

## 1,200-Year Old Sheep Breed Still Going Strong

Icelandic sheep are one of the oldest sheep breeds in the world. They have been bred with no outside bloodlines for around 1,200 years. Introduced to Canada in the late 1980's, they made it to the U.S. in the early 1990's. Their meat and wool quality, combined with good mothering, make them a great choice for small flocks.

"When I considered breeding sheep, I was dismayed at the demeanor of a lot of sheep, as they aren't terribly smart," says Elaine Clark, president, Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America and owner of one of the oldest flocks in the U.S. "The Icelandic sheep seemed more intelligent. They are one of the more primitive breeds, along with Jacobs and Shetland. They haven't changed much over the centuries."

Icelandics are considered a mountain breed. Historically, such a breed's meat is milder in flavor than lowland breeds.

Clark suggests the pure bloodlines going back so long makes the rams excellent terminal crosses with other breeds.

"Because they are so unrelated to conventional breeds, they bring a lot of hybrid vigor to the cross for excellent meat production," says Clark.

Even purebred Icelandics are good meat producers. She has butchered ram lambs fattened on grass and their mothers' milk at 5 to 6 months of age and had them dress out at 35 to 40 lbs. She says the pelts at that

age are very valuable.

Icelandic ewes are described as good mothers, producing high quality milk and usually producing twins. A gene in the breed causes multiple births. If the ewe has 2 copies of the gene, it can lead to triplets, quads, quints and even sextuplets. A single gene increases the rate of triplets.

Some breeders will expose ewe lambs to rams, although most wait for the following breeding season. Once they start, they usually continue to breed until 10 years of age and some continue to 12 to 14 years.

Ewes are seasonal breeders, beginning in October and continuing to cycle until bred. Rams are active year round and can start breeding at 5 to 6 mos. of age.

The lambs are very vigorous, usually up and nursing within 5 min. of birth, one reason Clark thinks they are seldom abandoned by the mother.

"Icelandics don't require grain if they have access to good pasture or high quality hay," says Clark.

She notes that they are good browsers, cleaning up brambles and shrubs as well as grass. They are also good wool producers, generally being sheared twice a year. Their wool is usually a mix of black, brown and white in solid patterns or shades. Spotting often occurs on top of other patterns.

"They have a 'wool break' in the spring before lambing," says Clark. "You can pull



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away most of the wool, but it won't be as clean as shearing. Most breeders shear before or after lambing."

Clark says the spring wool clip is often used for felting, while the heavier fall wool clip is a higher quality and in demand from spinners.

"Icelandic fall fleeces are dual-coated and typically weigh from 4 to 6 lbs.," says Clark. "However, because they don't have a lot of lanolin, the wool loses only 20 percent of its weight when washed, compared to other breeds that will lose 50 percent."

Clark describes the Icelandics as fine boned with a strong meat-to-bone ratio. Ewes run 140 to 160 lbs., while rams reach 175 to 200 lbs. With the exception of breeding season, she describes her rams as very easy to work with.

"Aggression is an inherited trait, and any

animal that is aggressive ends up in the freezer," says Clark. "There is no reason to keep a sheep that isn't easy to handle."

Those that are kept can range in price from \$150 each to as much as \$1,000, says Clark. "The price for an animal depends on its bloodlines and age," she says. "A newly bred ewe will be priced significantly different from one that is 3 to 4 years old and a proven breeder."

She notes that the reputation and number of years in the breed can also make a difference. "We have a good reputation and have been breeding Icelandics for 23 years," she says. "Our breeding stock hold their price."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Elaine Clark, P.O. Box 54, Limerick, Maine 04048 (ph 207 793-4640; frelsi@roadrunner.com; www.isbona.com).



**Almost extinct in the late 1900's, the Florida Cracker Sheep breed is once again growing in numbers. Fairmeadows Farm has about 200 ewes and actively supports the breed.**

## "Cracker" Sheep Making A Comeback

The Florida Cracker Sheep breed, close to extinct in the late 1900's, is once again growing in numbers across that state. Carol Postley, owner of Fairmeadows Farm in Ocala, Fla., has about 200 ewes and actively supports the breed through membership in the Florida Cracker Sheep Association.

