



Gotland sheep

Vermont Preserves Unusual Breeds

by Katie Sullivan

As the major breeds of animals in agriculture become ever more populous, farmers are increasingly aware of the genetic peril we face when we rely on just a few highly specialized breeds of a handful of species. Among sheep raisers, even as the Merino, the Rambouillet and the highly specialized cross-breeds dominate the large-scale production market, minor pure breeds continue to occupy key niches in the Vermont sheep market. What makes Vermont a good place for breeds of sheep that aren't commercially viable elsewhere, and what special care and stewardship do they require?

Historically, Vermont is the first home of the Merino sheep, the world's finest-wooled sheep. Vermont Merinos enjoyed a heyday in the 1820s, but major market changes in the 1840s sent their numbers plummeting and saw many hill farms abandoned as ruined farmers headed west. The West became the center of range-based Rambouillets, while the Midwest is home to large production flocks of commercial crossbreeds. Since the 1950s, however, American sheep numbers have steadily declined as cattle production grows and competition from low-priced New Zealand and Australian lamb remains fierce. Against these grim odds, Vermont has taken up a new mantle in our nation's sheep flock: a bastion of uncommon and rare breeds.

The culture and climate of Vermont are well suited to the maintenance and promotion of uncommon breeds of sheep. According to the USDA, the Northeast and West consume the preponderance of the nation's lamb, making Vermont a significant lamb-consuming market. Current trends promoting farm-to-table eating and the direct purchase of meat from farmers makes boutique farming viable in this area. Fresh, pasture Vermont lamb features perfectly in the Vermont tourist experience. Our cold winters kill parasites that plague sheep in other regions. Uncommon and particularly hardy breeds, such as Icelandic, Shetland, and Jacob sheep, thrive on rough hill pasture that can't support a dairy cow.

Also integral to Vermont's success with rare and uncommon breeds is the fiber culture in Vermont. Vermont is home to a dozen yarn stores, and many farms make significant incomes selling fleece, yarn, and finished wool and fiber goods. Our local crafting community, from weaving schools and spinneries to neighborhood knitting groups all serve to support a valuable fiber infrastructure. Vermont has a mill with felt-making capabilities, and several that will spin raw wool into finished yarn.

Before we suppose that Vermont is a shepherd's paradise, however, there are several challenges faced by sheep raisers that challenge the viability of keeping specialized sheep.

Planning a farming enterprise on a spreadsheet to estimate costs and figures is hard enough. For shepherds with unusually small sheep or sheep with different nutritional needs, the guidelines in general books about sheep just won't do. Several shepherds raising Icelandic sheep in Vermont note that the breed has a higher copper requirement than most breeds of sheep and won't thrive unless given copper at a rate that would be hazardous to copper-sensitive breeds such as the Suffolk. General sheep informational books are usually focused on lamb production and may not address the best ways to market wool or the finer points of wool maintenance for

double-coated breeds such as the Shetland and the Icelandic.

Stewarding a breed is more than just keeping them healthy on the farm and promoting their wool, pelts, and meat. For many shepherds, finding high-quality rams for their uncommon breeds is a major concern. Tammy White of Wing and a Prayer Farm focuses on raising several rare and uncommon breeds. Her focus is Shetland sheep, listed as "recovering" by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC). According to the ALBC, the United States provides an important repository of critical Shetland color genetics. More than 20 colors and marking patterns exist in the U.S., while Shetlands in their British Isles have become predominantly white like most other breeds. White also raises rare Cotswold, Wensleydale, and uncommon Cormo sheep. For each breed, she is careful to source a healthy ram with sound conformation and good production records. In restricted gene pools, accidentally or carelessly propagating faults like poor teeth, weak feet, or eye problems could doom the viability of the breed. White has recently decided to stop breeding two of her Cormo ewes whose offspring had eye issues, even though Cormo wool and breeding stock are both extremely valuable. Giving up potential profits for the health of the breed is a dilemma many rare-breed shepherds face.

