERLEY JOLYON S. Beverley Catto D. Bexley Leonie 77  
Watch for our Teams at Gloucester and Glen Innes.

ENQUIRIES: J. & E. DONOGHUE

"TOOLANGATTA" TAMBAR SPRINGS

TEL.: PREMIER 55U

**EMU HOLES & EMU HILLS**  
Hereford & Poll Hereford Annual  
Bull Sale  
Performance Tested Bulls to be held at  
EMU HILLS STATION YARDS,  
QUIRINDI, NSW