

= Shetland sheep =

The Shetland sheep is a small , wool @-@ producing breed of sheep originating in the Shetland Isles , but is now also kept in many other parts of the world . It is part of the Northern European short @-@ tailed sheep group , and it is closely related to the extinct Scottish Dunface . Shetlands are classified as a landrace or " unimproved " breed . This breed is kept for its very fine wool , for meat , and for conservation grazing .

Although Shetlands are small and slow @-@ growing compared to commercial breeds , they are hardy , thrifty , easy lambers , adaptable and long @-@ lived . The Shetland breed has survived for centuries in difficult conditions and on a poor diet , but they thrive in better conditions . Shetlands retain many of their primitive survival instincts , so they are easier to care for than many modern breeds .

= = History = =

Up to the Iron Age , the sheep of the British Isles and other parts of northern and western Europe were small , short @-@ tailed , horned only in the male and variable in colour . Short @-@ tailed sheep were gradually displaced by long @-@ tailed types , leaving short @-@ tailed sheep restricted to the less accessible areas . These included the Scottish Dunface , which until the late eighteenth century was the main sheep type throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland , including Orkney and Shetland . The Dunface died out on the mainland , Scotland , in the late nineteenth century , leaving its descendants limited to a few islands , including the Shetlands . The Shetland type of the Dunface has been regarded as distinct since the early nineteenth century or before .

= = Breed conservation = = =

By the early twentieth century , the Shetland was perceived as threatened by cross @-@ breeding , leading to a decline in wool quality . To combat this , the Shetland Flock Book Society was formed in 1927 , and this remains the body responsible for the sheep 's protection on their native islands .

By the time the Rare Breeds Survival Trust was set up in the 1970s , the Shetland had become rare , and it was listed by them as Category 2 (Endangered) . Since then , the breed has become popular with smallholders , and it is now classified as Category 6 (Other native breeds) , with a UK population of over 3000 . On the mainland the breed is governed by the Shetland Sheep Society .

= = Export and history outside the Shetland isles = = =

A notorious Shetland sheep was a ram kept by United States President Thomas Jefferson for several years in the early nineteenth century . Unlike modern Shetlands (but like some related breeds) this ram had four horns . He was kept with about 40 other sheep on President 's Square in front of the White House . In the spring of 1808 , it attacked several people who had taken shortcuts across the square , injuring some and actually killing a small boy . Having been moved to Jefferson 's private estate at Monticello , the ram was eventually killed after having killed several other rams : it was described by Jefferson as " this abominable animal " . Such aggressive Shetland rams , however , are unusual .

In North America , the original Jefferson flock of Shetlands did not persist . It was not until the mid @-@ twentieth century that Shetlands were imported into Canada , and then from Canada into the United States in the 1980s . Since then , a North American Shetland Sheep Registry has been established , and there are now thousands of the breed in the region .

= = Modern farming = = =

Today , shetland sheep are mainly kept in the Shetland isles and a handful of other locales . This is

because of their ability to survive on infertile land that would otherwise be agriculturally useless . Their good @-@ natured temperament is also a major attraction in keeping Shetland sheep . They are most commonly farmed for their prized wool , but they also may be kept for their meat .

= = Breed characteristics = =

The Shetland is one of the smallest British breeds . The ewes are usually polled (hornless) and the rams usually horned , although horned ewes and polled rams do occur occasionally . The breed is noted for its very fine , soft wool and the high quality of its meat , though its smaller size limits its use in commercial meat markets . They are small @-@ bodied animals , with no wool on their faces , noses or legs . The legs are of medium length and finely boned . They have small , erect ears . A distinguishing feature of northern short @-@ tailed sheep is the short , fluke @-@ shaped tail , broad at the base , tapering to a point , and covered towards the tip in hair , not wool .

Shetlands occur in many different colours and patterns , most of which have particular traditional names . The rams weigh approximately 90 to 125 lb (41 to 57 kg) and ewes about 75 to 100 lb (34 to 45 kg) .

