

From the
Premier Breeder
of British Registered
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

Viewpoint

THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

Fringe Benefits

by Kathie Miller

In summer, my thoughts turn to wool, and how a phone call from across the continent began my unexpected entry into the wool business.

A number of years ago I was contacted by Margaret B. Russell of Antrim Handweaving in Byfield, Massachusetts, an artisan handweaver specializing in heritage breeds of British sheep. Margaret hoped to support both the preservation of these breeds as well as the art of handweaving.

I referred her to a couple of breeders who I knew were interested in wool production, but when none replied to her inquiries I volunteered that I had some dirty fleece from last year that was stuffed in an old feed bag in the barn. If she wanted it she could



Blond ewe molting in Wales

have it for the postage.

I reluctantly packed it in a box and shipped it off to her, a bit embarrassed by its condition, and anxious about what her reaction would be. This was someone who had been weaving for twenty-five years and knew a good fleece when she saw one. To my shock she was thrilled when she opened the box. Not a handspinner herself, Margaret found a processor to which she forwarded the carton.

Still River Mill in Eastford, Connecticut, is a family-run operation dedicated to

servicing small farms and producers all over the country. They process small lots and specialize in rare



Rooping

fibers: American buffalo (bison), cashmere, llama, pet fibers and now Soay and Boreray, the only mill in the U.S. that can make such a claim. They were undaunted by the Soay's short one- to three- inch staple length. Margaret had Still River wash and, if it contained guard hairs and/or some "VM" (vegetative matter), de-hair and/or fiber clean it. Then it was spun to her weight and ply specifications. She prefers a 2-ply

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Of Fleece and Friendship

by Kathie Miller

Heather and I met on a trip to St. Kilda in 2000, both of us drawn by our curiosity, sense of adventure and our love of Soay sheep.

She had kept in touch over the years, always talking of her dream of moving to a farm. Despite her frequent, fascinating e-mails, we still barely knew each other. At last, in 2007, she came to visit and we discovered we had more in common than we realized. As she was leaving, she took one last

trip to the barn. While there, she lifted the lid of a garbage can marked "Margaret's Wool" only to discover it was full of raw fleece. She grabbed a BIG handful and, without saying a word, put it in a bag she was carrying.

Two months later, a package arrived. Inside was an incredibly soft, hand knit,



Photo by Daniel Manheart

chocolate brown hat. The wool she had taken had been spun (using a simple handheld device called a "drop spindle") and the fistful of raw wool had been transformed into yarn that she had knitted into a cap.

One year later I needed that cap, which somehow Heather had seemed to know. As it turned out, one of the things we had in common was cancer. 🐏

RESOURCE GUIDE

For information about availability of weaving, contact Margaret B. Russell at mbrweaver@comcast.net or www.antrimhandweaving.com

The cleaner your fleece, the less processing the mill will have to do and the more yarn you will get. If the fleece is heavily filled with VM it will be retained in the yarn. The better the quality (cleaner) of the fleece the better the quality of the yarn.

There is generally a minimum eight to nine months wait for processing, so don't delay in sending in your fleece. The fleece must be received in order to get your name on the waiting list.

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All advice in this newsletter has been used successfully on our farm. It is important to remember that every animal and situation is different. Before you try any of our suggestions, we urge you to consult your veterinarian.

Fringe *continued from page 1*

heavy weight yarn because it best reflects the fleece characteristics when it is mill spun. What left here as 10.6 pounds of dirty wool was returned to her as 6 pounds of clean, spun yarn.

We were amazed by the lovely chocolate color which had warmth and an organic quality that neither of us expected. Its strength, density and resilience made it ideal for weaving, and the flecks of vegetative matter in the yarn that I had been so worried about, and which would have made it unsuitable for handspinning or knitting, just added to its character.

The following season we agreed I would collect as much as I could and take better care of it. We organized our ideas and kept track of costs. What she could charge for finished pieces determined my price: \$10 a pound. In June and July I began collecting a little wool each time I fed or went to the barn. I carefully stored it in a clean plastic garbage can, picking out as much grass as I could.

July 15th became my annual

shipping date. Rather than delicately packing three boxes, as I had done the first year, I crammed as much as I could in one and held it shut with what must have been a pound of packing tape. What the mill received was a Soay jack-in-the-box!



Raw wool, spun yarn

Soay ewes usually shed after lambing, rams after the rut in spring, and wethers and non-breeders only sometimes. It is believed that hormones are responsible for shedding. Sheep that do not shed are

easy to shorn with shears or scissors for their comfort in the summer heat and, in areas where fly strike is a problem, to reduce infestations.

Soay skin is thin and tender and plucking must be done very gently and only in those areas where the wool has released. Shedding seems to start at the neck and work its way down the back and sides. Seldom does it come off all at once. For several

weeks the flock looks half-naked.

With rooing (hand plucking), as opposed to shearing, only the wool comes off and the guard hairs are left to fall out later. Within a few days new fleece is already beginning to appear, and a sheep that looked bald when rooed starts to get some color. As with all things Soay, quality varies. Some fleeces are full and soft; others are very short or very coarse and more primitive. The sheep that I have supplemented over the winter (who already have a naturally soft fleece) produce even finer wool and more of it.



Emmie's commemorative piece

With the yarn, Margaret has produced a variety of wonderful weavings; small blankets (wraps), table runners, bookmarks and commemorative pieces. You can only imagine the pleasure I derived last winter from snuggling under a warm Soay blanket that the year before had been wool growing on the back of a ewe in my own barn. ☺

Margaret Russell and Christine Williams contributed to this story.

JULY CALENDAR

- Ship wool
- Shear sheep that did not molt
- Finish lambing vaccinations
- Trim rams' horns as necessary
- Start fly protection in the barn

TIP OF THE MONTH

If you plan to save wool, do not use woodchips/sawdust as bedding as it will not come out.

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