

KARAKUL SHEPHERDS ALLIANCE ~ *where the flocks gather*
2017 US Karakul Sheep Registration & Census Report For The Breeders

The Karakul Shepherds Alliance continues to grow. We are bringing breeders together as we rebuild a network of Karakul shepherds, which has been small and inadequate for almost two decades. The first US Karakul sheep census in the 21st Century was a tremendous success and doubled the number of previously known shepherds.

Registrations

In the calendar year 2017, the Karakul Shepherds Alliance issued 84 certificates of registration, 30 rams and 54 ewes. There are currently three US Karakul organizations:

1. Karakul Shepherds Alliance, Washington (Alliance) – open flock book since 2014
2. Karakul Sheep Association, Colorado (KSA) – open/closed flock book since 2015/6
3. American Karakul Sheep Registry, Missouri (AKSR) – closed flock book since ~2002 currently under management of Dee Perera. The AKSR was previously an open flock book registry from 1984 – 1999 under the management of Julia DeVlieg. It was sold to the Perera family in October 1999.

I called the Registrars of the other two Karakul groups, AKSR and KSA, to ask about the number of sheep in their personal flocks. Neither Registrar wanted to participate in the Alliance's census. Lastly, I offered that I would be open to talk about bringing the registries together. The responses differed but the answer was the same, both declined my suggestion of 'coming together'.

History of Registries

For a bit of background, I have attached *US Karakul Sheep Registries-- Histories BRIEF*; for an outline of the 15 associations that have, or are currently representing the breed in the US--national, regional and private organizations.

Fifteen organizations have represented US Karakul breeders in 110 years of history. That's one every 7.3 years; disagreements over regional sheep differences (landrace concepts), policy of purebred disputes, which group can present their ideas about Karakul sheep better and gain followers/customers. Perhaps groups split off because their voices were not heard, or worse they were not being served by the registry that was supposed to.

Still, in the history American 'purebred' sheep does anyone know of another breed that has had as many associations representing it over the span of the breed's US history? I would like to know. Really. And four times in the breed's US history there have been three registries serving Karakul breeders—in 1929, 1944, 1954, and currently since 2016.

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There seems to be a history of bickering, wrangling, and disputing amongst Karakul shepherds. But perhaps the biggest reason is because Karakul breeders are as independent as the sheep they love.

The Alliance is again trying to bring breeders together so that *all* of us can work for the production and promotion of Karakul sheep.

Census Please refer to the Census Data gridsheet for a summary of the data collected

The Karakul sheep census was conducted by the Alliance from January 2017 through March 2018. Information had been trickling in throughout the 2017 year, but the week between Christmas and New Year's began the 'big push' to finalize data collection. Phone calls were made, emails sent, and paper *Farm & Flock/ Census* forms were mailed out with postage reply envelopes.

Perfect schedule, as late December through much of January is a time of rest for most people, especially shepherds, before lambing starts February through April. Most people were excited to share sheep stories, their Karakul numbers and history. Apart from one breeder who expressed concern about his privacy, shepherds were very happy to talk or write to me about their Karakul sheep. I asked a subjective question - What are the top two or three things you like or value most in Karakul sheep? This invariably got people talking. The data collection was extended until March 31st, a month later than planned because I made one final attempt to locate breeders on my list at the end of February. With an 89% response rate, it worked.

Landrace Flocks

See Breeders Tab on website

Six landrace Karakul flocks were located, in chronological age order:

1. Six Winds (Idaho) Isolated since 2005
2. Anakus (Washington) Isolated 2006
3. DerStepanian (Michigan) Isolated 2007
4. Neverov (California) Isolated 2007
5. Gabby (New Mexico) Isolated 2008
6. Johnson (Oklahoma) Isolated 2012

As the Alliance Advisors suspected, when the Karakul breeder network collapsed in the early 2000s, shepherds 'contracted in' and kept their stock at home. Isolated genetic pockets of Karakul bloodlines were formed, landrace flocks, all bred pure but all unrelated.

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Census Details on Farms

Persistence made the census 89% response rate possible. I tried for at least two attempts to reach breeders and frequently made three. Other than zoos for which I received no counts, the response was terrific.

