



Icelandic rams

PICTURE CREDIT: KNOWESIDE FLOCK

Why the ancient Icelandic sheep breed is so versatile today

Helen Babbs meets the hardy Viking breed that's great for beginners

In the 9th century, Viking farmers and traders introduced a hardy, thrifty strain of sheep to their new settlements in Iceland. Isolated from other breeds over the following centuries, these sheep developed into one of the oldest and purest sheep breeds in the world. By the 1970s, interest in their unique genetic make-up led to some Icelandic sheep being exported back into Europe, including to the UK in 1979. Though still a minority breed here, they have settled in well, with flocks distributed throughout the country.

"We started with one Icelandic ewe, called Mishca, in 2010," says Sheila Munro, who owns the Knoweside flock in the Scottish borders with her husband Alistair. "She was being sold cheap at the mart, but once we brought her home and contacted the breed

society, we discovered she was actually pedigree stock, just not registered yet. It's grown from there, and now we have eight ewes and two shearing rams, plus seven lambs from this spring."

Down in Suffolk, Mark and Belinda Scott also began their Sunnyside flock with a single ewe. "She was an in-lamb ewe, called Bella, bought eight years ago. We still have her, plus her two daughters, as part of our nine breeding ewes. Then we have two rams, from different bloodlines, and fifteen lambs. It was a bit of a last minute choice," Belinda admits, "but I loved the look of them, and their wonderful fleeces."

ORIGINAL VIKING SHEEP

In looks, Icelandic sheep retain a great deal of their primitive ancestry, with medium size bodies and fine, wiry legs. Ewes and rams are similar

size, standing between knee and mid-thigh height at the shoulders, and weigh around 50kg. "Weight varies a little between bloodlines, depending on whether someone has bred more for meat or the light, 'primitive look'," Belinda notes. Both ewes and rams have a single pair of horns, but the rams' horns are a lot more curled. Faces, ears and legs are wool-free, while the entire body is covered with their amazing fleece.

Icelandic fleece comes in a huge 'rainbow' of colours, from white through greys and browns to very dark black, including patterns such as auburn with silver flecks or the rare 'badger face'. "The colours can vary too with sun-bleaching," describes Sheila. "A dark fleece can fade to silver, or a brown one turn out to be grey at the roots!" The fleeces look "shaggy", as they are made of

two dramatically distinct layers, a very long, hairy top-coat, called "Tog" and a fine, soft under-coat called "Thel." With such a variety of colour and texture, the fleece is popular for handicrafts of all kinds.

FULL OF CHARACTER

While they might look a bit wild, in character Icelandics are almost the exact opposite. "They're incredibly friendly,"



Their full fleeces can look rather shaggy

PICTURE CREDIT: KNOWESIDE FLOCK



Icelandic lambs

PICTURE CREDIT: KNOWESIDE FLOCK



The double layer fleece

PICTURE CREDIT: KNOWESIDE FLOCK



Icelandics are very easy to handle!

PICTURE CREDIT: KNOWESIDE FLOCK



Sheila's first ewe, Mishca

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Mark enthuses. "When it's not breeding season, the rams will often follow us about like dogs; and the in-lamb ewes tend to become very cuddly, liking nothing better than a hug!"

"They're so good natured and easy going," Sheila agrees, "and very intelligent too, much more than our Jacobs. They're family oriented, going back into their family groups after shearing or mating. They are a bit greedy, they can hear a food bucket or hay bale approaching from miles off, and easy to handle, which made them great for us as beginners."

OUT IN THE FIELD

With their northerly ancestry, Icelandics are very hardy and well able to cope with all British weather. "They stay out in the fields 24/7 with a shelter. Though they don't much like rain, they seem to love snow and frost, and lie out quite happily," says Sheila. "They're very clever about the weather: if it's forecast to be stormy, we'll often find they've gone in or moved down to graze on the sheltered part of the field beforehand."

Icelandic sheep get along well with other livestock, although tending to stay in their own flock within the field. "Our two rams are very fond of our horse," Mark chuckles. "There's a big fuss if he goes out to the field and they don't. When they're startled, they tend to scatter rather than flock, which means they can't easily be worked with a sheepdog - but they're much too friendly with our dogs to be herded by them anyway."

