



Karakul Sheep: Bright-eyed and Broad-tailed

Ancient, elegant Karakul sheep are one of America's most uncommon sheep breeds.

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Photo by Jeff Martin

Karakul sheep are the only fat-tailed American breed, storing all their fat in their tails instead of spreading it throughout their bodies like other breeds. Most Karakul lambs are born shiny, jet-black with lustrous, wavy curls across their bodies and smooth, sleek hair on their faces, ears and legs. Neonatal lambs' close curls quickly begin loosening, often by a few days of age. Most gradually develop double fleeces with some degree of guard hair covering softer, downier undercoats.

Fleece types vary greatly in this breed, ranging in texture from very coarse to silky soft and glossy. Adult fleece is typically lightweight, strong, lustrous and long-stapled (growing 6 to 12 inches per year), and it hangs in long, loose locks. Karakul fleece has very little grease content, making it easy to prepare for use. It's usually used for crafting quality rugs and saddle blankets; however, it's a peerless felting medium, as well.

A typical coal black Karakul lamb coat gradually lightens in color during its first year of life, though a few sheep remain glossy, shiny black. The most common colors in the breed are solid bluish-gray and brown, but colors run the gamut from pure-white to coal-black in solids, spots and color-flecked white. Distinctive colors include pink-roan, known as "guligas;" "sharazi," a bluish mixture of black and white fibers; and a unique reddish-brown called "kambar." "Sur," a rare agouti color, sometimes appears, consisting of a brown base coat with a pale, frosted metallic effect on the tip of each hair.

Karakuls are the only true fat-tailed American breed (Tunis sheep, another ALBC-listed heritage breed, have slight fat deposits in their rumps but not enough to qualify as fat-tailed sheep). Karakul lambs, like other sheep, are born with long tails. However, a Karakul lamb's fleece-covered upper tail incorporates a unique sack that begins filling with fat almost as soon as the lamb is born. The lower, skinny half of its tail is carpeted with fleece and hair. The lower tail usually points down, but in some individuals, it curves back up into a stinger-like configuration. Some breeders leave the tail intact while others choose to dock the lower portion. The upper half is never removed, as that's where Karakuls store fat in lieu of distributing it internally like other breeds. The upper tail is ideally large, U-shaped with an indented tail bone and frequently as wide as the sheep.

Karakul sheep are alert and nimble with fluid and graceful movement. They are stylish, elegant sheep that are a feast for the eyes!

But looks and fleece aren't all these sheep have going for them. They adapt to extremes of climate, faring equally well in the snowy North and the sizzling South. They have unusually strong, foot-rot-resistant hooves and unusually sturdy, long-lasting teeth—traits that significantly contribute to the Karakul's longevity. They're remarkably resistant to internal parasites, too. Karakuls are outstanding foragers and easy keepers that shine on terrain where hothouse sheep would perish. They breed out of season, and although single lambs are the rule, twins and triplets aren't uncommon. Karakul ewes are attentive, protective mothers (when danger threatens, the flock forms a circle with lambs in the middle and faces the enemy with their hooves and horns as a group) that provide plenty of milk for their lambs. And, Karakul lambs' narrow heads and slender shoulders make for easy lambing. Breeders report lamb-survival rate in this breed is outstanding.

Keeping Up with the Karakuls

American Karakul Sheep Registry
660-838-6340
11500 Highway 5
Boonville, MO 65233

American Livestock Breeds Conservancy
919-545-0022
P.O. Box 477
Pittsboro, NC 27312

Pine Lane Karakuls
269-381-0980
6881 N Sprinkle Rd



Kalamazoo, MI 49004 Spirit and Elegance

Veteran Karakul breeder Letty Klein of Pine Lane Farm Karakuls near Kalamazoo, Mich., began raising sheep in 1982. One of her first sheep was a coarse-wooled, shaggy, pale-eyed Karakul ewe named Beulah. Beulah, destined to become the matriarch and foundation of the Pine Lane flock, lived to the ripe old age of 16, producing 14 lambs in her eight years with the Kleins. Longevity is evident in these sheep; one of Beulah's daughters, Helga, for instance, produced 28 lambs during her 14 years.

Nowadays, the Kleins raise Karakul sheep and nothing else. Many of their sheep trace back to Beulah and her sons and daughters. Several remaining Karakul bloodlines are represented in the Pine Lane Farm flock, among them rare Dawley Karakuls registered under the Historic Flock designation in the American Karakul Sheep Registry. The Kleins specialize in replacement rams but also sell ewe lambs and breeding groups, selecting for correct feet, straight legs, typical Karakul conformation and classic horns. Individuals that don't meet the Kleins' high standards are sold as freezer lambs or for meat production.

Klein's life took a twist when she met native Kentuckian Ann Brown at the North American International Livestock Exposition in 1995, and together they became interested in Karakul-wool braided rugs. The two friends perfected their technique and nowadays teach it to others at workshops across the country. Klein markets handcrafted Karakul-wool rugs through her farm's website, and she and Brown authored a 112-page, well-illustrated how-to book, *The Shepherd's Rug; a Braided Wool Rug from Roving* (Oak Woods Media, 2006).

"I've been raising Karakuls for over 27 years and have no interest in raising any other breed of sheep," says Klein. "I have a small flock, and I find that they are very smart, very affectionate once they get to know you, but are leery and standoffish with strangers. They are browsers, so help clear the brush and weeds. Karakuls are easy keepers, easy lambers, wonderful mothers, heavy milkers and they really taste good on the table. We are in the rug business because of their long, durable wool, which comes in many colors. ... So you can see, we take care of them and they take care of us and have led us down a very exciting path over all these years. I can't think of anything I don't like about Karakuls or what I would call a weakness—they do have to be shorn twice a year, but to us this is a good thing, as we use all our wool for the rugs. Some folks think they are flighty—but I love their spirit and elegance."

Karakuls are America's own fat-tailed sheep. They're affordable, available from dedicated breeders in 15 states and Canada, and additional conservation breeders are needed.

About the Author: Hobby Farms contributing editor Sue Weaver and her husband raise Miniature/Classic Cheviot sheep on their Arkansas Ozarks hobby farm. They have no Karakuls yet—but there are some in their future.