Karakuls are *just exotic enough* that several zoos around the world exhibit them; including Zoo Barben in France where the sheep appear so uniform they look like 'peas in a pod'. I spent a couple of hours attempting to contact all the US zoos that currently have, or had Karakul sheep on exhibit in the past. Two zoos no longer have Karakuls and one zoo I could not reach by phone. Neither of the two zoos currently known to have breeding Karakuls got back with me to provide their sheep counts.

The Facebook page *American Karakul Sheep Breeders and Enthusiasts* was created last year by a goat herder/ Jacob shepherd in Arizona who wanted to learn more about Karakul sheep. After informal discussions among our Advisors, one joined and three of us did not. Therefore that *Facebook* page created a separate US Karakul group; breeders I still need to incorporate into our FARMS list. I estimate another twelve to twenty more Karakul breeders from this source, sixteen is the number I picked for the estimate. Although a little later than some would have liked, plans are in the works for a *Karakul Shepherds Alliance* Facebook page with multiple administrators.

The Alliance remains convinced there are perhaps three to four dozen more Karakul shepherds who remain unknown at this time. Several of these are *starter flocks* that breeders have sold in the past year or two; a few breeders mentioned sales of starter flocks to me but never got back with names. I estimated another twenty one breeders from 2016 - 2017 starter flock sales. I will continue to ask breeders for names of new shepherds they sold, or sell Karakuls to in the future.

Sixteen *Facebook* group Karakul breeders and twenty one *starter flock* new shepherds total 37 estimated Karakul shepherds not reached in the 2017 census.

Additional sources of Karakul breeders are the ethnic shepherds, most of whom remain currently unknown. I suspect several of them have had no contact with a US Karakul group since they purchased their starter flocks; some might want to remain private making them even harder to connect with. These are the *ethnic flocks*, and I have a strong desire to reach this group of Karakul breeders mainly because I think their flocks will be large. Two days before the census closed I located an Armenian shepherd who had a flock of over 100 Karakul sheep. I added his sheep counts to the census, but I have yet to learn his name. For the 2017 census I made no Karakul estimates in the ethnic flock category because at this time I cannot hypothesize how many we have in the US.

The Alliance supports the interest that shepherds have in this remarkable breed of sheep.

Census conducted 2017/early 2018, formal report May 5, 2018 by
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Census Details on Sheep Numbers

The average US Karakul flock size is about 28 head (27.76). I subtracted out three flock sizes of one, since one sheep cannot breed without advanced technology.

There were 533 Karakul lambs reported born in 2017. This number is low as the question frequently went unanswered. But it helps me as a Registrar to know which shepherds are breeding and who is cutting back in production. Keeping important bloodlines actively breeding is an important Alliance goal.

Two breeders gave me number of head sold in starter flocks and the states they went to; those sheep counts were added to the census numbers, even though I do not yet have names.

There are 239 Karakuls estimated, placed in the *Non-Breeders* (wethers) category. I came to the number using these estimates, 100, 17, 8, and 114 explained below:

1. Estimated 100 sheep for 8 non-responders, 12 to 13 head each, who are known Karakul breeders
2. Seventeen Karakuls ewes or rams were placed in the Non-Breeders category because they were not being bred or not bred pure in 2017; a couple were pets. Karakul rams in two flocks were being used on Shetland or Jacob ewes until the new shepherds can obtain Karakul ewes, hopefully in 2018.
3. Eight rams counted as Non-Breeders, because they are being used in crossbreeding programs, on hair sheep, dairy ewes, or on an organic farm with commercial ewes.
4. Estimated 114 Karakuls for the Facebook group breeders and 2017 starter flocks sold for which I do not have shepherd names yet.

Even though I estimated 37 currently unknown Karakul breeders on my Data gridsheet (16 Facebook, 21 starter, 0 hidden flocks), I intentionally *underestimated* the number of sheep not counted in the census. I estimated that the 37 unknown breeders have just 3 to 4 sheep each equaling 114 *estimated* Karakuls not counted in the census. This number is probably much higher.

With this *intentional underestimate*, the real number of Karakul sheep in the currently unknown US flocks could be two to three times higher. This would put the estimated US Karakul population between 2,100 and 2,500 sheep at this time.

