

THE SHEPHERD

A guide for sheep and farm life

March 2016 • Volume 61 - Number 3

***ASI Convention
Highlights***

**NSIP
RAM GUIDE**

FOCUS:
Gotlands

***Rotational
Grazing***

CALLIPYGE: A STEALTHY THREAT TO THE SHEEP INDUSTRY



FOCUS



GOTLAND SHEEP

Their History

Gotland sheep have become highly sought after by fiber artists and shepherds, as they have made their way across North America. This unique breed of sheep originates from the small island of Gotland, set in the middle of the Baltic Sea, off the coast of Sweden. The northernmost tip of Gotland, Fårö Island, is home to the native breed of Gutefår (Gute sheep). Here their bloodlines date back to the Vikings.

This hardy landrace breed of sheep has been formed over time by its natural surroundings, grazing up to the water's edge on scrubby juniper, pine, and wild thyme and drinking sea water, which is much less salty at that location than in more southerly climes. Both Gutefår rams and ewes have horns which majestically curl about their clean faces. Their legs and bellies are free from wool, and faces have that



characteristic white nose and white circles around their eyes.

Many of the modern European short-tailed breeds of sheep descended from the Gutefår, the modern day Gotland being one of them. Legend has it that the Gotland breed, as we know it today, began with one farm in the early 1920s. Shepherds wanted a breed of sheep with no horns and a lustrous, curly fleece. This particular farmer saw a ram on the train headed for slaughter. He liked the looks of the ram,

and pulled him off the train, and bought him right there. He used this ram to cross breed to his Gute sheep and began selecting for polled sheep and the characteristic curly gray fleeces of the modern Gotland sheep. Today, Swedish shepherds raise Gotlands for their pelts, selling them throughout Europe.

See Gotlands page 46

TEXT & PHOTOS BY KIM GOODLING, VERMONT GRAND VIEW FARM

GOTLANDS From page 45

Gotlands Across the Globe

Purebred Gotlands may be found in Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, and several European countries. In 2003, Gotland semen was imported into the United States from the United Kingdom. This was followed by New Zealand semen in 2009, and Swedish semen in 2011 and New Zealand embryos in 2013. Breeders selected foundation ewes from ten different breeds of other northern short-tailed and long wool sheep, and began an upbreeding program in the United States through artificial insemination. After many years of selective breeding, in 2015, 97.5% Gotland lambs were born in North America. There are also now a very small number of 100% Gotlands, derived from the New Zealand embryos.

Breed Description & Characteristics

Gotlands are known for their hardiness, strong mothering characteristics, and their friendly, curious personalities. With slender bone structures, Gotland ewes weigh between 120-150 pounds, and rams weigh 160-190 pounds. A hornless breed, Gotlands have clean black faces and legs with occasional white markings on the forehead. They have short tails with hair on the tip. Gotlands often have "sugar lips," with white hairs around their mouths and pale rings around their eyes. Gotlands love to forage, and do well eating a variety of plants and herbs.

Gotlands from New Zealand tend to be finer boned, and have softer (but not quite as lustrous) fleeces than those from Britain or Sweden. New Zealand shepherds select and breed for fine hand-spinning wool, whereas the Swedish and British farms have been

breeding more for pelts with distinctive luster and curl definition. Some Gotland breeders in the United States wish to bring the luster of the Swedish Gotlands into the New Zealand genetics, producing a soft fleece with much luster. They have started a selective upbreeding program, combining the Swedish traits with the New Zealand genetics.

Lambs/Breeding

Gotland ewes have strong maternal instincts and often have twins and triplets. Lambs weigh approximately 7 pounds and enter the world full of vigor. They are active and quick to suckle. Gotland lambs are usually born with silky black curls, though they are occasionally born with a paler birth coat. As they mature, they may retain their black color or turn various shades of silver gray. Lambs mature and grow out quickly. A true dual-purpose breed, Gotland lamb is described as a "good flavored cross grained meat."

Wool

In Sweden, Gotland fleeces range in color from light silver to dark charcoal gray. Fleece color should be consistent and clear throughout the entire fleece. Fibers should be uniform, with Swedish breeders looking for a range of 35-45 microns in mature fleeces. Breeders tend to shear their sheep twice a year, once in the late fall and then again in spring. The fleece grows 10-12 inches within a year's time. The fleece grows in long, fine, and lustrous distinctive curls. Soft to the touch, the smooth silky curls feel clean, having little lanolin.

In Sweden, Gotlands are known as the Pälstär, or pelt sheep, being raised primarily for their meat and pelts. Swedish pelts have distinct lustrous curls in varying shades of gray to almost black, with



a luxurious feel. Depending upon its purpose, the wool on the pelt is either left at full length or cut to two different lengths. If used for making clothing, the wool is trimmed to 18 mm whereas, pelts used for pillows, throws, or chair covers are trimmed to 35 mm in length. In the United States, fiber artists seek out Gotland wool for spinning, felting, and knitting. Pure Gotland yarn has a lovely drape when knit, and develops a subtle halo effect.

Breeders

Breeders may be found from coast to coast in the United States. For those wanting to purchase breeding stock, there are two Gotland sheep breeder associations, both of which have active members on the east and west coasts.

Breeder Resources

More information about Gotland sheep and available breeding stock:

Gotland Sheep Breeders Association of North America (GSBANA)

American Gotland Sheep Society (AGSS)

Credits:

Thank you to the following people and resources in writing this article:

Gutefår photo from North SheD.

My new friend and shepherd to "one of the world's largest flocks of purebred Gotland sheep," Dan, of Gotland Island

Gutefår: The Bronze Age Sheep of Gotland by Judith MacKenzie McCuin

Föreningen Gutefåret – The association dedicated to preserving Gutefår.

--

Kim Goodling, of Vermont Grand View Farm, purchased her flock of high percentage Gotland sheep in 2014 and traveled to Gotland, Sweden in September of 2015 to learn from Swedish shepherds. She writes about her experiences raising Gotland sheep on her blog <http://www.livingwithgotlands.com/>.

