

British Icelandic Sheep Breeders Group



Description

The Icelandic is a fine-boned, medium-sized sheep, long or short legged, horned or polled in both sexes. Four-horned sheep exist in Iceland but there are as yet none in the UK. It has an open face, straight or slightly roman-nosed, with bright rather prominent eyes. The tail is naturally short and fluke-shaped. Mature rams weigh up to 90kg and ewes 60kg. They are hill sheep that browse as well as graze, and are listed in the Grazing Animals Project for nature conservation management. The fleece consists of a dual coat of very fine underwool (thel) and a long lustrous hair-like outer coat (tog), and is found in all the natural colours. Broken colours and patterns are common. Fleece weighs from 2kg upwards, with a full year's growth of undercoat measuring around 6cm, and outercoat 21cm (range 12 - 80 microns, Bradford Count over 70 - under 46. Mean 27 microns, Bradford Count 56)

History

The Icelandic is a member of the Northern short-tailed group of sheep. It is a primitive breed, and still shows many of the characteristics of the wild sheep, with its dual coat that is moulted and often coloured. It differs from British primitive sheep in that over the centuries it has become larger, and can be more docile. It was taken to Iceland by the Vikings, who colonised the island between 870 and 930 AD. Genetically it is the same today as it was 1100 years ago, and is possibly one of the oldest and purest domesticated breeds of sheep in the world today. Icelandic sheep have remained rare in the UK since being imported here for breeding purposes in 1979.

Main Purpose of the Breed

Icelandic sheep are capable of providing meat, milk, coloured wool and skins, and will clear rough grazing land too. In the UK they are kept mainly for the coloured wool, meat, and for the sale of pure breeding stock. With less breeding for white than in Iceland, there is a considerable range of fleece colours; patterns range from spectacles to large patches of colour, darker dorsal stripes, mouflon and badgerface.

Outstanding Qualities

Icelandic sheep are hardy, intelligent, long-lived, alert and very fast on their feet. Healthy ewes are able to lamb till 12 - 14 years old. They come in season mainly from October through to April. Prolificacy is good, twins are common, and triplets are not unusual, particularly with more intensive management. Lambs are small at birth but grow quickly. By using each ewe's own natural cycle it is possible to stagger lambing to provide a continuous supply of meat lambs. The meat of the Icelandic is lean and well flavoured. Mutton from a 2-3 year old is a real gastronomic delight. The Icelandic has been crossed successfully with other breeds to produce an animal with a bigger carcass.

Breed Society

The British Icelandic Sheep Breeders Group was set up in 1988 to maintain a Flock Book of Icelandic sheep bred in Britain, and to provide information about the breed. Contact the Secretary of the Group via www.icelandicsheepbreedersofbritain.co.uk or www.britishicelandicsheepbreedersgroup.co.uk