Why Shepherds Love Karakul Sheep

The reasons shepherds love Karakul sheep became clear after reading breeder's answers to the census question: *What traits do you like or value most in your Karakul sheep?*

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The answers fell into six categories ranked as follows;

the number indicating how many times it was mentioned in the census:

1. Constitution - 35
2. Fleece & Colors - 26
3. Intelligence & Disposition - 22
4. Beauty - 20
5. Meat & Fat-tails - 15
6. Lambing & Mothering - 12

Constitution = 35 times; Hardy or hardiness was mentioned 6 times, disease & parasite resistance 6 times, easy care or easy keepers stated 6 times. Phrases like problem-free sheep, self-reliance, low-input, and good health mentioned 7 times. Conformation (size & bone), structure and sturdiness were listed 7 times. Lastly, Karakul sheep were valued for their heritage, production, and fall lambing. My favorite comment was "*Karakuls are hardy and resilient (not regular passive sheep).*"

Fleece & Colors = 26 times; Fleece, fleece quality, and beautiful fleeces was mentioned 9 times. Wool, beautiful wool, and 'wool is nice length & low in lanolin' 4 times, and fiber for spinners, felters and rug makers stated 3 times. Wool colors was a favorite mentioned 8 times; black, persistent red, all colors from black to white, different wool colors from birth to adulthood; bunch of colors, colors & markings, and different colors. Lastly, one shepherd selects for *double*-coated fleeces for felting customers, and one shepherd selects for *single*-coated fleeces so they will not felt on the sheep. *You can have both with this breed!*

Intelligence & Disposition = 22 times; Intelligent and smart sheep were used twice. Words like essence, presence, spirit, character, independence, their personality, disposition and temperament were mentioned 13 times. Being easy to handle, gentle sheep, pretty calm, mellow, nice to work with, friendlier than some other sheep, and kind personality was stated 9 times. My favorite "*I admire Karakul uniqueness—their independence (head strong), tough as nails survival instincts.*"

Beauty = 20 times; Karakul adults possess beauty and elegance, and then there are the beautiful curly Persian lambs, living art in peas, pipes and curls mentioned 8 times. Breed character was described with phrases like long ears & big tails, pretty heads, droopy ears & long bodies, long legs & ears, massive curled horns on rams, and classic beauty in full fleece were mentioned 9 times. One breeder mentioned the appreciation of showing a beautiful unique breed. My favorite responses "*(especially) elegance*" and "*Karakuls have a noble bearing.*"

Meat & Fat-tails = 15 times; Meat, good meat-flavor, or leaner meat mentioned 7 times and Fat-tails mentioned 8 times. "*Fat-tail is very important and meat flavor.*" "*They have fat tails which I believe makes leaner meat.*"

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Lambing & Mothering = 12 times; lambing ease was mentioned 7 times and good mothers stated 5 times. My favorite comment was “*Karakuls suddenly have babies.*”

Home-Country choice = 3 times; Shepherds from Uzbekistan, Lebanon, and Iran chose Karakuls as a favorite from their home country.

And this comment from a breeder “Love everything about them!”

Conclusion

The six newly discovered landrace bloodlines are being written up with two almost completed. I am still gathering history on the shepherds and their acquisition and management of Karakul sheep in their US regions.

The general sense among the Alliance Advisors is that the census found more Karakul sheep in the US than we thought; 1715 known sheep. Additionally there could be up to another 30 to 40 breeders as yet unknown. We have more work to do in 2018 to reach and connect with them and learn more about their sheep.

The 2017 Karakul census was a fun project! “I’m having a ball!” was said a number of times. I really enjoyed talking with Karakul breeders! But the census generated a *large* amount of data that took *much* time to compile, use, and write up. It did produce plenty of useful information. It ended like this ~ When the writing was almost complete hunger overcame me and I cooked up 2 Karakul chops, inch thick with just a little seasoning. I wanted real meat flavor, no marinade or rub. The meat was a little tough, which actually is to be expected in a 7 year old ram. Chops from a ram used for breeding at least two years, on an organic all-grass diet, and had not been wormed in over three years. The flavor? Exquisite.

In addition to being good eating at any age, Karakuls are hardy, easy, smart, elegant, beautiful, terrific mothers who produce lambs with curls in living art forms. Karakuls are truly amazing sheep.

I welcome your comments and suggestions.

Deborah

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Karakul Shepherds Alliance

The biggest Alliance project planned for 2018 –
The first ever Karakul database! Our database ideas are
now at the programmer’s office waiting for her design ideas.



Attachments: Census Data gridsheet
US Karakul Sheep Registries-Histories BRIEF

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