



Spotlight

Cycle of Wool workshop series Thurso

March 2025



In the far north of Scotland, humans are outnumbered by sheep. For the 25,000 people residing in Caithness, we have almost 125,000 sheep. Our local farmers struggle to find uses for all the wool this produces every year, while selling fleeces to the British Wool Marketing Board has become simply unprofitable for them. As a result, this amazing local natural resource often sadly goes to waste.

Background

We find it especially heart-breaking to watch local wool wasted because this fantastic material indeed has great potential for circularity as a 100% biodegradable, renewable and sustainable resource.

We are grateful that being part of the Highland Community Waste Partnership enabled us to accomplish a lot of work to demonstrate to our community that we can find new applications for sheep's wool in both domestic and commercial settings.



Our project

Our aim was to celebrate and reignite the popularity of heritage crafts of the Highlands on a cottage industry level. That is why we created the Cycle of Wool - a series of workshops designed to provide a complete set of skills necessary to create products from sheep wool. We also carried out work to demonstrate how fleece of any grade can find an application, for example wool not suitable for crafting is perfect for use in garden and house improvement projects. Long-term the mission of this project is to strengthen our local economy, create more job opportunities and improve mental well-being for members of our community by offering training in slow crafting.

Crafting workshops

Here in Caithness, we are fortunate to have many incredibly talented crafters and artists. We invited a few of them to be instructors for our Cycle of Wool workshops so that they could share their wealth of knowledge and skills.

The Cycle of Wool workshops were designed to align with the sequence of processing sheep wool, so that attending all of them would provide an individual with a full set of skills and knowledge to transform raw sheep fleece into a ready-to-use product. At the same time, each session was a stand-alone event where attendees were provided with all required information and materials. We wanted to demonstrate that each process could be relatively easy and suitable for complete beginners and give confidence to people wishing to explore it further. As part of each workshop we also made sure to signpost attendees to further in-depth learning or local crafting groups they could join.

The first workshop in the series was on **Fleece Cleaning and Prepping**. For this event, we collaborated with [Highland Wool CIC](#), located at Hirsell Farm in Ardgay. Our participants had a chance to learn how to skirt, grade, clean, wash, dry, fluff and card the wool. We also had a chance to hear out about the farm's innovative work on creating water filtering systems to enable them to reuse the water used to wash the wool.

In the next workshop we went on a **Foraging Walk** in search of natural dyes for fibres, led by our local foraging expert Amanda Greig Williamson from [Natures Path Natural Ways](#). We learnt about using common plants like nettles, cleavers, cow parsley or docks for dyeing fabric - they are abundant and valuable resource that many of us were unaware of.

The subsequent workshop, from amazing instructor Garance Warburton, was called '**Store cupboard staple dyeing and a bit of colour fun**' was on dyeing fabric using natural dyes. We experimented with natural and easily accessible dyes that most of us can find at our cupboards or forage for in our local area, including turmeric powder, coffee grounds, onion shells and black beans - almost 50% of our dyes were repurposed food waste.

We saw how results varied from fibre to fibre, from mordant to mordant. Most impressive and unexpected were the results from black bean dye, where we achieved most stunning shades of magenta, blue and grey!

Once wool is processed and carded (and dyed if desired) it can be used for the most ancient method of using the sheep wool – **Wet Felting**. We delivered a number of workshops where we made wet felted slippers. By simply wrapping the wool around your feet, putting wellies on, pouring warm soapy water inside and going for a short walk, you can make a pair of wonderful slippers or welly socks. One great advantage of wet felted product is how easily it can be repaired – any hole or damage can be mended by adding more wool fibres.



