

TRADITIONAL FLOCKS, Bloodlines and Registration

In December 1908 Karakuls were imported into the US for the Persian lamb fur market. These Karakuls were not a definite breed in the “purebred” sense, rather a sheep “type”, originating from isolated flocks in Central Asia. In 1951 over four decades later, a Breed Standard was presented through Lowry Hagerman’s *The Karakul Handbook: Selecting and Breeding Karakuls for Fur Improvement* [1] Just three years after publication the entire Persian lamb fur market collapsed. The Breed Standard was forgotten. Karakuls became isolated again; genetics were concentrated within regional areas resulting in variable physical appearances. Karakuls became locally ‘adjusted’ sheep, developed over time through adaptation to their natural and cultural environments. Sometimes through breeder selection, although often not, as many were managed as Traditional Flocks—no maintenance of pedigree and frequently multi-sire mating. This is the definition of a landrace^s breed. [3,7,8] Three to four decades later most of these flocks were *found, identified, and validated** as Foundation or Historic bloodlines. Many individual sheep were *registered** from these flocks.

Traditional Flocks have been central in the development of US Karakul Bloodlines. After two more decades of isolation and breeder selection the Alliance has currently located “a dedicated core of breeders working solely with Foundation bloodlines. These [new] bloodlines tend to be free from much outside breeding, and can be among the most genetically distinctive animals of the breed.” [4] We are utilizing the Livestock Conservancy[±] [5] definition for a Bloodline “subpopulations that have been isolated from one another for several generations (usually four or more) with the consequence that they are somewhat genetically distinct”. From that, Alliance Advisors have chosen a minimum of five years of isolation or line-breeding generations to define a unique Karakul bloodline. Called Multi-Bloodline Composites or MBC, they fall into two types--Isolated and Line-bred. Isolated flocks are Closed having no outside genetic influences. Line-bred flocks are Open bringing in a new ram every two to five years; yet genetics are similar enough to continue selective linebreeding on a color or specific farm line. Traditionally-managed isolated flocks are being found, where registration is not a component of their operations, and by ethnic shepherds who wish to remain private. Our continuing focus to locate US Karakul Traditional Flocks, could be future validated **Bloodlines** for the breed.

The staff of the Livestock Conservancy[±] and Dr. Phil Sponenberg [3] have developed some guidelines for rescuing indigenous animal bloodlines and breeds. Together with their ideas and our own experience with the breed, we have developed procedures to define and evaluate *type*, adaptable to include new Karakul sheep into the KSAR Registry.

Inherent in bringing *new* animals into a Registry’s flock book is the establishment of some kind of protocol that would and could assure, as best is possible, the quality standard of breed type. The unique combination of two Central Asian characteristics, the Persian lamb birth coat and the broad-tail, make breed qualifying easier. Sheep with both a broad-tail and a lamb birth coat are easily characterized as Karakul; no breed mis-identification is possible. Other sheep have fat tails, but only Karakuls produce lustrous, patterned curls or smooth waves; thus the perpetual focus on birth coats.

* Current Alliance Definitions:

FOUND – Alliance *finds* a **flock** and gives it a Flock number. There is No History*, few if any photos, no contact info, partial name or no name of the owner. This is pertinent for the ‘hidden flocks’ that surface, usually traditionally-managed by ethnic shepherds. We will assign *shepherd name* and/or *number*, city/region, state; corresponding flock numbers will be designated with the suffix –NH until contact is made with the shepherd-owner. (NH = No History*)

IDENTIFIED – Alliance *identifies* a **flock**, assigns a Flock number. We have contact with shepherd, have History and photos.

VALIDATED – Alliance *validates* an isolated or line-bred **flock** and gives it a Bloodline name. Historical sources of sheep are verified by at least one other Karakul breeder, usually confirming past sheep trades through oral histories.

REGISTERED – KSAR will *register* an **individual** sheep from IDENTIFIED and VALIDATED flocks with application and photos after evaluation by Registrar, and if necessary, by Advisors. Karakul **ewes** (only) will be considered from FOUND flocks—Advisors will evaluate applications and photos on a case-by-case basis. If accepted, with their first entry in KSARs Flock Book, registration numbers will carry suffix –NH (No History). Once registered, this Karakul will have equal KSAR status; with the knowledge that *all* Karakuls are evaluated with application photos, including those with registered parents. [See *How to Register Sheep w KSAR* document for bringing individual Karakuls into the registry.]

