



Spot On: Jacob Sheep--a Unique Sheep Breed

The spotted Jacob sheep have made a 3,000-year journey from ancient Syria to U.S. farm flocks, while still retaining their primitive charm.

By Heather Smith Thomas

Courtesy Bide a Wee Farm Breed standard

Many sheep are called Jacob sheep, but they may have no resemblance to the true Jacob, except for having four or more horns, or producing an occasional spotted lamb. Just because a sheep is spotted or polycerate (having more than one set of horns) does not mean it is a Jacob.

The Jacob is basically a white sheep with random-colored markings, but the markings are clearly defined, with no mottling. The legs have short hair. Spotted sheep with wool below the hock are the result of crossing with other breeds. Merino sheep have spots and woolly legs, and some of the modern sheep breeds with Merino ancestry (Rambouillet, Columbia and Corriedale) occasionally have lambs with spots, woolly legs and sometimes wool forward of the horns. Dorset and Barbados crosses may also have spots. These sheep mature larger than a Jacob, however. A Dorset cross might not grow as large as a Merino type, and can be harder to differentiate from a true Jacob, except it would have a tendency to lose its color.

In the Jacob, there is no wool forward of the horns. Horns are black, or black and white striped, but never white. The face has large, symmetrical eye patches and a dark muzzle. Ears are small and erect. Tail is medium length. Wild sheep have short tails (about four inches long), while domestic sheep have long, heavily woolled tails that are generally docked. The Jacob tail is in between, reaching only to the hock. Hooves are black or striped. The most obvious clue to the purity of a Jacob is its offspring. Lambs are always spotted. If a ewe produces a black lamb (or black with a few white markings on the extremities) probably only one of the parents is a pure Jacob. With impressive horns and unusual coloring, Jacob sheep usually cause folks to take a second look. The history of this unique breed is just as fascinating and colorful.

Jacob sheep originated in what is now Syria and Iraq, more than 3,000 years ago. One of the oldest sheep breeds, the Jacob is named for the Biblical father of the 12 Hebrew tribes. Jacob, son of Isaac, was the first person in recorded history to practice selective breeding of livestock.

BIBLICAL HISTORY

As the Bible story relates, Jacob cheated his younger brother Esau out of his birthright, and tricked his elderly blind father into giving him a blessing that was supposed to go to his brother. Esau swore to kill him for that, so Jacob fled to his Uncle Laban's farm far to the east, on the plain of Aram. (Aram is the Hebrew name for ancient Syria.)

Jacob fell in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, and asked for her hand in marriage. The uncle agreed, if Jacob would work seven years tending Laban's flocks of sheep and goats. But after seven years of work, Laban gave him the older daughter, Leah, instead. Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel.

Jacob's wives bore him 12 sons who later became patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel. The eleventh son was Joseph, his favorite. Jacob gave him a coat of many colors, and the jealous older brothers sold Joseph to slave traders headed for Egypt. They told their father he'd been killed by a wild beast.

Jacob had worked for his uncle for 20 years by the time Joseph was born, and Jacob asked Laban to let him and his family go back home. But Laban didn't want him to leave. Jacob was a good herdsman and Laban's sheep and cattle had thrived under Jacob's care. Laban begged him to stay, and told Jacob to name his wages. So Jacob agreed to keep feeding and tending the flocks if he could have all the spotted and speckled sheep and goats.

The Biblical story describes how Jacob had a dream in which God instructed him to use only spotted rams for breeding, and this resulted in a flock that soon consisted almost entirely of spotted offspring. This Biblical reference is one of the oldest documented examples of selective breeding. To accomplish his purposes, Jacob built corrals at the watering spots and confined selected ewes with a spotted ram.

Eventually he took his family and large flock of spotted sheep back to Canaan. Later as an old man, Jacob moved his family and flock to Egypt. Thus the Jacob sheep came to Egypt, and eventually into most of North Africa. From there they went to Europe when the Muslims invaded and conquered Spain in the 8th century. From Spain and North Africa some of



these colorful sheep were eventually taken to England, where they survived as a distinct breed.

BREED CHARACTERISTICS

Because of their striking appearance, the Jacob sheep were soon noticed by English noblemen and imported as a novelty for use as ornamental animals. Jacob sheep have graced the large estates and country homes of England for many centuries; their impressive horns and color contributed to their popularity and survival. The British Jacob was primarily an ornamental park animal, and as such was not improved (selectively bred for increased meat and wool production) as much as modern breeds, according to Janine Fenton, who breeds Jacobs at her home in Fort Collins, Colo. Until very recently, the Jacob has not been genetically changed; it retains most of the hardy characteristics of its ancient ancestors.

There are other breeds of multi-colored sheep in various parts of the world, most of them bearing more than one set of horns. The double-horned characteristic, called polycerate, is common in sheep originating in the Middle East. Some of these spotted, horned breeds also spread to Europe, but most of them disappeared by the 1900s.

The first Jacobs imported to the United States were for game parks and zoos in the early 1900s. Some went to roadside zoos and exotic animal farms, and some were crossed with other breeds, diluting the Jacob's unique genetics. The gene pool was then augmented by more imports from Britain during the 1950s and 1960s.

"Unlike many other ancient breeds, the Jacob has not been improved to satisfy the commercial marketplace," says Fenton. Jacobs have a more primitive body shape, are fine boned and yield a lean carcass with very little external fat. Carcass yield is very high, compared with more improved breeds; there is very little waste. "Ewes need less supplemental feed than other sheep during times of nutritional stress, and usually lamb with no assistance. Newborn lambs are very vigorous, up and nursing quickly without help," says Fenton. Jacob ewes are included in many commercial flocks in England because of their hardiness, ease of lambing, strong mothering instinct and very little need of the shepherd's time and assistance.