Further along our Cycle of Wool series, members of Caithness and Far North Spinning Group taught us how to spin wool. **Spinning** is also great training for coordination and concentration as hands and feet move in different patterns and at different speeds. You must be in control of the wheel motion, its speed and direction, while concentrating on feeding wool and creating correct tension and thickness of thread. Like all slow crafts, spinning is highly therapeutic and is a wonderful way to improve mental wellbeing. This is how you turn carded wool into yarn. We are delighted to mention that most of the wool used at the workshops came from the sheep that live just over the fence from our instructors and was prepped and carded by them.

Once wool has been spun into yarn, it can be turned into a final product by means of **knitting, crocheting, weaving and sewing** - we delivered training courses in all of these techniques. Our weaving instructors, Terry and Sara-Jane Hardy provided our students with in-depth training on the process of weaving, including a history and overview of different types of looms. After theory, our students proceeded to try their hand at weaving on various types of looms. They had a chance to choose from a range of locally-sourced yarns and learn how to combine warp and weft.



Our comprehensive sewing, crocheting and knitting training courses were a huge success. Each of them consisted of several sessions (12-14 hours in total) and were so overbooked that we had to open extra groups for some of them! Suitable for both children and adults, we loved to see how at times three generations of the family were coming together to our classes. During these courses, attendees learnt not only how to make a brand new product but also how to alter, repair and repurpose their existing garments. They also learned how to read and adjust patterns.

Following on from the sewing course, some attendees sought funding to carry on with their training to a more advanced level. As our knitting course drew to a close, most of our knitters joined the local knitting club and now regularly attend their sessions to perfect their skills.

Overall, 105 people received training as part of our Cycle of Wool crafting workshops and courses.

Other uses

Only around 30-50% of fleece is of high enough quality to be used for crafting projects. However, there are also many, versatile, uses for lower grade sheep wool, as we discovered [here](#), that we were keen to share with our community. To this end, we teamed up with local community-run green spaces to run a number of trials with wool kindly donated by our local farmers and crofters.

Bed mulching at Thurso Grows Community Gardens

We trialled using fleece as mulch in raised beds, for over winter, to protect the soil and for tree circles in the young orchard. We laid the wool in November 2024, and our biggest concern was that the wool could be easily blown away. We trialled several ways of laying out wool to see which would hold best, and we discovered that fleece did not require any additional help to stay on soil - it felted very quickly with the frequent Thurso rain, and to date, after multiple storms, our wool mulch is still in place.



Path Lining & Sapling Protection at Dunnet Community Forest

[Dunnet Forest](#) can become very wet and muddy during the winter months and volunteers struggle to keep the paths walkable using woodchip produced on site. This eventually sinks into the mud, requiring the process to be repeated again and again.

We selected a segment on a popular path that is particularly prone to getting wet over the rainy season to experiment with. We dug up a shallow trench – about 15 cm deep, and placed a wooden framework around the edges. Then we filled the trench with sheep fleece of lowest grade, compacted the wool and *then* backfilled the segment with woodchip.

After four months, over winter 2024-25, the results are amazing – this stretch of the path remained dry and undamaged, despite bad storms and lots of traffic, from both pedestrian visitors and the Dunnet Forrest buggies that use the path. By comparison, similar stretches of the path that were not lined with the wool became virtually unusable very quickly. As a result Dunnet Community Forest are planning to scale up the use of sheep fleeces along all their paths and a further trial with our local RSPB site in [Forsinard Flows](#) is also scheduled for autumn 2025.

Finally, we have also successfully used fleece to protect **oak saplings** that were planted in Autumn 2024 from inclement weather and pests.

Overall, we diverted around 200 fleeces from landfill through these projects.

For more information, visit: www.thursocdt.co.uk/save-sheep-wool

The Highland Community Waste Partnership (2022-2025)

Funded by The National Lottery Climate Action Fund, and coordinated by Keep Scotland Beautiful, the Highland Community Waste Partnership (HCWP) brought together eight community groups in the Highlands to reduce waste and promote more sustainable consumption.

Learn more here: www.keeptscotlandbeautiful.org/highlandcommunitywaste