



The Shetland is one of the Northern Short-tailed primitive breeds of sheep that includes the Manx Loghtan and the Soay. The breed was probably influenced by sheep brought over by the Vikings from Scandinavia as the modern Shetland has many similarities with Scandinavian breeds. By the seventeenth century a strong trade in wool and woollen products from the Shetland Isles had developed. Over the next few centuries a small trade remained and in 1927 the Shetland Flock Book Society was formed to preserve the breed. Although the Rare Breeds Survival Trust did classify the breed as rare the population has developed and there are now many flocks of Shetland sheep throughout the mainland and the Shetland Isles.

Key Characteristics:

Size- Small- ewes- 25-45kg, rams- 40-65kg- Variation between upland Shetlands and lowland Shetlands.

Looks- A typical primitive breed similar in appearance to a Manx or a Soay. The breed is normally white faced with a white fleece but can come in 11 different colours with 30 different recognized markings. Ewes are normally polled but can be horned. Rams are horned, occasionally rams may have 4 horns.

Uses- Upland grazing, specialist wool production, low input ewe, conservation grazing, decorative

Hardy- The breed is very hardy and is able to cope with being out wintered on the Shetland Isles. They can survive on sparse grazing.

Decorative- With the range of colours the Shetland is a striking breed and popular for display purposes.

Disease resistance- Anecdotal evidence suggests a level of resistance to flystrike and footrot. Research carried out on worm resistance found that the breed possessed a very good level of inbuilt resistance to gastro-intestinal worms.

Long lived- Ewes can lamb at up to 12 years old.

Lambing %- Dependent on location- Lowland flocks lamb at around 150-160% but this figure is lower in an upland flock.

Birth weight- Small lambs. Very few lambing prob-

lems. Lambs are known for being very active at birth.

Conservation grazing- An active grazer and browser able to survive on the poorest quality forage and hardy enough to do well on most sites.

Specialist wool production- The Shetland has one of the finest fleeces and is an excellent proposition for use in woollen products. The wide variety of colours within the breed adds a new marketing opportunity.

Crossing- ewe- The Shetland-Cheviot ewe has become a popular and productive upland ewe and is now a recognised cross and an alternative to a Mule type ewe. Other uplands/longwool breeds can be crossed with a Shetland to produce a thrifty, maternal ewe breed. The purebred Shetland ewe is a good choice for a low input, extensive system and lambs easily to most terminal sires. An example system would be a farm running 500 Shetland ewes, putting a Ryeland ram on most of them. Ewes lamb easily, require little inputs and produce a good lamb². Similar systems are found throughout the country and the Shetland is proving to be an economical alternative to other lowland ewes.

Crossing- ram- The Shetland ram can be used on commercial type ewe lambs to ensure an easy first time lambing.

Meat- A purebred Shetland lamb killed at 6 months old will generally give a carcass weighing around 13-14kgs. With the great amount of size variation within the breed some strains will produce much lighter carcasses than this. The breed is suitable for keeping on to hogget and mutton age and can reach a 20kg carcass by about 18 months old. The meat is reputed to have an excellent flavour and is suitable for direct marketing. A crossbred Shetland lamb can reach a higher carcass weight in less time and has the potential to grade well- The aforementioned Ryeland x Shetland lambs nearly all graded at R3L.

Wool- Staple length- 10cm. Fleece weight- 1-1.5kg. Quality 56s-60s³

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust is the leading national charity working to conserve and protect the United Kingdom's rare native breeds of farm animals from extinction. We rely on the support of our members, grants and donations from the public to raise the £700,000 a year needed to maintain our conservation work with rare UK native breeds of farm animals. Visit www.rbst.org.uk to see how you can help.

More information available from the
Shetland Sheep Society-
www.shetland-sheep.org.uk or 01673 857363

¹ "The Relative Resistance to gastrointestinal nematode infection of three British sheep breeds"- Nick Golding

² "The Shetland ewe- a quality meat producer"- R.P.Wear in "The Ark"-

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