# Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Volume 4, Number 3 Summer 2000
Editor, Deb Kimball

## Historical and Modern Examples of Multi-horned Icelandic Sheep

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As a breeder of Icelandic sheep, I am interested in all of the many wonderful variations in genetics that are found within the Icelandic sheep as a breed. So when I started with icelandic sheep, I (as other breeders have done) had to learn the order of the dominant and recessive traits for color, pattern, and spotting. Once I had that figured out, I found that no matter how much we know there are still many things about sheep color, pattern, horning, and reproductive genetics that we have not yet figured out.

Most are familiar with the work that Dr. Stefan Adalsteinsson did on the subject of color and pattern genetics but do not realize that even Dr. Adalsteinsson recognized that there is much more that has not been researched or documented. This includes such things as genes for non-fading, the many variants of grey and badgerface, and the focus of this article, the gene for multiple horns.

I knew about multiple horning being in the genetics of Icelandic sheep, but had only seen pictures until visiting Iceland last summer (the summer of 1999). There, for the first time, I saw a full grown 4 year old 4 horned Icelandic ram, a black spotted guy with bold curving horns pictured below.

This example was in a Park/Zoo in reykjavik that is different than the type of zoo that most attend. Most zoos are places to see animals that are from far away places. This zoo is only for animals that can be found in Iceland. This encompasses the animals brought by the Vikings such as the Icelandic cow, horse, goat (much more rare than the sheep), chicken, sheep, seal, and the Icelandic Char (a fish in the salmon family).

This particular ram was wethered at birth because when a farmer comes across a four horned lamb it increases the possibilities of birth complications (one look at those horns will tell you that (so many examples of this genetic trait are lost to culling. In this case he was kept as the spotted pelts are particularly pretty and sell well. The farmer was going to raise him to full size and then cull him since large pelts bring the highest prices. Before this ram could be culled the park/zoo ran an ad looking for a 4 horned Icelandic sheep. That is how this ram got to the park/zoo. It would be interesting to know how many variations in horning and genetics are culled but whose genetics is still in the general population.

I have read that it is theorized that the four horned trait in Jacob sheep was derived from crossbreeding the Icelandic ram to native English Jacob spotted sheep. There are references to spotted Jacob sheep mentioned in English literature without the mention of multi-horns. The real question is how far back does multi-horning go in Icelandic sheep? I recently got a clue as to how well established the multi-horn gene really is.

I won in an auction on ebay a hand colored engraving done by a famous French naturalist (like the

American naturalist Audubon), named George Louis Leclerc Buffon who painted from 1766-1799. It depicts a sold moorit Icelandic ram with 3 of 4 horns showing. This documents that 200 years ago Iceland was known for its multi-horned naturally colored sheep. Over the centuries, Icelandic sheep have been exported to England and the European mainland but now I have the historical documentation that shows an Icelandic ram (and a solid moorit one at that).

In looking at the engraving, it appears that the tail was added as an afterthought as it is darker and longer than it should be. This is probably because it was not visible at the angle the original was drawn, but added after someone noticed that there was none showing. While Buffon was French, the engraving was printed in Amsterdam. I wonder how many other prints or historical examples of Icelandic sheep are around in book and antique stores waiting to be discovered.

At some point it may be possible to bring 4 horned Icelandic sheep to North America through importation of frozen ram semen. It is exciting to know that not only do these genes exist but that they have been around for hundreds of years. Today’s declining worldwide market for lamb meat and wool have caused populations of sheep to decline but it is gratifying to know that we are doing our part to preserve the unique genetics that are present in this delightful breed, the Icelandic sheep.