



Icelandic Sheep Facts

Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Description

The Icelandic sheep is one of the world's oldest and purest breeds of sheep. Throughout its 1100 years of history, the Icelandic breed has been truly triple-purpose, treasured for its meat, fiber and milk.

The Icelandic breed is in the North European short-tailed group of sheep, which exhibits a fluke-shaped, naturally short tail. To ensure the continuing purity of the breed, tail docking an Icelandic will disqualify it from being registered in North America. Icelandics are a mid-sized breed with ewes averaging 130-160 pounds, and rams averaging 180-220 pounds. Conformation is generally short legged and stocky. The face and legs are free of wool. The fleece is dual-coated and comes in white as well as a range of browns, grays and blacks. There are both horned and polled strains. Left unshorn for the winter, the breed is very cold hardy.

Ewes are seasonal breeders, most coming into heat in late October. They will continue cycling until spring if not bred. Rams are sexually active year round, and the ram lambs can start breeding at 5-6 months.

Lambs mature early and ewe lambs commonly lamb at 11-12 months of age. Icelandic ewes are bred as lambs, and many remain productive until age 10 or longer.

Prolificacy is quite good, on average 175-220%. Triplets are not uncommon and many Icelandic ewes are very capable of nursing triplets without assistance. A gene has been found in the Icelandic breed that causes multiple births of triplets, quads, quintes and even sextuplets, if the ewe carries two copies of the gene. One copy of the gene causes a milder increase in fertility, resulting primarily in a higher rate of triplets. The Thoka gene, as it is called, is named after the first ewe known to carry the gene. It is similar to the Booroola gene in the Merino sheep.

The lambs are small, twins averaging 6-8 pounds and very lively after an average gestation of 142-144 days, several days shorter than the species average. Lambs are vigorous at birth, a trait that has been shown to carry through in crossbreeding programs. The first lamb born will commonly be up and nursing before the twin arrives. Experienced mothers can have a lamb nursing even before it has gotten to its feet. Lambs are generally strong enough to suck out the wax plug, and are seldom lost to pneumonia.

Due to their large rumens, and the selective pressures of their history in Iceland, the breed is feed efficient. The animals are cold hardy and have a strong, reactive immune system. The sheep have evolved over 1,100 years under difficult farming conditions in Iceland, with a resultant sturdy and efficient constitution.

A defining quality of the Icelandic breed is the ability to survive on pasture and browse. Historically, Iceland is not a grain producing country due to the climate, and the breed has survived through its thousand year history on pasture and hay. The ewes are supplemented with fish meal when pregnant and most ewe lambs here in North America are supplemented with some protein especially when pregnant. On good grass, meat lambs can be slaughtered directly off the pasture at 5-6 months of age.

The most eye-catching aspect of the breed is the variation of colors and patterns. Genetically, Icelandics have one of two base colors either black or moorit (brown). They exhibit 5 pattern combinations, white, gray, badgerface, mouflon and solid. Individual sheep may also display various shades of these colors/patterns, ranging from white, cream, light gray, tan, caramel, milk chocolate, silver, dark chocolate, dark gray, to jet black. A spotting gene adds even more combinations with many recognized and named patterns of white markings.

Meat Production

Though famous throughout the world for wool production, the Icelandic breed is predominately grown for meat in Iceland. Since the cool and wet climate precludes the production of most grains in Iceland, the breed has been selected to bring the meat lambs to slaughter weight off of the summer and fall pastures.

Icelandics are very adaptable, and can be handled in a variety of management plans. Here in North America they thrive on grass-based farms where they are rarely fed grain, to dry-lot situations where they are fed daily, and all the management systems in between.