Postley says "Crackers are extremely easy to raise because you don't need lambing pens. They can be raised without doctoring and they're resistant to parasites, which hamper most other breeds in our warm climate. There's a lot of interest in Crackers by organic farmers and people who want to live off the land on a small acreage and raise their own food and animals."

Postley says she hasn't assisted a single one of her Cracker ewes with lambing. "The ewes go off alone to have their babies and bond with their lambs. The mommas will be grazing with the lambs nearby and when one makes a sound, her lamb or lambs come running. It's amazing to see."

Mature Cracker sheep are extremely tough, withstanding heat, humidity and even hurricanes. "When Hurricane Irma came through our area in the fall of 2017, I left my flock out in the pasture and the 100 mph wind and 15 in. of rain didn't bother them a bit," says Postley. "They found a place to bed down and just weathered it out."

Crackers are descendants of animals that were brought to St. Augustine by the Spanish in 1565, then abandoned 20 years later when the settlers were forced off their land. Those remaining animals and their offspring adapted to Florida's heat, humidity, hurricanes, wildfires and tropical storms for nearly 300 years, enduring predators such as alligators, bobcats, feral pigs, panthers and black buzzards. In the late 1800's a Florida ranch family established a flock of Cracker sheep, and other ranch families gradually joined in. A small breed lineage was eventually established and is now documented by the Florida Cracker Sheep Association.

"I've had Katahdin, Wiltshire and Native Cracker sheep for nearly 30 years and the Crackers are by far the easiest to raise," Postley says. Although their coarse wool isn't very valuable, the breed has excellent meat qualities to go along with its parasite resistance and easy demeanor. "We're making progress selecting for growth and carcass conformation. They're a breed that can thrive without medication even with year-around parasite challenges," Postley adds.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Fairmeadows Farm, 9250 West 60th Ave., Ocala, Fla. 34482 (ph 352 216-4571; www.fairmeadowssheepfarm.com; julayne@mfi.net).



**Cackellac Shelter has a lift mechanism at each corner, making it easy for one person to push the shelter ahead onto new pasture.**

## Cackellac Chicken Shelters

With a Cackellac Shelter one person can move 100 chickens on pasture in a few minutes.

"In general we tried to design it so it's more user-friendly, and we want to keep it light, strong and functional," says David Weber about the portable poultry shelters he makes and sells. With optional accessories, such as water reservoirs and automatic waterers, they are "the closest thing to turnkey pasture poultry management."

After using heavy wood shelters for several years, Canadian poultry growers started experimenting with aluminum tubing, making them tall enough for a person to stand up inside. By 2010, other producers were asking him if he would build them shelters. He modified his design to create panels that can be shipped by truck. The steel and aluminum tubing frames are covered on the ends with welded wire mesh on the bottom, then hot-dipped to galvanize it. The tops of the ends are polycarbonate panels. Woven UV-stabilized polyethylene covers the top and sides and is secured with ratchet straps. To control ventilation, the cover has a 2-ft. flap next to the ground that can be raised.

"There is a lift mechanism at each corner," Weber says. That makes it easy for one person to push the larger 500-lb. shelter ahead for the birds to be on new pasture. Once each corner is lifted, the 15-in. foam-filled tires move the shelter easily. The smaller 150-lb. model has two wheels and can also be

moved easily by one person. Chickens adapt quickly to walking with the shelter as it is slowly moved. Once in place, the corners are set back down and anchors secured to hold it in place.

"There is flexibility that allow the ends to twist for corners with low spots," Weber says, noting the shelters withstand most winds when properly anchored. He offers a screw anchor option for added protection in high-wind regions and where the soil is soft from rain.

"The shelters are ideal for meat birds, but they can be adapted for layers," Weber says. In his region, he secures the shelter to use during the winter, and he sells optional kits to close off the ends. Most customers, however, use the shelters in the summer and then leave them idle for the winter or use them for storage.

The shelters retail for \$2,895 (Canadian) for the large 1312 model (100 chickens) and \$1,295 (Canadian) for the 812 model (40 chickens).

Weber sells them direct and through dealers in Canada. He is interested in expanding into the region from Illinois to Northeast U.S. where he has available trucking, and he invites interested dealers to contact him.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, David Weber, 1230 Bruce Rd. 11, Paisley, Ont. Canada N0G 2N0 (ph 519 353-4113).