

“Goat-Like” Sheep Breed Good For Tough Conditions

Although the Scottish Blackface is the most numerous sheep breed in the British Isles, there are only small numbers in North America which makes it more of a unique “heritage” breed.

They are very distinctive looking, with large curled horns and a roman nose. The horns are similar to the wild Big Horn Sheep’s and they produce a coarse, long wool fleece.

The Scottish Blackface is raised here mainly for meat, but the wool is good for carpets and rugs. In the U.K., it is valuable for making into “tweed” fabric. The meat has a nice, mellow taste.

“These sheep have a good, hard, black hoof that takes basically no maintenance,” says Ron Bowick, a Canadian breeder. “That’s a big plus, especially on my type of peatland pasture. I almost never have to trim any hooves.”

According to the Barrhead, Alberta man, these sheep are in demand with stock dog trainers because people who compete at stock dog trials have had their dogs completely shut down when these sheep have been used in competitions. The dogs aren’t expecting, or used to, such aggressive sheep, and have been sent flying.

“This breed is very tough, with goat-like foraging habits. Because of their aggressiveness with predators, they have a reputation for having ‘bad attitudes,’ but they are exceptional mothers and can survive harsh conditions thriving on poor quality forage,” he explains.

“They are tougher when it comes to most ailments and recover on their own more easily,” he explains. “Problems have to be fairly severe before you can even tell that there are any. For example, they won’t even limp until they’ve practically lost a toe. They also have a higher resistance to intestinal worms.”

Bowick believes he may have the largest



Scottish Blackface sheep have goat-like foraging habits and produce a coarse, long wool fleece, says Canadian breeder Ron Bowick.

herd of this breed in North America, with 105 females. He doesn’t think there are even 1,000 in all of Canada.

Both the ewe and ram have horns, but the ewes’ curve into a “C” shape, while the rams’ develop a full curl. Bowick has a ram with 37-in. horns measured from the base to the end of the curve.

He once had someone contact him looking for sheep with big enough horns that they would be suitable for his hunting preserve, but Bowick didn’t have any that were old

enough at the time.

Bowick sells 20 sheep per year for breeding stock, with animals going to Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and B.C., to date.

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Dave and Mary Falk developed this hardy breed of dairy sheep that thrives on grass with no grain.

Sheep Bred For Grass-Based Dairy

Milking sheep in northern Wisconsin requires a special kind of sheep, says Mary Falk. Falk, with her husband Dave, has been developing a hardy breed of dairy sheep that thrives on grass with no grain.

“We’ve been working on our sheep breed for 20 generations now,” she says. “At first we were aiming for the organic lamb market so we started with Romney Marsh, Dorset Horn, Finnsheep and Clun Forest blood lines.”

Along the way, the Falks took a detour when they were exposed to the idea of milking sheep. Ten years later, they now operate a milking sheep herd and market organic, aged sheep cheese.

“Our ewes don’t produce as much milk as Friesians (the Holstein of milking sheep), but we have a much higher butterfat, and our sheep are much more hardy,” says Falk. “We average about 3 lbs. of milk per day on twice-a-day milking for about 220 days. However, the milk averages 7.5 percent butterfat.”

That butterfat is ideal for making high-quality cheese that the Falks make right on the farm. They have won numerous industry awards over the years, and their cheese has been featured in national publications and radio interviews.

Falk insists that key to success of their breeding flock and the quality cheese they make is the fact that the flock is totally grass fed, no grain. The hardness they have bred in means the only night of the year they are inside is the night they lamb. That also reduces overhead for buildings and expenses for producing or purchasing organic grain.

Market lambs are sold privately for \$1.75/lb. live weight plus processing, mostly to cheese customers. The Falks haul them to a USDA-inspected meat processor where the lamb is dry aged, European style, for two to three weeks.

“The meat is like velvet when you eat it,” she says. “Lamb is like cheese; as it ages, it changes texture and flavor. The flavor is concentrated when you take out the water, and because the lambs are slaughtered at 75 to 89 lbs., there is less connective tissue.”

While they keep the highest production ewe lambs for their milking flock, they don’t need many. Having bred for hardness, they have ewes in their milking flock as old as 14 years. Replacement ewes, depending on their production genetics, sell for \$475 to \$1,000 each. The high-end price is for only the highest production potential and selected ram lambs.

An unexpected feature of the selection process has been the wool fleece. While not selected for their wool, the flock produces a 4 to 5-in. length, very fine fiber wool with a high staple count and a luster similar to Shetland sheep.

“We sell the best wool to spinners and all the tags, belly wool and wool with burs in it for use as mulch around plants,” says Falk. “My cheese customers at the farmers’ market claim it keeps the rabbits and squirrels away from their gardens and potted plants.”

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Rare Soay Sheep Look Like Small Deer

Soay sheep are a rare domestic breed with distinctive, primitive looks that give them an exotic look. Almost deer-like in appearance and behavior, they are small. Ewes average 45 to 55 pounds and rams between 60 and 85 pounds.

Soays seldom grow over 24 in. at the shoulder and their bodies and hips are narrower than the more modern breeds. Their size makes them easy to handle, although they are generally shy, aloof and wary, especially the ewes.

“They resemble small antelope or deer with fleeces that may be blonde, fawn, shades of brown, or black,” says Nancy Hibbing, secretary/treasurer of Soays of America, Inc., a group dedicated to conserving, promoting and registering the breed.

“Most Soay sheep have light markings on the belly, rump, over the eyes and under the tail and jaw. There may also be white markings on the face, poll and lower legs. Like antelope, these graceful sheep sprint-jump on all fours when frightened or feeling frisky. There are thought to be less than 500 pure Soay in North America, and only about 2,500 throughout the world.”

The Soay’s face is “dished”, and rams have well-developed, full-curl horns and often a striking mane of long, darker hair that gives an elegant appearance. Ewes can be either horned, scurred, or polled.

The breed originated on two small islands, Soay and Hirta, off the west coast of Scotland. Here, they have been feral for at least a thousand years. Soay sheep are believed to be the ancestors of the first domestic sheep. It is believed they were first imported to North America (Canada) in 1970.

“Soay sheep are hardy, disease-resistant, and manage on more meager pastures,” says Hibbing. “In fact, they actually improve pastures by consuming Scotchbroom, berry vines, and woody plants as well as grass. They shouldn’t, however, have access to rhododendrons or azaleas which are toxic to them.”



Exotic Soay sheep are a rare breed that don’t need shearing or tail docking.

Soays lamb easily (twinning is common), they require minimal hoof care and don’t need shearing or tail docking. They shed their wool in spring so it can be collected just before shedding by either plucking or shearing.

Although Soays are considered a hair breed, their wool has two types - “hairy” with coarse guard hairs typical of double-coated more primitive sheep - and “woolly”, with more of the soft downy wool that can be separated out and used by hand spinners. Some fleeces have been compared to musk ox “quiviut”.

Soay meat is mild, low in cholesterol, and similar in flavor to elk.

A starter flock of two to four ewes and a ram can sometimes be purchased for as little as \$1,000, according to Hibbing.

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