Market lambs will start to reach their ideal slaughter weights of 70-100 pounds at four to five months. With continued access to quality graze, the lambs can be slaughtered directly off the grass all through the fall months. This has positioned the Icelandic breed to fit well in the move towards grass-based farming, enabling "natural" and organic farmers to utilize the Icelandic breed. As meat consumers increasingly recognize the health benefits of grass fed meats, and as economic pressures drive our farmers toward grass-based businesses, the genetics of the Icelandic breed become increasingly valuable to our sheep industry.

The Icelandic breed is considered a mountain breed, and historically mountain breeds have been milder in flavor, and leaner than the lowland breeds. The meat is indeed very tender with a mild flavor, and is generally described as gourmet meat. With the leaner, European style carcass, and the mild flavor, Icelandic lamb can appeal to the palate of even those consumers who avow they "just don't like lamb." With the combination of the economic and market advantages of grass fed farming, and with the appeal of the delicious flavor, the Icelandic breed is a natural for direct-to-consumer marketing.

Fiber

The Icelandic sheep produces a premium fleece. The fleece is dual coated, with a fine, soft undercoat called thel and a longer, coarser outer coat called tog. The tog fiber with a spinning count of 56-60 and a micron count of 27-30, grows to a length of 6-8" in six months. It is lustrous, strong, water- and wear-resistant, and sheds off the rain and weather. Thel is the soft downy undercoat, with a spinning count of 64-70 and a micron count of 19-22, growing to a length of 2-4". The thel provides the loft for the outer coat and insulation for the sheep. Tog grows from the primary hair follicles and the thel from the secondary follicles. Tog is a true wool, and is not a kemp or guard hair. The combination of the two fibers on the sheep gives superb protection from the cold and wet.

Icelandic fleeces are open and low in lanolin. The weight loss when washed is significantly less than many other breeds.

The average adult yearly fleece total weighs 4-7 lbs. Producers often shear their Icelandics twice a year. This is due, in part, to the fact that Icelandics have a natural wool break in late winter for the rams generally, and in spring for the pregnant or lactating ewes. Shearing at or around the time of the natural break is recommended to remove the "old" coat before the "new" coat grows in. The sheep are sheared again in the fall to harvest the fleeces before the animals go on hay for the winter. These fall-shorn fleeces are very soft and clean and can bring a premium price per pound.

The two coats can be separated by hand for special projects, or they may be processed together. The traditional lopi is a lightly spun blend of tog and thel. Thel is very soft and downy, with an irregular crimp and can be used for baby garments, and for the fine shawls in the style of the Wedding Shawl. The tog is similar to mohair; wavy or corkscrewed rather than crimped and is wonderful in worsted spinning.

The versatility of the wool, the ease of spinning and the wide variation of tones and colors are a true delight to handspinners, and put Icelandic wool into the exotic or premium category. It is also known as one of the best fleeces for felting, which is fast gaining popularity in the craft community.

Milk

Icelandic ewes easily support twins and many raise triplets without assistance. In North America, they are used for personal milk production by many shepherds for yogurt and soap. Some farms are making gourmet artisan cheeses. There are a few operations milking more than 25 sheep, but long-term production records are not yet available. Crossing Icelandic sheep with commercial dairy breeds is also being investigated. For personal use, it is possible to allow lambs to continue to nurse while milking once per day, without sacrificing lamb growth.

Pelts

The pelt of the Icelandic sheep is beautiful, lustrous, soft and luxurious, in a delightful range of colors and patterns. The relatively low number of follicles per square millimeter, a count of 12 rather than the 53-87 of the Merino sheep, for example, makes the pelt soft and flexible. These pelts command a high price in that niche market.

Registration

In North America, Icelandic sheep are only registered through the Canadian Livestock Records Corporation, known as the CLRC. Registrations can be done via surface mail, or electronically, and requires tattooing the sheep in a manner accepted by the CLRC. The Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America (ISBONA) organization formed in 1996 for the education of the public and for the education and fellowship of the Icelandic Sheep breeders. As defined by the by-laws of ISBONA, the breed association recognizes the registry of Icelandic sheep only through the CLRC.