

Maine Couple Made Rare Breeds Their Mission

Icelandic cashmere dairy goats are so rare they're only found in Iceland. Since live goats cannot be imported, sheep producers Jo Ann and Wayne Myers are slowly upbreeding using semen from Iceland crossed with Oberhasli dairy goats. The Oberhasli were selected for their similar characteristics.

"We now have 4 goats that are 87 percent Icelandic," says Jo Ann Myers, Waldoboro, Maine. "It takes about 7 generations to get animals that are considered genetically pure, and we have 4 to go."

The Icelandic breed is quite rare even in Iceland where they have been raised since the earliest settlement. Myers reports the current number there at about 700, having reached a low of about 100 in the 1960's. One breeder reportedly owns half of them and was facing foreclosure in 2014. An international crowdsourcing effort on the Indiego website raised more than \$120,000 and saved the farm.

With all the breeding stock in one country, the Myers fear a disease outbreak could eliminate the breed. They are determined to establish a second population in the U.S.

While all goats produce an inner layer of very soft cashmere fibers, the Icelandic goats are known for the quality of their fiber.

Myers reports that at even 75 percent (just 2 crosses), their Icelandic goats are producing a good amount of cashmere fiber. In Iceland they're also used for meat and milk.

The biggest challenge the Myers face is a current bureaucratic snafu over semen importation. New tests are being required before more semen can be brought in to the U.S. As a result, the Myers have limited ability to continue upbreeding.

While their Icelandics may be the most rare breed on Meyers' farm, it isn't the only one. In fact, since starting the farm more than 20 years ago, rare breeds are what they have raised. Currently they have 6 breeds of duck, 4 breeds of sheep and 1 horse, all considered critical by the Livestock Conservancy.

Protecting rare breeds could be important in the future. For example, the farm's registered Soay sheep have a valuable trait. "They resist parasites," says Myers "and could be bred to other breeds to introduce parasite resistance."

Others of their breeds, like the Dutch Hookbill ducks, have more ornamental qualities. Quite endangered, the unique pattern of their feathers makes them valued for fishing lures.

Myers encourages others to explore rare



Rare Icelandic cashmere dairy goats are found only in Iceland, but JoAnn and Wayne Myers are determined to establish a second population in the U.S. Their Soay rams are shown at right.

breeds by visiting the Livestock Conservancy website, reading about the breeds, and then going to the registry for the breed. She suggests selecting breeds for characteristics that match the farm and farming style. They chose Leicester Longwool sheep for their ability to do well on the farm's mucky ground.

While rare breeding stock often comes at a premium price, the Myers prefer to encourage other breeders with the prices they charge. As an example, they sell a breeding trio of the Dutch Hook Ducks for \$30, about what registered ducks of any breed sell for.

"We operate as a business. Even though we may not be making a profit on the breeding stock, we do make a profit on the fiber we sell," says Myers. "We sell wool from the sheep and organic eggs from the ducks. We also grow and sell a range of organic produce and flowers, particularly you-pick raspberries and grapes."

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Gotland sheep are descendants from the Viking era on the Swedish island of Gotland. They have lustrous, smooth wool, and breeders are adding new colors.



Photo courtesy of ALMS Digital

Old Sheep Breed Comes In New Colors

An old Swedish sheep breed is getting more colorful because of some U.S. breeders. Sheep owners, knitters and fiber artists wanted a variety of shades from gray to black and browns.

Gotland sheep are thought to be descendants from the Viking era on the Swedish island of Gotland. Over the years they were bred to be polled with curly grey fleeces.

"When people see the wool, they get excited about the purling locks and the smooth feel. It's lustrous, pretty wool," says Carol Ronan, who has nearly 100 Gotland sheep on her Selma, Ore., farm. "However, it's the sheep that sells them. Gotlands are calm, curious, friendly and they like being handled. They're smart and they have personality."

She and other members of the Gotland Sheep Breeders Association of North America (GSBANA) focus on matching the Swedish standard for the Gotland breed. At the same time, they're excited about new colors, especially brown, which is showing up through breeding with approved foundation ewes.

Since they can't import sheep from Sweden, U.S. breeders rely on semen from Britain, Sweden and New Zealand that's used to impregnate Shetland, Finn, Icelandic and other foundation breed ewes.

"The brown shows up when you have two parents with brown genes. We didn't want

to cull them out," Ronan explains. "Shades of brown and gold are desired for natural colored wool, and they're hard to find."

There is a good market for the fleeces and roving. People who do felting like Gotland wool because it is smooth and silky. The meat is also considered excellent.

Besides their personality, Ronan appreciates the breed's hardiness. She has never had to worm her flock, and they adapt to hot and cold climates.

A major difference with Gotlands is that they need higher amounts of copper than other sheep breeds. Ronan has had success with feeding them an Angora goat mineral mix.

Because of the expense and years required for breeding, breeding stock is expensive, Ronan notes. She sells her animals according to the percentage of Gotland and how they were bred. Artificially inseminated semen from Sweden is the most expensive.

Sheep, wool and finished products can be purchased from Ronan and other GSBANA members (www.gsbana.org).

The American Gotland Sheep Society (www.AmericanGotlandSheep.org) also has Gotland breeders. The group only breeds for the original grey color, however.

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Black Sheep Breed Pretty, Practical

Black Welsh Mountain sheep may be considered a threatened and exotic breed by some in the U.S., but they're also a sustainable breed on the commercial level, says Oogie McGuire. She and her husband, Ken, have about 185 of the sheep on their Paonia, Colo., ranch, Desert Weyr.

"They're working sheep, not pets," McGuire emphasizes. "They need to be promoted as a functional meat sheep."

She understands why hobby farmers are attracted to them, however.

"They have a striking black color and elegant faces," she notes.

The breed dates back to medieval times. Black wool was prized because it was difficult to find natural dyes for black garments.

Welsh shepherds continued to breed for color and a finer fleece. Currently, in Britain, Black Welsh Mountain sheep flocks are common, and their meat is considered premium. Black Welsh Mountain sheep in the U.S. date back to 1972, when Thomas Wyman of Easton, Md., imported them.

McGuire learned about Black Welsh sheep because of her interest in the Middle Ages and her desire to spin and weave a black cloak. "Black Welsh Mountain sheep tend to be easy to care for. They're good mothers, and we lamb out on pasture," McGuire says.

The sheep thrive in most regions except hot and muggy climates because of their dark wool. Tails don't need to be docked, which saves work. And, they are easier to handle because they are smaller than some breeds, with the ewes up to 120 lbs. and the males up to 160 lbs. The McGuires worm and vaccinate according to their vet's recommendations, but the sheep are hardy,



Photos courtesy of Fred Sacks

Black Welsh Mountain sheep have a striking black color and elegant faces. Oogie McGuire and her husband raise about 185 of them on their Colorado ranch.

McGuire says.

"We finish them without any grain. They are on pasture and eat hay. Customers like the flavor," she adds. The McGuires sell meat from their farm and in a couple of area stores, as well as fleeces, wool, roving, yarn and socks. They also sell sheep manure and the horns from the rams.

They record all their animals with the National Sheep Improvement Program (NSIP) for breeding value calculations.

"We're actively looking for breeders committed to continuing genetic breeding," McGuire says. "It's important to maintain because you can't get genetic diversity back once it's gone."

People interested in finding breeding stock can contact the McGuires or check out the association's website (www.blackwelsh.org). There are currently about 1,800 animals in 45 to 50 registered flocks.

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