



SOUTHERN OREGON
SOAY SHEEP FARMS
www.soayfarms.com

Viewpoint

FROM THE PREMIER BREEDER OF BRITISH REGISTERED SOAY SHEEP

All that wool...

by Kathie Miller and Heather McLaren

I can't count the number of times I have pulled my jeans out of the dryer and then remembered I should have checked the pockets.

The soft brown wool I forgot I had stuffed in them is always transformed into a hunk of felt.

Felt is actually one of the world's oldest fabrics, wedged somewhere between fashioning clothing from animal skins and primitive weaving. While fleece production is not why we breed these



Ewe kept on grass pasture

sheep, there are lots of things you can do with the wool. Besides felting, it can be spun, knitted, or woven. In the nineteenth century when knit-

ting was introduced to St. Kilda, the St. Kildans actually knitted Soay wool into undergarments.

Because of its short staple length, Soay wool can be a frustrating challenge for the inexperienced handspinner. But because of the double coat that limits its suitability to handspinning, it is ideal for felting. While expensive, it can also be processed by experienced small fiber mills such as Still River in Connecticut. They do a wonderful job of

transforming raw fleece into yarn and are especially good at dealing with vegetable matter (VM). While the result would not be acceptable to



Ewe on a dry lot

a knitter, it makes a lovely yarn with an organic quality for artisan hand-weaving.

Soay can be shorn, but the preferred method of collecting wool is "rooing", which is gently hand-plucking when the sheep naturally molts in the spring and summer (see July 2008 *Viewpoint*). The advantage of rooing is that guard hairs and kemp fibers are left behind on the animal to fall out later, leaving you a soft, downy fleece that is ready to be cleaned and processed.

If you are going to raise Soay for wool, keeping the fleece cleaner will make processing it later a lot easier.

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November Calendar

- ❑ Make final plans for your breeding groups. Put rams to the ewes November through December.
- ❑ Watch rams closely when you enter pens. They can become more aggressive than normal, protecting their ewes during the rut.
- ❑ Keep a calendar. Note dates rams and ewes are put together and especially note dates of any "accidents"—rams jumping fences or break outs.
- ❑ Watch bachelor flock for excessive fighting. Use ram shields if necessary.

A little magic

by Kathie Miller

On October 18, 2000, the sheep Val and I were importing from Canada had just crossed the border and were rumbling down the main street of a small New York town.

They passed the house of a man whose daughter would later become my friend. This fall, on the tenth anniversary of that event, five lambs went back to that same town to the daughter of that man who had watched their ancestors pass by a decade earlier.

Recently, the daughter, Shelley, sent me a touching letter that reminds me of the magic these sheep have brought into my life and the lives of so many others.

"Dear Kathie, I think you need to add therapy animals to the list of amazing attributes of these little guys.

Back in January, my oldest, Andrew was diagnosed with a mild form of Tourettes. He has tics that cause his head to bob forward and makes chirping sounds.



Andrew greets his new friends

When he is with the lambs there are no signs of the Tourettes. They will both eat out of his hand and have let him pet them almost since they have arrived. They have become such a part of the family already!"

Resources

Still River Mill has extensive experience with Soay wool. Their waiting list is presently about two to three months long (down from six months). They do require a deposit to hold your place in line.

Still River Mill, LLC
Phone: 860-974-9918
Fax: 860-315-7240
<http://www.stillrivermill.com>;
Email: sales@stillrivermill.com

A premier fiber magazine, Wild Fibers, <http://www.wild-fibersmagazine.com/>. Even if fibers aren't your passion, this is a spectacular publication with amazing photographs.

Sheep shows are the best place to purchase raw fleece.

Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival, West Friendship, MD, May 7-8, 2011: <http://www.sheepandwool.org/>

Blacksheep Gathering, Eugene, Oregon, late June: <http://www.blacksheepgathering.org/>

Oregon Flock and Fiber Festival, Canby, Oregon, late September: <http://www.flockandfiberfestival.com/>

NYS Sheep and Wool Festival, Rhinebeck, NY, Oct. 15-16, 2011: <http://www.sheepandwool.com/>

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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.

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All that wool *continued from page one*

Sheep raised on grass pasture will always have cleaner wool than those on a dry lot fed dry hay year-round. Alfalfa (which should always be used sparingly) is the worst. Wood shavings used as bedding are also the devil to get out. The less debris you have, the less work you will have processing and the higher percentage of usable fiber you will have to work with.

It has also been established that nutrition has a lot to do with wool production, and those naturally woolly sheep that I have fed sugar beet pulp over the year have produced fuller fleeces than those that were not supplemented.

Before you can do anything, however, the fleece needs to be cleaned, and that begins on the animal. Heather McLaren of Rocky Mountain Soay has been spinning and knitting for more than



Fleece from a ewe kept on a dry lot

forty years and was kind enough to put down some basic instructions on how to prepare raw wool for later carding and spinning.

Preparing the fleece:

The worst part of processing fleece is getting rid of chaff (VM). To accomplish this, take a scrubbing brush or a dog comb and lightly rake the worst off before you start removing fleece from the sheep. Brush it as clean as you can while it is still on their backs. Do your best to get it as vegetation-free as possible while the debris is still just on the outside tips of the fleece.

It's a lot easier to clean than if it is all tangled inside. Take your time here!

As you collect the wool, drop it into a bucket/tub/bag where it will stay as clean as possible. For handspinning, every single scrap of chaff must be removed, so this is the easiest moment to do it.

As Soay are double-coated (one of their primitive characteristics that was lost when sheep were selectively bred for wool), there may be some hair which is easy to pick out as it is fairly slippery. Shake it well. If the animal was shorn, lay the fleece on a table and pick clean the obviously poor areas like under the tail and around the belly. Now you are ready to wash.

Take the cleaned wool and put it in the hottest possible water you can with a little liquid Ivory soap, about one capful per quart/liter. To get the water really hot, I add kettle-boiled water. Cover and soak for some hours.

Next, gently drain the wool without agitating it. Agitation will cause it to matt/shrink/tangle badly (felt). Wash it again with very hot water and less soap. Cover and soak. Gently drain. Repeat this process until the water comes out reasonably clean when it is poured off.

Soaking performs wonders all by itself because



Light flecks are lanolin

the scales on each filament open, releasing the dirt and lanolin. Do not let the fiber get cold in the dirty water or the

lanolin you have just soaked out will cake back on it again. If you are doing this in the sink, use a cheap drain sieve (available at places like Wal-Mart) so you don't clog the drain with scraps!

Rinse well. A huge colander which I found at a Chinese market works very well for this, as I can drain without agitating the fleece. Finally rinse again with very hot water to which you have added a few tablespoons per gallon of brown vinegar.

Dry on a wire rack or shelf set out on a concrete or patio floor. You will be amazed at how soft that scruffy fleece feels, now that it's free of lanolin and vegetation. You are now ready to card.

To be continued next month

Tip of the Month

Make water pipes ram-proof by securing heavy gauge wire fencing around them.