Registration applications for individual **un**-pedigreed Karakul sheep, of any age, will be reviewed by Alliance Advisors using the time-tested method of visual observation for breed character evaluation. See *How to Register Sheep with KSAR* regarding requested photos, and possibly a fleece sample. After evaluation and acceptance, the individual sheep will be identified by the flock into which they were born. Therefore, sheep without a registration number will carry their original Source Farm/Flock and Location as their first identifier in the Registry.[6] Until breed-specific DNA testing becomes available, the following guidelines are endorsed and supported by Alliance Advisors [6]:

KARAKUL SHEPHERDS ALLIANCE ~ *where the flocks gather*

1. Ideally isolated or line-bred Karakul flocks should not be raised with other breeds. However, if other breeds are kept, they must be noted and steps taken to avoid inadvertent cross-breeding.
2. Traditional Flock recognition is by location of breeder. Karakuls entering the Alliance Registry with one or both unregistered parents will have the sire and/or dam listed as Breeder Name/Farm and City, State as their sheep Name/ ID, *without* the usual registration number. Ex: **Anakus, Rice WA red 876** [eartag] is the registration number
3. A brief history of the flock is **important** for verifying source bloodlines and will be kept on record—including original animal sources and approximate dates of acquisition. Ideally, history of *validated** **Bloodlines** is updated annually; most importantly after additions—*gender, source, and year* noted (*Farm & Flock Finder* form)
4. If shepherds have grouped sheep to maintain different bloodlines, the bloodlines should be noted and tracked.

For registering with KSAR, the basic criteria for sheep must 1) have a Persian lamb birth coat, or be able to produce offspring with Persian lamb birth coats, showing reasonable degree and coverage of curl types as defined by CLTPD [below] 2) have a broadtail and 3) have a *within Breed Standard* breed-type head, in order to be registered as a Karakul. Persian lamb birth coat production must be proven in sheep from **No History*** flocks, or if there is a concern about crossbreeding.

1) Birth Coat—The Alliance has chosen five of **the most important** Persian lamb categories: **CURLS, LUSTER, TEXTURE, PATTERN, DEVELOPMENT** (CLTPD). To qualify, **at least two** of these must be represented; they do not have to be top-quality, but present. If a lamb fails to qualify due to lack of Persian lamb coat, or if an adult fails to produce progeny with acceptable birth coat qualities, the Alliance will recommend breeding to a Star-coat producer, *3-Star Birth Coats and above*, and submitting registrations for those progenies in the future. The Alliance is seeking the best lamb birth coat qualities to maintain as an American Karakul genetic resource. [See *Lamb Birth Coat Assessment* and *Karakul Lamb Barn Worksheet* documents.] 2) "Tails may vary considerably but they should always be of the broadtail type, not of the fat tail or fat rump type...fatty development should be confined to the upper part of the tail...the lower tail should be a slender appendage^[2]." 3) Karakul heads are outlined in the *Breed Standard*, section 1.

Karakul sheep are fundamentally independent and self-sufficient; they almost raise themselves. Low-maintenance and reasonably isolated from other flocks are typical of farm systems that have characterized Karakul breeding for centuries. The Karakul Shepherds Alliance would like to encourage purebred Karakul breeding in traditional settings. If registration is desired, within this framework the KSAR Open Flock book is available as the transition point for individual Karakul sheep progressing from isolated farms, ranches, and desert ranges into the Karakul Registry.

[§] About Landrace-

Landrace^[7] is a term used to classify animals that have been raised or developed genetically isolated for fairly long periods of time. It was originated by Kurt Von Rümker in 1908; literally translated 'country-breed' from the German *Landrasse*. Geneticist Phillip Sponenberg of Virginia Tech University describes landrace creation "...when isolation, environmental pressures...and human selection plays a role, but for *end goals* (emphasis added), not as a result of careful selection."^[8] Per the Livestock Conservancy* "Landraces are by their very nature more variable... characterized by *biological* and *adaptational* consistency and not necessarily by uniformity of physical appearance."^[9]

References:

1. Hagerman, Lowry 1951. *The Karakul Handbook-Selecting and Breeding Karakuls for Fur Improvement*. Denver: Smith-Brooks 211 p.
2. *ibid* p 36
3. Sponenberg, D. Phillip and Donald E. Bixby 2007. *Managing Breeds for a Secure Future: Strategies for Breeders and Breed Associations*. Pittsboro, North Carolina: American Livestock Breeds Conservancy*.
4. *ibid* p 15
5. *ibid* p 34
6. Sponenberg, D. Phillip. 2014 March. Received via email "Landrace Registration Based on Herd/Flock Rather than Individuals." *White Paper*.
7. "Landrace." Wikipedia. Accessed June 2, 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landrace>
8. *ibid* p 9-10
9. *ibid* p 13-14

*In 2013 the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) shortened its name to The Livestock Conservancy (LC)

Alliance documents referenced can be found on the Registry page of our website.

Written by Deborah Hunter with
Significant input from Alliance Authors
who wish to remain anonymous

karakulshepherds.org

May 2020