If raising a rare breed sounds challenging, establishing one in Vermont for the first time takes even more effort. In the rumpled hills of Washington, Vermont, Kim Goodling sold her prized Romney flock in 2014 to start a new adventure: Gotland sheep from the Swedish island of Gotland. Two years of research, extensive communication with the breed society, and a trip to Sweden were part of Kim's initial effort to learn about the Gotland and its particular dietary needs. She crossed the country to Oregon to purchase her foundation flock, noting that the cost of the trip effectively doubled the starting price of the ewes. Gotlands also need enhanced copper, so Goodling needed to find a vet to help formulate an appropriate ration for her new sheep. She also had to acclimate to more active, curious behavior from the Gotlands compared to the docile Romneys.

Like many sheep breeds that are rare in the United States, the Gotland arrived via artificial insemination. It is illegal to import most live sheep into the U.S., so semen from the desired breed is used to artificially breed ewes of an approved foundation breed. Their daughters are then artificially bred again to purebred rams of the new breed. Through time, effort, and expense, sheep with 97 percent Gotland blood were finally born in the mid 2000s, definitively establishing the Gotland in the United States. Goodling recognizes the importance of this project and has committed to maintaining purebred Gotlands. Losing valuable genetics to non-breeding or cross-breeding farms when the U.S. population of the pure breed is less than 500 would be disaster for the long-term viability of Gotlands in the U.S. Every individual counts!

I, too, have experienced the ups and the downs of raising rare breeds. My first foray into sheepraising involved the Cormo, which originated in Tasmania on one ranch and is not widespread in the U.S. I did not correctly match the needs of the breed with the conditions on my farm and my eco-

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conomic needs. My purebred Cormos absorbed our summer rains in their thick fleeces. While my cross-bred sheep in my rotational-grazing system shook the rain out and didn't mind a bit, the Cormos seemed to wish for a quieter, more sheltered existence. Cormos have long been popular in fiber circles due to their luxuriously soft wool, but I soon learned that very few of Vermont's Cormo owners were breeding their sheep. The rams I did find, fell short in various ways. One didn't have very soft wool at all, another had excellent wool, but he and his daughters were always on the lean side. The climate on the farm where they came from was much milder and the feed richer, so mine never did as well. I seldom got twins from my Cormos, and that was the kicker. While I was raising them for fiber, meat was still key to the economic viability of the flock. My sheep weren't producing twins because years of being raised for fiber had prompted shepherds not to select for twinning, as well. I couldn't motivate myself to get my next ram from Arizona or California, and I knew it was time to get a breed of sheep better suited to my farm, for my sake and for theirs.

In 2016, I bought a foundation flock of Bluefaced Leicesters, and already I can see that the breed association, my fellow breeders, and the sheep themselves are better aligned with my goals. This breed is primarily for meat but maintains high-quality fiber. The breeders association is active and helpful. Bluefaced Leicesters are a little tender for our climate, but I have plans in place to help them thrive. They typically have twins and triplets, and this spring my starting flock gave me four sets of twins and one set of triplets.

Raising rare breeds can be a rewarding experience for many shepherds. Rare breeds offer marketable, unique wool and meat products. Some are especially suited to thrive in the climate of Vermont, making many breeds economical here despite being marginal elsewhere. Shepherds choosing rare breeds must contend with the expense and mileage of sourcing rams, the hefty responsibility of keeping the genetics in the breed active, diverse, and viable, and the financial disadvantages of potentially sourcing genes from across entire oceans. Still, experienced shepherds—dedicated to doing something a little different—will continue to raise these sheep well into the future.

Katie Sullivan raises Bluefaced Leicester and Cormo-cross sheep in Williston with her partner, Matt. She loves the whole process of turning grass into sheep and sheep into meat and wool.



Bluefaced Leicesters



Gotland sheep

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