

## Soay Sheep

**The history of Soay sheep is where to begin learning more about the small, primitive sheep.**

By Sue Weaver

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In this article ... Importance of Conservation Soay Arrives in North America Online Soay Resources Description of Soay Type Breeding for Conservation The history of Soay Sheep is where to begin learning more about the small, primitive sheep.

Thousands of years ago, Neolithic man settled the isolated four-island archipelago we now call St. Kilda, located 41 miles off the west coast of Scotland.

He brought with him semi-wild sheep much like the Mediterranean mouflons from which sheep were first domesticated.

These pioneer shepherds salted the least habitable island with their primitive sheep (when Viking raiders visited in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., they named the island So-øy, meaning "Sheep Island" after the nimble, diminutive sheep dwelling there) to better utilize the sparse grazing available in St. Kilda's fierce, storm-swept climate. In this hostile environment, the little sheep thrived.

Prehistoric sheepfolds on the main island of Hirta and dome-shaped, stone-and-turf structures called "cleitean" on all of the islands (including uninhabited Soay) speak of man's early presence in St. Kilda.

As long as the inhabitants of Hirta could remember, men of the settlement mounted annual wool-gathering forays to Soay.

Since the island is made up of granite cliffs rising 1,000 feet perpendicular to the sea and it lacks a landing beach of any sort, men and dogs were dropped off by boat and picked up again a week or so later.

It's Important ...  
to conserve the world's heritage breeds in America

Most heritage conservators emphasize breeds with American roots and rightfully so. However, endangered breeds from abroad need us, too.

Breeds with a limited genetic pool to draw from are especially vulnerable when core groups are decimated due to disease, environmental disaster or acts of war, so it's important to maintain satellite groups at a distance.

Consider Britain's battle against hoof and mouth disease, in which entire flocks and herds of livestock, rare or otherwise, are destroyed to contain the spread of this modern-day plague—and needless to say, war can have devastating effects on entire breeds.

The Orlov-Rostopchin horse of Russia was nearly annihilated during World War I and the following Russian Revolution, but was carefully bred back up in the post-war years. Then during World War II, every horse at the state studfarm was killed; the only known purebred survivors were three horses stabled at the Moscow Agricultural Fairgrounds.

Numerous other European breeds fared just as poorly; for example, at the close of the war only three purebred Friesian stallions were left alive. These are now reconstructed breeds; had satellite herds been in place in North America, the original pre-war breeds would have surely survived.

So endangered international breeds need dedicated conservators, too. Soay sheep, Ancient White Park cattle, Exmoor

ponies, Tamworth pigs and Belgian hares—they all need additional steadfast breeders if they're to survive. Or choose Catalina chickens, Aylesbury ducks or Shetland geese if poultry strikes your fancy.

There are hundreds of interesting, endangered heritage breeds from abroad that are crying for committed conservators. If that's you, consider establishing a satellite group on your farm as a hedge against catastrophe.

TopDuring their time on the island, they lived in primitive cleits, capturing sheep by day and rooing (plucking) their molting wool, then releasing them until the following summer. Since the sheep belonged to the Scottish laird who owned St. Kilda, Soay's sheep were rarely carried home to be slaughtered for meat.

In historic times, St. Kilda's only settlement was at Village Bay on Hirta, although ruins on Boreray (an island four miles to the north) and at another site on Hirta suggest earlier settlements there. Life was crushingly difficult for Hirta's Scottish-Gaelic speaking inhabitants; it was a place where extreme isolation, 40-foot waves and gale-force winds were a way of life.

Finally, on Aug. 29, 1930, the last 36 residents of Hirta, along with their livestock (a few cows and a large number of domestic sheep), were evacuated to Morvern on the Scottish mainland at their own request. The few remaining domestic sheep on Hirta were destroyed.

In 1931, the laird of the islands, Sir Reginald MacLeod, sold all of St. Kilda to Lord Dumfries (later to become the 5th Marquess of Bute), who in turn left it to the National Trust for Scotland upon his death in 1956.

The new laird hired a group of former residents to return to Hirta in 1931 to transfer wild sheep from Soay to the now-uninhabited island to keep vegetation in check.

The present flock on Hirta, now more than 1,000 strong, descends in its entirety from those first 107 sheep.

Around the turn of the century, a few wealthy British landowners imported small numbers of Soays to graze their estates and parklands. Selectively bred for various characteristics, such as dark mouflon coloration and horns, these animals became known as "Park Soay."

Soon after accepting ownership of the isles, the National Trust for Scotland allowed groups of scientists to visit uninhabited Hirta to study the ancient Soay sheep.

In 1963, Dr. Peter Jewell and his colleagues brought 24 sheep back to the mainland so they could continue their studies year-round. The team selected sheep "comprised of a selection of colors, and ewes with and without horns, and even some animals with white markings, sheep that were representative of the animals as we encountered them on Hirta." These became known as "Hirta Soay."

