

Focus On Fiber Series: Jacob

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Introduction:

Jacob sheep are magical with their long horns, gentle faces, and spots. One look was all it took to inspire me to search for their wool. There was no need for me to research their wool characteristics to figure out what project their fiber might be suited to. It didn't matter to me. The Jacob's stunning appearance was all that was needed to convince me to spin some of their wool. The search was on...

History of The Breed:



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The origins of the Jacob sheep remain a mystery. They have been linked to Scandinavia, Spain, and the South Africa. In the 1750's, England imported flocks of Jacobs from Spain. Ship import data from that time and on show spotted sheep arriving in England from Portugal, Spain, South Africa, and North Africa. The Jacob sheep were known as "Spanish" or "Piebald" sheep originally but the name Jacob appears in holding listings as far back as 1834.

There are a couple of famous legends about the Jacob including the most recognizable story of them being descended from Jacobs spotted sheep flock from the Torah. Although spotted sheep can be seen in Egyptian wall paintings dating to 1800 BC, we are unable to directly link our modern Jacob sheep to Jacob's famous flock!

Another legend has our beloved Jacobs surviving a shipwreck of the Spanish Armada as it attempted to invade England during the 16th century. Whatever the beginnings of the Jacob, it is evident that they are worthy of legendary status among sheep.

Due to their exotic beauty and good nature, Jacobs were often kept as ornamental "park sheep" on country estates and public parks. Their popularity dwindled and, by 1911, they were on the verge of being wiped out. It was then that the Park Sheep Society was created to save seven breeds of sheep from extinction including the Jacob. In 1969, there were a mere 1,681 Jacobs left in England, which prompted the creation of the Jacob Sheep Society.

Currently, the Jacob is no longer listed as being at risk by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust in the UK though they are still considered "threatened" by the American Livestock Breed Conservancy which means they calculate less than 5,000 Jacob sheep worldwide.

Breed Characteristics:



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Jacob sheep are small and fine boned. They resemble goats with their light, long bodies. American ewes weigh in at 80 – 120 lbs and rams at 120 – 180lbs with their UK counterparts being larger. Both sexes have 2 -4 horns normally, although there are some sheep that grow 6.

They are resistant to foot and parasite problems and are easy to keep. Their body is covered in patches of dark and light spots for which it is well noted making them a handspinning favorite.

The Wool:



Jacob sheep produce medium wool of approximately 26-33 microns or a Bradford Count of 56s-48s with much variation per individual fleece for fineness. Fleeces should have as little kemp (coarse fibers) as possible for handspinners. The average staple length is about 3 to 6 inches. Jacobs do not grow a dual coat (the coarse outer coat and finer inner coat) like other multiple horn sheep do, e.g. Icelandic.

The color of the dark spots can be black, which can turn brownish due to sun bleaching, or “lilac” which is a grey-brown. In Ingrid Painter’s book, *Jacob Sheep in America*, she has listed five types of Jacob fleeces:

Type A is the finest of fleece, with no kemp on belly, and well-defined spots. It is an even, open fleece of high quality.

A quilted fleece, or type B, refers to a fleece whose dark patches consist of longer and coarser hair than the finer, white patches.

In type C, or freckled fleece, there are no true white spots in the fleece. The white wool has small “freckles” throughout giving it a grey quality. A freckled fleece may have Type A quality wool.

Type D is known as a spongy fleece, which is dense, long, and kempy. This type of fleece has lost the open quality to the wool. It is also the heaviest of all the types listed.

Type E is a wiry fleece which is a extremely kempy and would only be suited to be used in carpets and the like.

Fleeces weigh between 3 – 6 lbs. Handspinners who purchase raw Jacob fleeces often do so to have the opportunity of producing many shades of yarn from one fleece. Depending on the fleece type, Jacob wool is suitable for sweaters, outerwear, blankets, and rugs.



Image by [@Davehamster](#) of flickr

Resources:

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