JACOB SHEEP IN AMERICA

The Jacob sheep today in North America is a small- to medium-sized sheep. Adult ewes range in size from 80 to 140 pounds; rams weigh up to 180 pounds. Color is basically white with lilac or black spots. Skin is pink under the white fleece and black under colored areas. Legs and face are free of wool. Jacob sheep never have black legs; their legs are white with black spots (usually black knee patches).

For More information:

Jacob Sheep Breeders Association
www.jsba.org

Jacob Sheep Conservancy

www.jacobsheepconservancy.org Since Jacobs have the polycerate gene, individual animals may have two, four or six horns. The rams have the most spectacular horns, which can reach 30 inches or more in length. Jacob fleeces are light with very little grease. Because of the spots, fiber from a single fleece can be spun into material with a complete spectrum from white through gray-lilac to black, and these fleeces are very popular with hand spinners. The colors can be blended or separated to give uniformity of color or a plaid effect in the finished sweater, scarf, shawl or mittens.

PRESERVING THE BREED

In 1976, several people interested in preserving ancient breeds became aware that there were Jacobs in the United States. These sheep were purchased by breeders who wanted to preserve rare, domestic livestock. Ingrid Painter, who raises Jacob Sheep at her Puddleduck Farm near Redmond, Wash., says the Jacob Sheep Society of Britain formed a branch of their association in 1982 to record Jacob sheep in America that passed photographic inspection. Additionally, the American Minor Breeds Conservancy started identifying and recording Jacobs in 1985 and published the Foundation Flock Book in 1986. In 1988, the American Minor Breeds Conservancy helped interested individuals form the Jacob Sheep Breeders Association (JSBA) and registry. The first JSBA flock book was published in 1989 with 400 animals inspected and registered. From these humble beginnings the breed has grown and gained popularity.

Jacobs in the United States today are descendents of early imports dating back to the turn of the century, plus additional imports in the 1950s and two more in the late 1970s. These later imports provided some much needed new bloodlines, and were larger and heavier boned than the earlier population. The Jacobs in Britain before 1969 (when the Jacob Sheep Society there was formed) were also smaller and lighter boned than those in Britain today. The British Jacobs today can compete with commercial breeds for size and wool quality and are no longer considered an endangered breed or a primitive sheep.



Has this come about through selective breeding or the deliberate crossing with commercial breeds such as the Dorset Horn? Painter believes that there are many tell-tale signs that the latter is true. "By 'improving' on an existing breed, it is easy to lose sight of the very reasons that first attracted a person to them," she says.

ADVANTAGES OF PRIMITIVE SHEEP

The advantages of the Jacob sheep in a commercial operation are actually the very characteristics that make them an "unimproved" breed. They are small and hardy, economical to feed and have few health problems. On pasture, stocking rates for Jacobs are about six sheep per acre, compared to about five per acre with the larger breeds. The small, fine-boned Jacob has no lambing problems in contrast with the improved breeds that often need birthing assistance. Jacob ewes are also good mothers, and often have twins and occasional triplets.

Selective breeding to create more weight and meat in modern sheep breeds has its disadvantages, such as creating more lambing problems. The ancient Jacob has conformation more like a wild sheep, with more sloping hindquarters than modern sheep breeds. "Through selective breeding, this slope has been raised, allowing the leg muscle to increase in size," says Painter. "This is the most valuable cut of meat on the carcass. Altering the tilt of the pelvic bones means that the slope of the birth canal has also been changed. So lambs entering the birth canal in improved breeds have to rise upward before they can be delivered outward, instead of slithering downward and out, unassisted, as in sheep with sloping docks." For a few extra pounds of "leg of lamb," modern breeds have had to sacrifice easy births.

The biggest drawback in showing Jacob sheep is that most judges tend to place as winners the sheep with larger leg muscles and tails carried well up. But as Painter says, "judges are never present at lambing time!" The change in the slope of the hindquarter is probably the most noticeable difference between the older and newer Jacob.

The udders on Jacob ewes are small, yet they give plenty of milk. Jacobs with large pendulous udders are probably not pure Jacobs. Scrotal sacs on Jacob rams are held high and tight against the body, rarely reaching the hock, even in hot weather. "The scrotum of rams in more modern breeds are lower and more pendulous and may almost reach the ground, becoming more prone to injury," says Painter.

Breeders like Jacobs because they still have many of the instinctive traits that have been lost in modern breeds. "Jacob sheep can think," notes Painter. Breeders also like them because the carcass is lean and tasty, with little fat and bone waste, compared with up to 30 pounds of kidney fat in some modern sheep, plus the waste weight of their heavy bones. In England, where there are more Jacobs, the ewes are often bred to large mutton rams to produce larger, early maturing, lean-market lambs. "The ewes are more economical to keep than the same number of a larger breed," explains Painter. "Jacob rams are also used on yearling commercial ewes, to help ensure less lambing problems."

Breeders who raise Jacobs find them highly marketable as breeding stock, and for their many products. Farm sales of freezer lamb, tanned pelts, hand-spinner fleeces, exotic horns for making walking sticks, buttons and various ornaments can bring breeders additional income.

The uniqueness of these sheep gives many breeders a great deal of satisfaction, for Jacobs can be bred to exhibit a specific look to suit each owner's personal preference; percentage of color, two horns or four, spotted legs or white legs, large spots or small. Breeders can craft their own flock just the way they want it and not quite the same as anyone else's. This genetic diversity is part of the breed's appeal and may help assure its continuity.

About the Author: Heather Smith Thomas is a life-long farmer and freelance writer based in Idaho. She has authored many books on livestock, from horses to beef cattle.

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