Top

Soay Arrives in North America

Only two groups of Soay sheep were ever exported to North America, one arriving in Canada in 1974 and another in 1990. On Dec. 5, 1974, Assiniboine Park Zoo in Winnipeg received four 6-month-old lambs from Highland Wildlife Park in Kingussie, Scotland.

Online Soay Resources

The Soay Sheep Society (U.K.)

[www.soaysheep.org](http://www.soaysheep.org)

0161 976 4734

Rare Breeds Survival Trust (U.K.)

[www.rbst.org.uk](http://www.rbst.org.uk)

024 7669 6551

Soays of America

[www.soaysofamerica.org](http://www.soaysofamerica.org)

Soay Sheep Breeders Cooperative  
[www.soaysheepbreeders.com](http://www.soaysheepbreeders.com)

The Open Flockbook Project  
[www.openflockbook.com](http://www.openflockbook.com)  
(541) 899-1672

Free e-mail listservs at YahooGroups:

Soay Sheep Breeders  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/soay>

Soay Sheep in North America  
<http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group>

Southern Oregon Soay Sheep Farms  
[www.soayfarms.com](http://www.soayfarms.com)  
Kathie Miller  
(541) 955-8171

Saltmarsh Ranch Soay Sheep  
[www.saltmarshranch.com](http://www.saltmarshranch.com)  
Steven and Priscilla Weaver  
(541) 899-1672

TopOver time, 17 lambs were born at the zoo. Some were sold to Canadian wildlife parks and exotic animal dealers, including Eugene Hutka, who bred the little sheep for a spell.

Hutka sold stock to a breeder in South Carolina, who in turn sold sheep to additional American fanciers. Along the way, records were lost and non-Soay hair sheep bloodlines were added to the mix. Today, descendants of these animals are known as "American Soay."

Meanwhile, in 1989, a Montreal-based research organization purchased six Rare Breeds Survival Trust-registered Soay sheep from a breeder in England. The company eventually bred a closed flock of 30 purebred sheep; Soay whose predecessors trace exclusively to this flock are referred to as "British Soay."

Enter Kathie Miller of Buffalo Creek Farm in Merlin, Ore., and Val Dambacher of Ewe Pals Farm in Talent, Ore., who were both already enamored with American Soay sheep. As part of a shared effort to piece together the saga of Soay sheep in North America, the two friends heard about a purebred flock in Quebec.

On Oct. 14, 1998, two ram lambs and one 4-year-old ewe arrived at the Portland International Airport, and in the spring of 2000, the first three American-born Soay lambs ever eligible for registration in the British flockbook were born on the friends' Oregon ranches, which they now call Southern Oregon Soay Farms.

At the same time, Kathie and Val were breeding their American Soay ewes to imported rams to develop a line of sheep (American-British Soay) ideal for handspinners, hobby farmers and organic meat producers seeking stellar Soay qualities, but who weren't necessarily interested in participating in a global conservation program.

Then, in April 2000, Val and Kathie learned that the Montreal-based company was terminating their Soay project and the remaining purebred sheep would be for sale later that year. Because stringent import laws now prevent further importations from Britain, they realized this would be their only opportunity to help conserve British Soays in North America. On Oct. 17, 2000, 19 sheep left Canada by truck; they arrived in Oregon six days later.

Since the early days when Kathie and Val and two other breeders began selling British Soay, an encouraging number of other conservation-minded Soay keepers have joined the ranks of breeders committed to preserving their ancient bloodlines, among the most active are Priscilla and Steven Weaver of Saltmarsh Ranch in Jacksonville, Ore.

When asked about their first foray into British Soays, the Weavers laugh. "They looked so appealing compared to the hulking Suffolks we already had and through them we stumbled into our retirement life's work: conservation breeding and genetics.

"The first time we met Kathie Miller," they say, "she mentioned that she had a thick, three-ring binder of Soay pedigrees. In an instant, Steve's life changed forever. He had spent his working life as a genetics research and teaching professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago. The notion that he could redirect all that training and experience into documenting the ancestry of the entire cohort of Soay sheep in the United States was the kind of 'eureka' moment new retirees hope and pray for."

Top

#### Description of Soay Type

And what are these ancient sheep that so excite their breeders' passions?

Soay are lithe, fine-boned, elfin sheep standing about 22 inches tall at their prominent withers. Mature rams weigh 85 to 90 pounds and ewes run about 30 pounds lighter. Their lean, primitive-type bodies are set on long legs; their tails are naturally short and skinny. As expected from their rugged, rocky island heritage, they're active, sure-footed and nimble.

Most rams have strong, down-curved, non-spiraling horns, although scurred rams aren't unheard of; ewes may have spiky, backswept horns, scurs or no horns whatsoever.