= = = Wool = = =

The wool produced by the Shetland has historically been a valuable commodity . Shetlands produce numerous shades of wool colours (see below) , and this variety was commercially important to the wool industry of the Shetland Isles , where natural wools are often used undyed . Tweed is also produced from the coarser Shetland wool , but the Isles are best known for their multicoloured knitwear (made using Fair Isle knitting) and for the traditional knitted lace shawls which are so fine , they will pass through a wedding ring . Fleeces usually weigh between 2 and 4 lb (0 @. @ 9 and 1 @. @ 8 kg) .

In November 2011 , Shetland wool produced in the Shetlands gained protected geographical status with a protected designation of origin (PDO) classification as " Native Shetland Wool " . It was the first non @-@ food product in the UK to receive this status .

= = = Colours and patterns = = =

Shetland sheep can show almost all possible sheep colours and patterns , although solid white and solid moorit (reddish @-@ brown) or black are most common . Many of the colours and patterns have Shetland dialect names ? these derive from the Norn language formerly spoken in Shetland , and similar names are also used in at least one other Nordic language : Icelandic .

Eleven main colours are recognised by the breed association (most including many different shades) : light grey , grey , white , emsket (dusky bluish @-@ grey) , musket (light greyish @-@ brown) , shaela (dark steely @-@ grey) , black , fawn , moorit (reddish brown) , mioget (honey @-@ toned , yellowish @-@ brown) , and dark brown .

Thirty different coat patterns and markings are recognised , many of which can occur in combination . They include katmoget (" badgerface " : dark belly and dark shading around nose and eyes , lighter elsewhere) , gulmoget (" mouflon " , the reverse of katmoget : light belly , dark face with light marks around eyes , dark elsewhere) , yuglet (generally light with dark " panda " patches around the eyes) , bleset (dark with white blaze down face) , smirslet (white marking around the muzzle) , sokket (with white socks on the legs) , bersugget (irregular patches of different colours) and bielset (with a collar of a differing colour) .

= = = Lambing = = =

Like other " primitive " breeds , the ewes are highly seasonal , becoming fertile in October and November (in the Northern Hemisphere) and lambing in spring or summer . On the poor grazing of the breed 's native isles , the lambing percentage is about 130 % . However , when the ewes are on

better pasture , twin lambs are more common , especially from mature ewes . Shetland ewes are hardy , easy lambers , good mothers and produce ample milk . Healthy lambs are born with a weight between 4 and 7 lb (2 and 3 kg) .

= = = Lamb and Mutton Production = = =

In truth , ' slow @-@ growing ' is something of a misnomer . Forage conversion to milk with good Shetland ewes is excellent , second only to Lleyen ewes in the UK . Because of the Shetland ewe 's forage conversion efficiency , growth in her lambs is explosive . A good Shetland ewe on adequate forage can easily wean off 150 % of her body weight in purebred twins by fall . Some ewes wean singles nearly as big as themselves . A Shetland ewe on the heavy side at 80 lbs (36 kg) is easily capable of weaning 60 lb (27 kg) purebred twins . Or what makes the Shetland ewe an optimal maternal base for grassfed lamb production is her prowess in producing hybrid market lambs . Take the same ewe and breed her to say a Leicester , Texel , Charollais or Berrichon ram , and keep her on the same pasture management system . In some flocks these ewes are weaning off pairs of 90 lb (40 kg) twins at only 120 @-@ 150 days old- each crossbred lamb weighing more than their dam .

Shetland lamb is of the highest quality , with rave reviews from chefs and home cooks alike . Texture and flavor are very desirable , with high @-@ yielding carcasses . The mutton also has nice flavor , with some customers and many breeders preferring mutton over lamb .

Lines that have been bred with selection pressure focused on uniformity and finer fiber diameter often do not perform as optimally as lamb producers , and vice versa . Shetland breeders find it imperative that the breed maintains a balance in its ability to produce both a quality fleece and carcass , managed relatively holistically .