ON THE MENU

Given a choice, Icelandic sheep much prefer to browse than graze. "They tend to ignore the grass and go for the rough bits," says Mark, "which works well on our rough heathland grazing." It also means they fit into mixed grazing well. "They're happy to eat the sections our horse won't, while our other sheep go along and tidy up the short grass afterwards."

Over winter when the vegetation stops growing, Icelandics do need a small top-up. "We put out a round



Icelandic ewe and lamb (Photo: Knoweside flock)



Icelandic sheep are playful!

PICTURE CREDIT: SUNNYSIDE FLOCK



Icelandics come in a rainbow of natural colours

PICTURE CREDIT: SUNNYSIDE FLOCK

hay bale for them," says Sheila, "which tends to last our fifteen about a week. Then they have a coarse mix around lambing time, plus a few scoops in a bucket anytime we want them to come up!" Unlike most other breeds, Icelandic sheep have a high mineral need, including for copper, either as a lick or twice-yearly drench.

LAMBS IN THE SPRING

At lambing time, Icelandic ewes continue to take life

easy and independent. "They make really good mums, even the first-time gimmers," says Sheila. "The lambs are small, but quick to get up and about. Their wool is very flat when they're born, but springs out after a day and they look like a haggis on legs!"

Ewes typically have twins or triplets, although some bloodlines have a specific gene for multiple births and can have up to five lambs. "They're easy lambing, and



PICTURE CREDIT: SUNNYSIDE FLOCK

Fully hardy, Icelandics will graze out all year round



PICTURE CREDIT: SUNNYSIDE FLOCK

The lambs are initially small



PICTURE CREDIT: SUNNYSIDE FLOCK

The fleeces are great for handicrafts, including Belinda's wet-felted "Viking capes"

only occasionally need help with for a lamb with big horn buds," Belinda notes. "Then they'll quite happily go on to feed triplets unaided. We take the ram lambs off in August, but leave the ewes on to wean naturally."

SHEARING AND SHEDDING

When it comes to shearing, Icelandics can be a bit different. "We have a commercial shearer who comes in now," says Mark, "and he says he's never seen such flexible sheep for wriggling back upright! When our flock was smaller, I sheared them myself and eventually found it was easier to shear them still standing, with their heads happily in a bucket of feed while I clipped!"

For their flock, Sheila and Alistair opt for the ancient practice of "roo-ing" rather than shearing. Icelandic sheep naturally shed their fleece as the weather gets warmer in late spring, growing a tiny weak



PICTURE CREDIT: KNOWESIDE FLOCK

Ewes out grazing

point in each strand of the wool which then breaks to release the old fleece. "It peels off like an orange skin," says Sheila, "coming off as an entire fleece really easily and leaving about an inch of new wool growth below, so they stay warm."

MEAT, MILK AND MORE

Although some flocks are raised purely for their fleece, Icelandics can make good 'meat sheep' for lamb or hogget too. "We send our spare ram lambs off in November at about seven months old," Mark explains, "and can get up to 24kg back per lamb. It's a bit darker and much richer, with a slightly stronger flavour. Some goes in our freezer, and some we sell, which is always popular – our local pub restaurant did

a whole Viking-themed menu around it! We also get the skins back for tanning, which are very popular sold as rugs," he adds, "and the horns, which we dry out and make into 'Viking-style' jewellery for our business."

In Iceland, the ewes are also used as dairy animals, being nicknamed 'the poor man's cow.' "We've only milked them for bottle feeding a lamb," says Belinda, "but they certainly produce enough milk for dairying, and there are some flocks that do."

All in all, Icelandic sheep make an excellent multi-purpose sheep, without being demanding. "They're long-lived too," says Sheila, "reaching about 14, although we 'retire' our girls from breeding at 12.



PICTURE CREDIT: KNOWESIDE FLOCK

The ewes make devoted mothers

They're the perfect sheep if you want something easy."

For more information, visit the Icelandic Sheep Breeders of the British Isles' website: www.isbobi.co.uk