

San Clemente Goats: Saving A “Feral” Endangered Breed

The San Clemente Island goat is unlike any goat you’ve ever seen. Don’t expect a 4-ft. fence to stop one from leaping over. Even a 5-ft. tall fence may not be enough to contain an active male with 3-ft. horns. And check out its deer-like appearance, narrow nose and narrow ears with a distinctive crimp. Finally, the breed has feral tendencies, which is totally understandable when you know they survived on their own for at least 100 years off the California coast on San Clemente Island.

Introduced to the island in 1875, estimates indicate that there were between 15,000 and 30,000 running wild by the 1970’s. Hunters greatly reduced the population before the Fund for Animals rounded up volunteers to rescue them. Classified as critically endangered, there are about 750 San Clemente goats, but they are thriving in a variety of climates throughout the U.S. under the care of people interested in preserving the breed.

The biggest herd of about 200 is owned by John F. Carroll and Chad Wegener at Willow Valley Farms, LLC in Nebraska. They also recently inherited the role of leading the San Clemente Island (SCI) Goat Foundation, dedicated to preserving the genetic diversity and growing the herd while increasing the geographical distribution (www.scigoats.com).

“Their color scheme, intelligence and feral-

ness is what I appreciate,” Wegener says. “They are fantastic mothers, and you rarely have to intervene with birthing. I’ve only had to do it 3 times in 5 years.”

He set up a chute fencing system to handle them for vaccinations and other treatments.

While many goat breeders raise them to conserve the breed, he and Carroll plan to set up a dairy operation and make boutique artisan cheese. Though the females have smaller udders than many goats and produce less milk, the milk they produce is high in butterfat so there is less whey and waste.

The challenge is that it’s common for San Clemente Island sheep to have an extra supernumerary teat, which does not work well with two-teat milkers.

“We’re working on selective breeding to increase our numbers of two-teated goats,” Wegener says.

Other producers are already using the milk to make soap and some sell males for meat. They could also be used for brush control.

Other than taller fencing, the San Clemente goats have similar care requirements as other goat breeds. They do well on pasture, but receive alfalfa, grass, hay and grain supplements during the winter and when nursing. With two coats, including a cashmere layer, they do well in an unheated barn in the coldest climates and can handle heat in the South.

Adult females average 24 in. tall and weigh 80 to 100 lbs. Males average 30 in. in height and can weigh up to 200 lbs. The males have spiral swept back horns that can grow to nearly 3 ft. long.

Prices vary according to the breeder. On the East and West coasts SCI goats average \$300-\$400, while prices tend to be a bit less in the Midwest.

The SCI foundation website includes a breeders list for people interested in helping the breed grow, Wegener notes.

“Do your research,” he suggests. “Goats are curious, so you have to have a proper facility and fencing.”

Members of the foundation believe that it’s important to maintain the breed and their genetics, which may also be valuable for crossbreeding. Most breeders do not disbud their goats so that they maintain their natural feral beauty. But as they domesticate a breed that ran wild for more than 100 years, it’s also important to let San Clemente Island goats be what they are.

“We have 40 acres and have rocky land, pasture, forest and sandy areas. The goats will climb trees, jump over rocks,” Wegener says. “I hope we never lose that or that they get lazy.” Carroll says, “The best part of the day is when we get to let the goats out of their pasture and follow them around for a couple of hours. Goats will teach you a lot.”



San Clemente Island goats survived on their own for at least 100 years on an island off the California coast. Small flock producers are trying to keep the breed pure.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Chad Wegener, 6902 S. 240th St., Gretna, Neb. 68028 (ph 402 510-2408; chad@willowvalleyfarms.org).



Both sexes of the Old Irish Goat breed have horns and beards. A group of Irish volunteers are trying to increase their numbers.

Nearly Extinct “Old Irish Goat” Breed

Modern DNA testing of old museum bones and skins helped define and save an ancient breed - the Old Irish Goat. As a result of the study of the relics in 2013, a group of Irish volunteers have made it their mission to do whatever they can to increase the breed’s numbers.

“We have had a captive breeding program running since 2014 and we now have just over 40 goats,” says Sean Carolan, a member of The Old Irish Goat Society. Feral goats were caught and tested. Those that best matched the old DNA were found around Mulranny, Ireland, and bred in a leased walled garden.

“The Old Irish Goat is multi-colored, with 12 color patterns. A herd looks like a moving patchwork quilt,” he says. “Achieving a viable population as well as conserving the 12 color patterns presents a challenging conservation mission not yet accomplished.”

Both sexes of the breed typically have horns and beards. The Old Irish Goat has a long, coarse, oily coat with a cashmere undercoat. A large rumen helps them digest poor forage, and legs are short and strong for their natural hilly environment. Small pricked ears resist frostbite while a long muzzle

warms cold winter air before it hits the lungs.

There were an estimated quarter million Old Irish goats until the 1920’s. The Old Irish Goat helped people survive during famines, providing milk, meat, fat, hide, horns and fiber to rural families. The purity of the breed was lost when European breeds were crossed with the Old Irish Goat, though some still run wild.

“The feral or wild goats are pretty easy to tame down, particularly if bottle fed or well handled,” Carolan says. “They are super intelligent and clean and will turn the latch on your door and take up residence.”

Carolan notes that there are supporting groups in the U.S. that provide funding such as the County Mayo Foundation and the Ireland Fund.

The society hopes to build the herd up to at least 1,000 to save the Old Irish Goat, which they consider to be an important part of Ireland’s national heritage.

Check out the website for more information.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, The Old Irish Goat Centre, Mulranny, Co Mayo, Ireland, F28 X213 (www.oldirishgoatsociety.com; info@oldirishgoatsociety.com).

Goat-Raising Hobby Became Profitable Farm Business

When Bonnie DeBernardi bought two Nubian goats for her grandsons nearly 20 years ago, she had no idea the purchase would lead to an exciting business venture for she and her husband Don.

“Those female goats grew up and we decided they should have kids (baby goats) of their own so the grandkids could raise them,” says Bonnie, “and the whole idea just took off.” Today, the DeBernardi goat herd numbers more than 200 animals with about 40 of them producing milk. Don DeBernardi turns that milk into artisan cheese sold mostly at local retail stores and farmers markets.

At age 81, he isn’t ready to slow down and ease into retirement any time soon.

However, transitioning to milking goats came with its share of challenges.

Don visited relatives in Switzerland to learn cheese making and returned to his farm with a vat that held 15 gal. of milk. He converted a small building on his farm into a cheese making room and says, “By that time Bonnie had several more goats milking, so I was making cheese twice, sometimes 3 times a day,” DeBernardi says with a laugh. Soon he purchased a 52-gal. computerized vat with a pasteurizer that allowed him to make cheese twice a week. Now he markets his product to local stores, and World’s Best Cheeses, an online cheese business.

“We’re low-key, we just kind of do it for pleasure,” DeBernardi says. He conducts free tours of the goat farm and cheese-making operation. DeBernardi taught his grandson Nick Temple how to make cheese so he can fill in when needed. “He really likes it,” DeBernardi says.



Don DeBernardi turns milk from his Nubian goats into artisan cheese that’s sold at local stores and farmers markets.

Producing goat cheese requires a very specific process. It begins with 42-degree milk, then a culture is added followed by a resting period and other processes that include draining off the whey, then crafting cheese into 6 and 9-in. wheels. The wheels have to be turned, then placed into a brine tank the next day for about 12 hrs. before being stored on shelves.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Two Rock Valley Goat Cheese, 7955 Valley Ford Road, Petaluma, Calif. 94952 (ph 707 762-6182; www.tworockgoatcheese.com).

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