

# Valais Blacknose Sheep Gaining Popularity

Known online as “the cutest sheep in the world,” the Valais Blacknose looks almost like a stuffed animal. But looks can be deceiving, as the hardy sheep have been valued in Switzerland for generations as a dual-purpose breed. Not only are the sheep stocky and well-built, but their wool is also highly valued for use in carpets and felting. It’s light on lanolin, washes white and quickly picks up dyes.

The breed hails from the Valais region of Switzerland, dating back to at least the 1400s. It’s evolved to tolerate the steep grazing land and harsh mountain conditions. As their name implies, Blacknose sheep have black noses, along with black eyes, ears, knees and feet. Paired with their naturally light coats, the contrast earns attention. Both sexes have large spiral-shaped horns. Unlike most sheep, they breed throughout the year rather than seasonally.

Today’s blacknose sheep might be descendants of a breed from pre-Roman times, known only by its skeletal remains. The alpine valleys of Switzerland created a closed environment for the breed to thrive without dilution. At times, that’s been considered a downside.

In 1884, Valais authorities attempted to cross the breed with the Australian Southdown Sheep. Unfortunately for the

breeding effort, the resulting offspring were considered inferior to their genetic predecessors in terms of meat and wool production. The bloodline was restored, and the breed gained official recognition in 1962.

The Swiss Government prohibited raising the Valais Blacknose outside its borders until 2014, when select breeders in the United Kingdom and New Zealand were allowed access to the breeding stock. While Switzerland has closed down trade again, the United States Department of Agriculture has been working to import semen and embryos in hopes of establishing a robust U.S. population that meets the Swiss standards of selection.

It’s a careful process that can take several generations of sheep to earn the title of “pure-bred” Valais Blacknose. These ewes can sell for \$18,000 or more, making theft a genuine concern for U.S. livestock farmers. But for the Swiss, another threat looms larger—wolves are making a comeback and can devastate a flock.

U.S. livestock enthusiasts can connect with the Valais Blacknose Sheep Society (VBSS). Established in 2017, VBSS maintains a registry of all Valais Blacknose Sheep bred according to the society’s registration rules in the United States. These rules aim to preserve the long-term integrity of the breed within



Photo courtesy of valaisblacknosesheepsociety.org

**The Swiss Government prohibited raising the Valais Blacknose outside its borders until 2014, when select breeders in the United Kingdom and New Zealand were allowed access to the breeding stock.**

the constraints of limited semen imports and strict international regulations.

In this way, the society promotes the selection of desirable traits within each generation to create a sustainable population that meets the standard for an “American

Purebred.”

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Photo courtesy of Anna Clark

Anna Clark uses hides from her yak farm to make moccasins and mukluks.

## Crafter Makes Moccasins And Mukluks

By Carolyn White

Anna Clark and her husband, Kelly, of McCall, Idaho, raise yak on their ranch, the Rock’n K Bar C. Wanting to make good use of the hides, Anna—an experienced crafter—decided to try her hand at mukluks, the soft boots worn by Arctic Indigenous peoples, as well as Native American moccasins.

She looked up a professional tanner and

shipped the raw yak hides to him. It didn’t work well.

“The leather he returned was too soft and not skived properly, meaning it wasn’t uniform in thickness,” Anna says.

She cut it into round coasters, stitched fabric onto one side, and gave most of them away as gifts.

A second tanner, who specialized in exotic leather, returned a much better product.

Anna started with moccasins, which have lower tops than mukluks. The pattern was passed down from her father, who had received it as a gift from an old cobbler in New York.

After cutting the pieces, Anna assembled them using her heavy-duty Chandler “patch” sewing machine.

“It can sew into small places, and the top foot rotates 360 degrees. It’s an extremely handy machine,” she says.

Linen thread was used for hand-sewing around the toes and heels. Some of her moccasins were lined with sheepskin, and others were not. She added a crepe sole for good traction in the snow.

“Crepe is a natural rubber that’s very flexible and comes in different thicknesses and colors. This makes them more wearable outside.”

For a more traditional moccasin feel, Anna applies a type of liquid rubber, similar to Shoe Goo, over the bottom of the moccasins for waterproofing. For traction, she mixes it with a little bit of clean sand. As the soles wear out, she applies more to add longevity.

The mukluks were more challenging. Anna didn’t have a pattern, so she had to create one. She used heavy paper and traced around her own feet with a black magic marker, adding seam allowances for felt inserts.

Mukluks are traditionally made from cari-

bou or seal skin, hand-sewn with sinew, and lined with fur for warmth. Anna’s versions are created entirely on her patch machine.

“I use cork for the insoles. It’s lightweight, conforms to the foot, and is a great insulator from the cold. Usually, when your feet get cold, it’s coming up through the ground.”

For the sole, she adds a 1/4-in. thickness of crepe to the mukluks. She comes up an inch on the sides with a 1/8-inch. thickness of crepe to waterproof.

Polar fleece is sewn to the insides of the mukluks. Additionally, they have a heavy, removable wool-felt lining.

“That way, when it’s not super cold outside, you can pull it out, so your feet won’t overheat,” Anna explains.

“In McCall, known for its winter temperatures of 30 below zero and an average snowfall of 138 in., warm and dry footwear is a must. My mukluks work great. They’re so much lighter and more comfortable than my packer boots. I wear them to the grocery store, to walk to the mailbox, to feed the yaks, and when snowmobiling. They’re the best when you’re standing at the winter carnival watching the parade because, with the cork and the felt liner, you don’t feel anything come through.”

Prices start at \$200, and shipping is to U.S. addresses only.

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