



ISBONA Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

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ISBONA's purpose is to provide information about Icelandic sheep to the general public and to facilitate the exchange of information between members and breeders. ISBONA also promotes the special attributes and products of these unique sheep.

Membership Benefits

- Quarterly newsletter
- ISBONA library
- Website breeders listing
- Internet discussion group
- Annual membership meeting

Newsletter membership	\$20
Full membership	\$30
Website membership	\$55



Why Icelandic Sheep?

Triple purpose breed: fiber/meat/milk
 Soft lustrous dual coated fleece
 Mild flavored, lean meat
 Farmstead milk and cheese
 Luxurious soft pelts
 Many color and pattern combinations
 Medium sized, early maturing, long lived
 Excellent mothers and vigorous lambs
 Suitable for pasture lambing
 Highly prolific, reliable twinners
 Thrive on good pasture and hay
 Finish on good pasture in 4 to 5 months
 High value products for niche markets

Icelandic Sheep Facts

The Icelandic sheep is one of the world's oldest and purest breeds. For over a thousand years, they have provided fiber, meat and milk. They are a medium-sized breed. Mature ewes in good condition are 130 to 160 lbs. and rams are 180 to 220 lbs. Both ewes and rams may be either polled or horned. Within the breed, conformation may vary. Breeding in Iceland has been for short-legged stocky animals with excellent meat production. The tail is naturally short, eliminating the need for docking. Docking an Icelandic sheep's tail prevents that animal from being registered. In North America, the Canadian Livestock Records Corporation registers Icelandic sheep.

The normal gestation period is 142 days, 5 days less than typical commercial breeds. Lambs are vigorous, on their feet and nursing within minutes of birth. Often the first twin has nursed before the second is born. Adult ewes seldom need assistance with lambing. This vigor is passed on in crosses with other breeds.

Ewes are seasonal breeders, starting estrus in October and continuing until May if not bred. They seldom naturally breed during summer. Rams appear to be sexually active year-round. Healthy ewes are often still actively breeding at age 10. Lambs reach sexual maturity early. Rams can start breeding as early as 5 months, and ewes commonly lamb as yearlings.

Prolificacy is quite good, on average 175-200%. Triplets are not uncommon. A Booroola-type multiple birth gene (i.e. for triplets, quads and quints) has been found in Icelandic sheep. It is named the Thoka gene after the first ewe known to carry it.

The eye-catching aspect of these sheep is their incredible color variations, with 17 possible combinations of colors and patterns. Colors range from snow white, through cream, taupe, various shades of brown (moorit), to inky black. Patterns include badgerface, mouflon and gray. There is also a gene for spotting, with numerous recognized and named markings.

A valuable characteristic of the breed is its "grass based" genetics. Iceland is not a grain producing land and these sheep were bred and have flourished for centuries on grass and browse.

Fiber

Icelandic sheep are known around the world for their fiber. The fleece has a dual coat, with a fine soft undercoat (*thel*) and a long coarser outer coat, (*tog*). Tog fiber is strong and lustrous and sheds rain and dirt well. The downy thel provides loft for the outer coat and insulation for the sheep. The tog is neither guard hair nor kemp. Both the tog and thel are true wool. Fleeces are open and thick with little lanolin, resulting in significantly less weight loss during washing than fleeces from other breeds. The average fall adult fleece weighs 3-5 lbs. in the grease.

The wool of Icelandic Sheep is a delight for fiber artisans. In the fall fleeces, the thel is typically 2-4 inches, very soft and irregularly crimped. The longer tog, 4-8 inches in the fall, is similar to mohair, wavy or corkscrew rather than crimped and is wonderful in worsted spinning. The two coats are often spun together without separating, as in Lopli yarn, but can be separated by hand for special projects. The versatility, ease of spinning and range of natural colors, makes this wool a handspinner's delight. It is also one of the best wools for felting, working up quickly and easily, producing a strong durable felt suitable for rugs, garments, footwear and fiber art.

Meat

In Iceland these sheep are bred almost exclusively for meat. More than 80% of a shepherd's income comes from meat. With ewes and lambs on good pastures, lambs should reach a slaughter weight of 80 to 100 lbs. in 4-6 months. Lambs often gain ½ to ¾ lbs. per day. The meat is lean, tender and mild flavored, with an average dressed weight of 35-45 pounds.

Pelts

Icelandic sheep produce excellent pelts. This is due in part to the low follicle count. There are about 12 follicles per square millimeter, compared to the Merino with 57 to 83. This makes for a very flexible pelt. The pelts are exceptionally beautiful because of their lustrous, long wool and the wide variety of colors and markings, and bring a high price in that niche market.

Milk

Icelandic ewes easily support twins and many raise triplets without assistance. In North America, they are used for personal milk production by many shepherds for yogurt and soap. Some farms are making gourmet artisan cheeses. There are a few operations milking more than 25 sheep, but long-term production records are not yet available. Crossing Icelandic sheep with commercial dairy breeds is also being investigated. For personal use, it is possible to allow lambs to continue to nurse while milking once per day, without sacrificing lamb growth.

The Icelandic Sheep has long been a valued animal on the farm, and continues to be a hardy, healthy, thrifty sheep, offering high quality meat, fiber and milk.