

Finnsheep in Spin-Off Magazine

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Photo courtesy Grace Hatton

FIBER BASICS: FINNSHEEP

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Purebred Finnsheep are in short supply in the United States with only around four hundred registered annually. Finnsheep are among the Nordic short-tailed breeds that include the Shetland, Icelandic, Romanov, Norwegian Spaelsau, the Swedish Landrace and several other breeds. All are believed to have descended from the wild muflon sheep.

The breed probably developed in the middle ages in Scandinavia and Northern Europe where they might have lived in one end of the longhouse or in an attached wing during the long, cold months of the year. Their body heat would have

helped to heat the shelter in the winter. With space at a premium, few animals could be kept indoors. For each animal kept indoors, it was necessary to stockpile hay or dried leafy branches. In Iceland, the Shetlands and other islands, sheep wintered outdoors. Those types of sheep usually only have one or two lambs due to the rigors of their lives. Parts of Scandinavia have predators such as wolves and bears plus deeper snow cover where sheep could not have found food and would have had to have shelter during the winter to produce lambs. Apparently some sheep lambed indoors. Lambing in shelters allows larger sized litters of lambs to survive.

The excavation of an iron-age farm in Scandinavia where the occupants had perished in a fire, revealed the remains of two pregnant sheep, other sheep with lambs in addition to five humans, horses and cows. In the summer the large numbers of lambs Finnsheep produce would have repopulated the grazing lands with lambs.

Photo courtesy Stillmeadow Finnsheep

The Vikings likely brought sheep to and from Ireland, the Faroes, the Orkneys, the Shetlands and Scandinavia. Sails of Viking ships were made of wool. Recent research suggests that

such sails woven on upright looms would have lasted many decades. Some sails were as large as 85 square meters and would have required the wool from a great many sheep.

While there is a range of wool fineness across individual Finnsheep, the American Sheep Industry's American Wool Council ranks Finnsheep in the fine end of the medium wool category. On average, micron tests range between 24 and 31 microns for a spinning count of 48's to 60's. The wool has a moderate crimp and a high luster. The fleece is considered an open type of fleece, which means that the locks separate to some extent -- as opposed to a Merino sheep where the tips of the fleece are tight together. Finnsheep do not shed their wool.

Fleece length depends on how often they are shorn. For flocks like mine that are shorn twice a year, the average fleece length is around 3 ½" to 4" with a well-skirted fleece weighing around two pounds. Yield after washing is around 70% because there is not a lot of lanolin in the wool. A Finn in full fleece is a lovely sight!

Finnsheep are not generally double coated, although there may be a few individuals that are. Finnsheep have a similar range of fleece colors to that of Icelandic sheep although moorit and

fawn Finnsheep are very scarce in the USA at this time. Blacks, greys, and piebald sheep are more common. Markings such as white stockings, tail tips, white crown or facial markings including the panda-like eyespot pattern are common in colored Finnsheep. Only a few hundred purebred Finnsheep have been registered annually in the last several years by roughly three dozen purebred Finnsheep breeders in the USA, making purebred Finnsheep rather scarce.

*Grey ewe with brown and brown-piebald lambs Photo courtesy Wee Croft
Finnsheep*

Finnsheep are finer boned than most breeds of sheep. They are attractive to the ethnic meat market precisely because of the fine bone which means less waste. Ewes range in size from 120 lbs to 160 lbs; rams from 160 to 220 lbs. Finnsheep lack horns and the naturally short tail should not be docked.

What sets the Finnsheep apart from the other Nordic breeds is the large number of lambs produced. Only the Romanov can compete with Finnsheep in terms of prolificacy. Litter sizes of up to nine live Finn lambs have been recorded. There have been several litters of seven live lambs born in the USA. More commonly three to five lambs are born in a litter. Adult ewes

can raise triplets with no difficulties. Larger litters can be supplemented with an extra feeding or two or the extra lambs may be raised as bottle lambs. In the case of ewes bred to lamb twice in the same year, a practice common in Finland in the 1900's, we have had one ewe drop quintts in the spring and quads the following fall. This is possible because Finnsheep have a shorter gestation period -- about 142 days -- compared to most other sheep breeds. Obviously breeding twice a year requires much greater attention to the ewe's body condition. High quality feed during the last six weeks of gestation and during lactation is vital. In our flock we offer roasted soy meal to lambs in a creep feeder from the first week of life so that lambs can be weaned by six weeks. Well grown ewe lambs can be bred to lamb as yearlings. Finns are aseasnal breeders and will breed almost any time of the year except for the hottest months of summer. We routinely lamb some ewes in the fall to have lambs available when the prices are higher in late fall.

Finn ewes in the last few weeks of pregnancy are enormous round wooly creatures on slender legs. From the front or rear their bodies look a bit football shaped with their huge bellies projection out on both sides. The breed's slender head is attractive. Lambs with slender heads make birthing easy.

Udders are free of wool and often have four teats. Around 25% of the extra teats are functional.