Soay colors range from fawn through brown mouflon (mouflon coloration includes white markings on the rump, underbelly, over the eyes and under the jaw) to solid-colored fawns, browns and blacks. Black-faced, white-faced and spotted sheep sometimes occur.

The Soay has no wool on its face or legs. Its body fleece is comprised of guard hair overlaying a short, woolly undercoat so soft that women on Hirta used it to knit their families' underwear. During summer, this undercoat molts so that Soay wool is gathered by "rooing" (plucking or combing) instead of shearing. A typical Soay yields one or two pounds of cushy fiber every year.

Soays are browsers. They thrive on a varied diet, making them an ideal breed for grass-fed and organic farmers or anyone grazing sheep on marginal land. Soay meat is lean, low in cholesterol and boasts an unusually high ratio of polyunsaturated to saturated fats; its light, delectable flavor makes it a favorite with British chefs—and this is a niche that Soays in America could fill very well.

Surely no one in America knows these wee sheep's strengths better than Kathie Miller.

"There are lots of great things about these sheep," she says. "Compared to conventional wool breeds, they're tremendously hardy and easy to care for. They molt their wool so you don't have to shear them and their tails are short, so they needn't be docked. They're resistant to diseases that trouble other breeds—there has never been a documented case of scrapie in Soays and they aren't prone to foot rot. They thrive on marginal pasture and browse. Soay ewes lamb easily, they're excellent mothers and their lambs mature quickly. They're gentle-natured and curious, and they produce lovely, short wool that's in high demand along with their delicious, low-fat meat."

Top

#### Breeding for Conservation

There are, however, a few caveats, Kathie cautions. "Their small size," she says, "can be an advantage or disadvantage depending on your market and they aren't commonly available in all parts of the country. This is especially true of British Soay since there are fewer than 200 conservation ewes in the entire United States.

"Because of these low numbers, conservation breeding is done to preserve the breed's genetic diversity, so they aren't a good choice for people who want to play with color, spots, horns, wool and so on.

"The type of person who is drawn to the British Soay is someone who is interested in preserving an ancient treasure, just as they would save an heirloom seed, an ancient artifact or preserve a historic building or site. But American and American-British Soays are perfect for people who raise organic lamb or meat for home consumption, handspinners and breeders interested in developing particular colors or patterns, or those who want to help develop an emerging breed."

The Weavers, too, are eager to praise their favorite sheep.

"We like that their little feet don't churn up our pastures," says Priscilla. "They shine at weed control and eat noxious

blackberries and poison ivy, then move on to the pasture grass. Because they're small, men and women of all ages can easily handle both rams and ewes. And Soay present a unique opportunity to participate in the conservation of this primitive breed of domesticated sheep."

Steve elaborates, "For example, we're engaged in a formal breeding conservation program for our flock of 64 fully documented British Soay. It simply feels good in an intangible-but-profound way to be preserving these ancient creatures that figured out how to survive on their own in extremely harsh circumstances, basically on rocks and meager island pastures."

"At the time Steve started the Open Flockbook Project (OFP), there was no database available, paper or electronic, of the pedigrees and related genetic characteristics of the U.S. Soay population," says Priscilla. "He literally built the OFP one animal at a time, collecting information from all manner of sources, relying heavily on the willingness of Soay keepers all over the country to submit data on their animals. Now containing the vast majority (1,500 animals) of Soay in this country, the heart of the OFP is a completely free and open online database available 24/7 to anyone who wants to use it."

And what advice might Kathie and the Weavers offer hobby farmers interested in acquiring Soay sheep?

"Before you decide on Soay—or any other livestock for that matter," Kathie says, "visit every farm you can, talk to every Soay breeder you can and read every scrap of relevant information. Don't hesitate to ask questions and talk to lots of people. When you've decided this is the breed for you, find a breeder you're comfortable with, one who will answer your questions and be available to answer future questions after the sale."

"The easiest way to test your compatibility with Soay, whether you just want a few to grace your pasture or a full-blown conservation, meat or fleece operation," Steve says, "is to acquire three or four Soay of the same gender before you commit to breeding and the need to keep non-breeding rams and ewes separate."

"If you're a first-time shepherd, go through a year and see how you react to dealing with fencing, pasture, hay, vaccination, hoof trimming, deworming and protection from predators."

"One Soay-specific caution: Despite their primitive origins and initial shyness, Soay are social creatures and it isn't a good idea to have a single animal. As for which animals to buy first, wethers and rams can be had for a lot smaller investment than ewes."

"If you're pretty sure you'll want to breed, a good starter flock is three to four ewes, plus two rams or one ram and a wether to keep him company. If you're looking for a productive relic of the past with everything to offer today's hobby shepherds, look no further—there's a Soay just right for you."

About the Author: Sue Weaver is an HF contributing editor and author of *Small-Scale Sheep Keeping for Pleasure and Profit*. (Bowtie Press, 2005).

Top

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