



## FOCUS

# American Karakul Sheep

by Deborah Y. Hunter and Julia DeVlieg. Photos by Julia DeVlieg

## Profile

**K**arakul. Just the word evokes a different place, something unique. This ancient, desert breed of sheep is known in its Middle East and Central Asian homelands as the producers of Persian lamb fur.

In the United States, Karakul sheep have other roles: spectacular and colorful in the show ring; a rug-maker's dream, while distant cousins thrive as self-sufficient sheep in harsh, remote environments on western ranges.

Karakul sheep are unique and amazing animals that can take care of themselves. Karakuls:

- Are rugged, disease and parasite-resistant. Karakuls are tough. They can take what nature throws out, then take some more.

- Have great lamb survival. Karakul ewes are some of the most protective mothers on the planet.

- Are productive foragers and grazers.

- Are very lean and superior in flavor with mild, almost sweet meat; even aged animals. Most fat is not in the meat, it's in the fat tail.

- Have distinctive coarse wool to braid, spin, weave, knit and felt, in a myriad of natural colors.

- Are beautiful, intelligent, classy-looking sheep.

- Karakul sheep are one of the few breeds that can have variable ear sizes, ranging from very long to elf size, about one to two inches.

- Will breed out of season.

- Can have wattles.

- Have fat tails.

Most Americans look at fat tails, akin to mud flaps, and ask 'How does any work get done at this working end of the sheep?' But it does. And consider the benefits.

It is not unusual to see American Karakuls in good condition with foot-wide tails filled



with over ten pounds of fat. With this nutritional reservoir, ewes go into their lactation with plenty of fat-rich milk to successfully wean big twin lambs and remain in decent condition themselves. This is a major advantage of fat-tail sheep, and one of the reasons Karakuls are fast becoming a breed of choice in American sheep dairies.

To dispel a myth about breeding fat-tail ewes, rare is the ewe who fails to breed because her tail is too large. Undocked ewes can lift their tail for the ram using a lower appendage muscle. Karakul rams get the job done, lambs are born. Twinning in American Karakuls is common in some bloodlines, with occasional triplets.

Because of their fat tails, American Karakul sheep have a large ethnic following, unique to

the cultures of Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

With the exception of Africa in the homelands mentioned above, Karakul sheep were developed in very low-maintenance conditions and isolated from other flocks. This has characterized the breeding of these sheep for centuries. In the United States and Canada, Karakuls have frequently been raised in rugged, remote conditions. Self-sufficiency is a hallmark of the breed a century after their import to this continent.

## Outlook

Karakul sheep were first imported in December 1908 and several registries came and went over seven and a half decades. In 1985, an attempt to locate shepherds and their flocks

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was successful and well received; information was collected into a registry format. In 2000, a decision to close the books to any flocks not already included proved to drastically reduce the gene pool and discourage Karakul shepherds.

Recently, after a great deal of discussion, it became obvious to a core group of concerned breeders that without assistance and encouragement for American Karakul owners, the future outlook for the breed was dim.

### Future

We came together as the Karakul Shepherds Alliance. The Alliance is less of an organization and more a statement of the bond that exists between those who care for and love these sheep.

Our website and blog ([karakulshepherds.org](http://karakulshepherds.org)) is designed to serve Karakul breeders by providing an easy way to find each other, share information, and advertise. The Alliance's second goal is to acknowledge and count all the flocks in the country so as to keep better track of our annual population, whether Karakuls are registered or not.

Karakuls are a breed that is raised by many shepherds, in small and large flocks, who do not have a desire to register their sheep. However there are some breeders who need or want individual certificates. By providing registry services in an open-book approach, we can include any of the animals and their bloodlines that were previously excluded from the registry after 2000. We have decided to use the time-tested method of pictures, and possibly fleece samples, for evaluation of individual

Karakul sheep for registrations.

A few shepherds have been keen on out-crossing Karakuls with other breeds of sheep. Because of the current low American Karakul population, we are inclined to discourage this practice. At the first cross, much of their uniqueness disappears. The life-long, defining characteristic of Karakul sheep is the fat tail. People who breed Karakul sheep want fat tails, the bigger the better. Karakul lambs are born with the traditional pelt curls and patterns that were so sought after for Persian lamb garments a hundred years ago. These distinct qualities can be easily bred out, akin to crossbreeding an Angora goat. It does not make sense since it causes the loss of distinctive and valuable characteristics. But if crossbreeding has taken place, it is easily discernable. If you want to retain the two unique Asiatic features, fat tails and lamb pelts, you have to keep the breed pure.

We are hoping to find some purebred Karakuls in the 'new' flocks that we find. We are encouraged in this quest due to a phenomenon referred to as landrace, best explained in a book published by The Livestock Conservancy, *Managing Breeds for a Secure Future*.

When a flock is isolated and line-bred for several generations, traits become predictable genetically. Line-bred sheep reliably pass these onto their offspring – physical characteristics and adaptations to their local environments.

In scientific communities this is called landrace – an isolated, locally developed population that has adapted to its local environment usually with traditional agricultural methods i.e., low-input systems. As an added benefit, with a certain amount of isolation and absence of new ram input, bloodlines can become more genetically secure with appropriate line-breeding. This could be good news for U.S. Karakul breeders – locating isolated, older bloodlines could diversify our current registered genepool.



Even small flocks can keep bloodlines thriving.

Additionally, the Karakul Shepherds Alliance would like to acknowledge our dedicated breeders and count their flocks for a more accurate estimate of American Karakul sheep numbers. The Livestock Conservancy uses only the number of lambs registered each year for decisions on their Conservation Priority List. We have offered to provide The Livestock Conservancy with an annual total head count of Karakul flock size, not just lambs. This is common for breeds that do not register every animal. Our online Karakul Census is posted at: [karakulshepherds.org/karakul-census](http://karakulshepherds.org/karakul-census). Please join us in the Karakul count and help us preserve this genetic resource in our country.

Karakul Shepherds Alliance wants to establish closer contact with Karakul shepherds, where all types of breeders are welcomed. Some flocks are managed by American shepherds, and others by shepherds from other countries who are familiar with the breed from their homelands. We would like all breeders to connect with us. Our goal is to establish a network of Karakul shepherds with whom to exchange information and ideas, buy and sell sheep, trade rams; a 21st century marketplace for an ancient breed of sheep.

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