Brian Magee, Cornell University Shepherd, and long time Finnsheep breeder wrote in an article for the April 1994 issue of the Finnsheep Breeders Association newsletter, Short Tales, that Finnsheep have co-adapted genes that allow them to have large litters without the problems one might expect from ketosis or twin-lamb disease. The co-adapted genes also play a role in low lamb mortality and rapid lamb growth rate. Births are usually easy because the size of each lamb in a large litter is small compared to breeds that normally only have twins. The small lamb size also helps if a lamb is not positioned correctly. It isn't hard to reach in and sort things out. In almost 20 years of lambing our small flock, we have never lost a ewe to lambing difficulties, had to have a C-section performed or had to have a veterinarian come to extract a lamb.

Black-piebald ewe Photo courtesy Stillmeadow Finnsheep

In 1973, Groot wrote a survey on Finnsheep in Finland and found that 85% of all flocks in that country had four or fewer adult ewes. At that time rams could be borrowed free of charge by the local farmers with small flocks from the breed

association. About half the ewes lambed twice a year. The record reported at that time for lifetime production of a Finn ewe in Finland was 49 lambs in eleven lambings with 46 of those lambs having survived. The highest average litter size for one ewe for nine lambings was 4.9.

Generally speaking, Finnsheep are friendly and pleasant to work with although there may be an occasional flighty individual. Rams are aggressive breeders year-round. Personality seems to be heritable. I like to keep bottle lambs out of my best ewes as replacements for my flock because they will tend to be calm and easy to work with.

I shear my own sheep by fastening them by their collars to the barn wall. I shear them while they are standing up. This year we achieved a first. I timed shearing my two- and three-year-old ewes so they had finished their morning grain and hay. They stood calmly chewing their cuds while being shorn with my noisy Stewart clippers. Shearing six-month-old lambs this way for the first time isn't usually as easy. When a lamb cooperates, the result can be some exceptionally fine, lustrous Finn lamb's wool about three inches long.

Finnsheep were first imported into the USA in the 60's and 70's to crossbreed with meat sheep to increase litter size and reduce the number of open or unbred ewes in commercial flocks. The conception rate for purebred Finnsheep is around 97 to 98%.

For every percent of Finn blood in a crossbred ewe, studies showed a proportional increase would occur in the litter size of the crossbred ewe over the purebred of the same breed.*

So much emphasis has been placed on Finnsheep for crossbreeding over the years that the qualities of purebred Finnsheep kept in a small farm flock have been overlooked. Their wool is beautiful, lustrous and has a silky hand. Colored Finnsheep can be registered and they come in all the colors of the sheep spectrum. While some have suggested that it could harm the breed and ultimately reduce its prolificacy to select for certain colors, since there are so many lambs to choose from, it is unlikely this would happen.

The Finnsheep Breeders' Association has been against showing the breed, fearing that selecting for popular show appearance could irreparably harm the breed's prolificacy. The theory has been that if we select for prolificacy, the sheep will show us how they need to look. Unfortunately, since we don't

show them, the public doesn't see them and aren't aware of them.

Finland lies north of the 60th parallel with an average annual temperature of just above freezing. The relative humidity averages about 80% with rainfall of between 14 and 23 inches annually. The pasture season ranges from four months in the north of the country to five months in the south. The rest of the year the sheep are kept in barns usually with adjacent exercise pens.

In the early 1900's Finnsheep probably looked more like today's Icelandic sheep. Some would have had horns and many would have had double coats.

In 1948, Finland started keeping records on Finnsheep for improvement purposes. By 1998, the Finnsheep in Finland had increased in live adult weight by 50%. The fleece weight had increased by 40%. Litter size at birth had increased by 30%. Lamb weight at five months had increased by 35% and litter weight at five months had increased by 45%.

I have been raising Finnsheep since the mid-1980's. I chose this breed because of the smaller size -- compared to Suffolks

- - and multiple births. I have stayed with them because of their great wool, long lives and good dispositions. The climate they came from is not so very different from that in Northeast or that of the upper Midwest. The major difference is that in Finland the winters are darker and the summer's day length is much longer. The breed developed because of the need to keep as few animals over the winter as possible and yet have plenty of lambs to eat the forages that grow so quickly in the long summer days that give way so quickly to another cold season.

The softest parts of the fleece, as on most sheep, usually found under the neck and on the shoulder can be used next to the skin. Even the coarser parts of the fleece low down on the hind legs can be used for outer garments or rugs. The natural grey fleeces can be used as is or dyed to produce wonderful muted colors.

I used the softest, finest wool from a baby lamb to spin for the basket-weave swatch and the coarser britch from older sheep to make fingerloop braided belt. Also made of coarser wool is the sprang bag I made, with fingerwoven tie. I can imagine that a hundred years ago, Finnsheep wool in Finland would have been used in some of the same ways.

References:

Excellent website on Nordic short-tailed sheep: www.sheep-isle.dk/artikler/articlesuk.htm

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"Wool Grades and the Sheep that Grow the Wool"

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*"Developing the right ewe for maximizing returns" by David L. Thomas, published in the Finnsheep Breeders Association Newsletter, Short Tales, November 1991.

Micron testing: Yocom Mcoll Testing Laboratories, Inc 540 West Elk Place, Denver, CO 80216-1823 phone 303-294-0582
www.ymccoll.com email ymccoll@ymccoll.com

Resources:

Breeders Directory, Finnsheep Breeders Association

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