Karakul sheep have been here at Pine Lane Farm for 34 years. Over the years many prospective shepherds have asked me what breed of sheep they should get. I always suggest that they get a breed that they enjoy looking at. That's how it all started with me. I saw a ewe in a mixed flock that caught my eye, I loved the way she looked, her haughty carriage, long shaggy fleece, and the way she hid her lamb from us strangers. She was a Karakul I was told. Now after all these years I still love the looks of the Karakul, they are elegant and colorful creatures with a spirited demeanor, reminding me of an Arabian horse or an Afghan hound.

The Karakul has truly changed my life: I soon needed something to do with all the coarse wool that grew so fast that it had to be shorn twice a year. So along with my friend in Kentucky, Ann Brown, we developed a method of braiding the roving made from our fleeces to be used in making rugs. In 2006 we decided to document our technique by writing and self-publishing a book, The Shepherd's Rug.

The conformation on a Karakul is different from other sheep, the sloping hindquarters ends in a fat tail. The fat in the tail is considered a delicacy by many. The fat in this unique tail is a soft fat, the tail feels like a hot water bottle filled with water rather than the more solid fat found in the body cavity. While it is used in cooking and as an ingredient in many dishes, it serves the animal as a source of energy in times of need.

The Karakul is a desert sheep, originating in the near-east around the Caspian Sea, they were brought to the USA in the early 1900s for the fur trade, the pelt from a newborn lamb was the prized "Persian Lamb" used in fashionable fur coats of the time, more recently seen on the news where Afghanistan's president Karzai was wearing a silver Persian lamb fez, i.e. hat.

Lambing time is my favorite time. Since Karakuls are non-seasonal breeders, ewes can come in heat whenever they are exposed to a ram. While black is the dominant color, any other color is possible.
Profile

Karakul. 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) 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 gene pool.

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. 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.

Julia DeVlieg is the former Registrar of the American Karakul Sheep Registry from 1985 to 2000. Deborah Hunter is a former Karakul and Tunis sheep breeder in Michigan for 11 years, now a librarian in the Pacific Northwest.
A little over a hundred years ago, ancestors of Central Asian Karakuls were introduced to the United States. Also in the early 20th Century, Karakul sheep were imported to Germany, and from there to the German colony of South West Africa. SWA (now Namibia) became a major Karakul-producing country after WWI, with the USSR heavily involved in pelt marketing at the same time.

Karakul sheep came to the U.S. in four importations between 1908 and 1929, a total of 87 head (48 rams and 39 ewes); 53 from their native land and 34 from other countries. Not only were the imported numbers small, but there existed additional pressure to quickly develop a ewe flock for Persian lamb pelt production. As such, there was much crossbreeding done in the teens and 1920s. The American Karakul was born.

Dr. C.C. Young, a Russian-born American-educated physician is credited with the first three imports, 1908 to 1914, from the Bokhara Province of Central Asia. USDA research was completed in Beltsville, Maryland, to study Karakuls intending to quickly build Persian lamb pelt producing flocks. Young advocated crossbreeding with good coarse or longwool pelt producers such as Lincoln, Navajo, and Cotswold sheep, but he kept his Karakuls pure-blooded. We may never know why, but Young moved around quite a bit, and taking descendants of his imported sheep with him, farming in Texas, Coahuila, Mexico (along the Texas border), California, and Colorado.

Alex Albright of Dundee, Texas had Lincoln sheep for about a decade before Young moved 13 miles up the road to the town of Holliday, near Wichita Falls, in 1909. Eighteen years later in February 1927, Albright advertised that he had sent breeding stock to South America, Nova Scotia, Canada, South Manchuria, Japan, and a third of the States. Alex was responsible for the final 1929 importation of Karakuls from Germany, and increased his flock to 1,500 even during the Depression. After Alex died in 1937, his wife Marie remained in the Karakul business until 1949. The Albright family had struck black Karakul gold.

Charles de Bremond of Roswell, New Mexico, had ranched over 6,000 head of Shropshire sheep when he financed Young’s 1912 importation. A year earlier, December 1911, with 100 head of Alex Albright’s Karaline crosses and a Karakul ram purchased for $1,080, Charles was well on his way to the second largest U.S. Karakul flock. For perspective, a 1911 Ford Model T was priced at $725.

The story continues: de Bremond’s oldest daughter Marie married Lowry Hagerman, who inherited and embraced these exotic sheep when Charles died prematurely after WWI. Lowry went on to author the landmark Karakul Handbook, dedicated to his father-in-law, and at one point had 4,000 head of Karakul sheep.

Karakuls are unique in the sheep world because of their association with the fashion industry. They have always been bred for variable traits in order to adapt quickly to fashion changes. In the late 1940s white furs – and therefore white Karakuls – were all the rage.

In 1943, there were approximately 1,000 U.S. Karakul breeders, 10,000 registered head, 20,000 grades & commercials, producing about 10,000 merchantable pelts per year, all consumed in this country. In 35 years of American Karakul sheep, there had been some bad marketing practices, a few exploiters, and a bit too much competition at times, but American breeders worked through – until fashion dealt a critical blow.

The Persian lamb pelt market collapsed. Prices had been low since at least 1949 and the market for fine ladies coats slipped further. The market for Karakul sheep evaporated. Lowry Hagerman’s Karakul Handbook was published in 1951. The Fur Farming Journal, which started as the Karakul Journal in 1947, published its last issue mid-1954. Karakuls had been in the U.S. less than 50 years but their shepherds had to come to terms with the fashion economy of boom and bust. The breed went through a metamorphosis in the 1960s and 70s, kept alive by pockets of dedicated breeders.

Back to the Hagerman flock: Down to a few hundred, it remained in existence until dispersal by son Bud Hagerman in 1996. Still ranged in New Mexico, the pioneer flock descendants served a couple of significant roles between the 1950s and 1980s. One was the role of Karakul sheep with movie settings in the Near or Middle East, “the best suited of any breed found in the US” stated Maurice Shelton, Professor Emeritus of Texas A&M University. Second, breeding stock from this flock was exported to other countries, specifically Australia, for potential use in developing flocks of fat-tailed sheep to serve the Middle East markets. In the early 2000s, New Zealand Karakul sheep came back to the United States by way of semen importation, with a few breeders embracing the new bloodline.

Owning Karakuls has spanned generations in more than one family. The pioneer de Bremond/Hagerman family is the longest, at 85 years (1911-1996), but they are not alone in long-term admiration of this breed. A few current breeders are at 35 years and counting. When Karakuls captivate you, it is tough to let go.