

= Hog Island sheep =

Hog Island sheep are a breed of sheep descended from animals first brought to Virginia 's Hog Island in the 18th century . During the 1930s and 1940s , storm conditions forced the island 's residents to evacuate , leaving some sheep behind . These sheep adapted to the environment free of human intervention , becoming feral .

The breed is preserved by various organizations because of its relevance to American history and its resemblance to historical American sheep . It also possesses some traits that have been somewhat lost in more modern breeds .

= = Breed characteristics = =

The Hog Island sheep is a feral breed , descended from sheep abandoned on Hog Island in the 1930s and 1940s . It is believed that the breed was descended from the Merino breed , among others , possibly the Improved Leicester or other English breeds . The sheep is relatively small but tough and hardy . Rams weigh on average 125 pounds (57 kg) and ewes 90 pounds (41 kg) . Lambs are born with spotted or speckled fleece ; about 90 % of adults have white fleece and 10 % black . Both males and females can have horns , and about half the total population do .

The Hog Island sheep is not commonly used in modern agriculture , largely because of its endangered status and because more modern breeds have been bred for other characteristics , including maximum size and fleece yield . It is nevertheless considered important to preserve because of the insight it may give into American history and the traits it has that modern sheep might lack such as its toughness , foraging skill , efficient use of food , and easy lambing .

= = History = =

Hog Island was colonized in the 17th century . The sheep that colonists would have been using at the time would have been the contemporary English breeds , but Merinos were known to roam the barrier islands , taken there by Spanish ships that wrecked and let the sheep loose . The colonists would have used some combination of these sheep in their flocks .

As an island , Hog Island had open space and lacked predators , therefore the colonists allowed their livestock to roam free , rounding them up only to mark them or to use them for meat or wool . In 1933 a hurricane destroyed most of the island ; the inhabitants abandoned the settled areas and many sheep were left to fend for themselves , reverting to a feral state . The Nature Conservancy bought the island in the 1970s , rounded up the sheep , and removed them to prevent overgrazing . The breed is extremely rare today ; with fewer than 200 registered animals it is listed as " Critical " by The Livestock Conservancy .

= = = Research and conservation (after rediscovery) = = =

When the Nature Conservancy bought Hog Island , most of the sheep were bought by private owners . Some were taken to Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University , where they were studied to determine why they were relatively free of parasites ; the researchers concluded that the sheep had no special resistance to parasites but were simply isolated from them by their habitat . The sheep were then sent to institutions such as George Washington 's birthplace , Mount Vernon , and Colonial Williamsburg for preservation . The United States Department of Agriculture 's National Animal Germplasm Program has collected semen samples from several of the sheep as part of a program that aims to preserve the genetic material of animals significant to American history . Because Hog Island sheep resemble the small , short @-@ fleeced sheep that would have been raised in colonial farms for meat and wool , they (or a cross between them and Dorset sheep , a combination called " American Site sheep ") are used in exhibits to recreate the look and feel of a historical farm .

Because the Hog Island sheep population is so small , the preservation of the breed through a pure

, inbred line would threaten the breed 's health by an increased risk of pairing of " bad genes " . Stillbirths and atypical @-@ looking sheep have been reported by some breeders . In response , some breeders have crossed Hog Island sheep with other breeds , including Gulf Coast Native sheep , and then bred the offspring with pure Hog Island sheep , producing almost pure Hog Island sheep except for the addition of some genetic diversity .