

KARAKUL SHEPHERDS ALLIANCE 2014 TO PRESENT

By Deborah Y. Hunter

Eight years ago, Karakul Shepherds Alliance came together out of concerns for the Karakuls not recognized in a Closed Flock book. A breed census was conducted in 2017-2018, with an estimate of 2,000 US Karakuls located, and about 10% registered. Some effort was spent looking for Canadian breeders and one was located; the owner was looking for a ram or two. Unfortunately, there had been no American Karakul breeders participating in the Scrapie Export Program, and no one checked that the rules differed for rams and ewes. The Canadian breeder ended up using a crossbred ram on what were perhaps the last registered Karakul ewes in Canada.

Forward four years, March 2022 I received notice that a Canadian Karakul has not been registered in over 10 years. Heritage Livestock Canada (HLC) is ready to declare Karakuls extinct. Meaning nonexistent. I would like to think this situation could have benefitted greatly from the work of a dedicated breed-specific association to motivate Canadian breeders and track Karakul sheep populations.

U.S. Herds

On the US side of the border, the situation could not be more different. The Karakul and fat-tail cross population is so large we are unable to obtain clear numbers. The Alliance has discovered private and secluded flocks, managed by shepherds who seldom communicate with other shepherds outside their community. Discovery has been through the 'shepherd's grapevine.' Many sheep from these private flocks would *not* be genuine representatives of the Karakul breed due to the extent of crossbreeding, but the 2022 estimates of fat-tailed sheep have doubled from the 2018 census. An entire sub-culture descendant from Karakul sheep, some with very large flocks, has developed in the past 20 years.

California alone probably has over 3,000 head of Karakul and other fat-tail crosses that are in private flocks. Nation-wide the fat-tails in private and graded-up flocks probably total over 5,000 head. Large Muslim populations are surrounded by great



Photo from the Julia DeVlieg collection

One week old Karakul lamb with a lustrous birthcoat in pressed pipe curls ribbed pattern. His fat-tail is filling out and sporting a kink.

numbers of Karakuls and other fat-tail sheep, amassed by their shepherds and those who support their lamb markets. We have two new breeders in Florida, moving desert sheep to a tropical climate for that market. Sheep tail fat is a very important part of Middle Eastern culinary culture. Americans involved with this easy-care, self-sufficient breed have kept them private too. An old shepherd told me recently he thought there were 'Karakuls indigenous to Montana' This amazingly resilient breed continues to inspire.

Karakul ewes have been AI recipients for African fat-tail semen imports and Awassi dairy sheep grading-up programs in the upper Midwest and California. The goal is to increase American fat-tail sheep populations by the thousands. We are currently considering a one-year AI lease for purebred Karakul ewes. Larry Meisegeier has more in the Karakul Foundation inset.

To sum up current US numbers, I estimate:

about 2,000 head of purebred Karakuls which are potentially trackable and registerable over 5,000 head of fat-tails in crossbred graded-up flocks, private, and difficult-to-track flocks. *Some* sheep in the last two groups could be registered as Karakuls.

less than 200 head of Karakul sheep registered per year

Registrations

Despite some large flocks, registrations have always been relatively low for Karakuls, being held back by inefficient, error-prone, paper-based systems. Some breeders have refused to register with paper anymore. In March 2022, a database has been started for the Karakul Shepherds Alliance. This ancient breed of sheep which has been in North America since December 1908 (113 years), will finally have a modern database to track sheep, pedigrees and shepherds. We are building it the best-possible way, from 1985 forward, ancestors first. Going back at least 30 years was a must for pedigrees, as many Karakul sheep are productive well into their teens.

Exports

US and Canadian Karakuls are related through the large 1914 import, over 130 head, which came though Prince Edward Island, Canada. Well before news of the Canadian breed extinction, I received four to six requests a year for Karakuls from all

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over Canada. In an effort to help this along, I created an outline of the tremendously helpful article Export to Canada Explained written by Margaret VanCamp, published in *The Shepherd* April 2020. Margaret added her 2022 advice to the Export Outline for an up-to-date addendum to this breed association update. The Export Outline gives line-by-line guidance on how to export rams to Canada without being in the Export Certified Program.

Serendipitously, while the extinction news disseminated this spring, a farmer in Nova Scotia had contacted four-decade Karakul shepherd Letty Klein, Kalamazoo, MI, wanting to import three rams. In mid-April they crossed the border, the newest Karakul genetics in Canada since 1997. One Canadian registry group has a grading-up program, but HLC only recognizes purebred ewes. The first Karakul ewes to be imported into Canada could be as early as 2027 by Babette Turk, Aptos, CA. She is Canadian-American and plans to retire in Canada with her sheep. She has her breeding plan in place to produce the required scrapie resistant genetics and has rams available with the correct genetic profile for import into Canada. I highly encourage Karakul breeders in northern border states and beyond to read, consider and implement the Export Outline procedures for their flocks, which will be printed in the August 2022 issue of *The Shepherd*. Canada needs American Karakul genetics.

Fiber & Dairy

This breed has attracted the attention of military veterans, who first saw sheep in Iraq and Afghanistan carrying around extra nutrition in tails as wide as their rumps. One vet said the sheep have helped him to heal of PTSD as he worked toward peacefulness,



Photo by Letty Klein

PLF Martin pictured at almost 11 months old, exported in April, is one of three rams now living in Nova Scotia, the first Karakul genetics in Canada in 25 years.

“I *have* to be calm around the sheep.” This same vet sells raw sheep milk and came up with the unique solution to lamb a couple Karakul ewes every month, thereby keeping the milk flowing.

Several others milk Karakul ewes for home cheese making. All One One All, a non-profit silvopasture farm in Goshen NY, is building an all-Karakul dairy flock, which produces the creamiest sheep’s milk yogurt and the most decadent frozen fudge pops. These sheep have been milked for centuries, after lambs were removed for fur. Karakul lambs, called Persian lamb, are the most beautiful sheep babies in the world; their mothers become the shepherd’s family dairy.

The fiber market remains strong, but Karakul sheep are no longer being bred exclusively by fiber artists and hobby farmers. They are making their mark in the US sheep industry serving large markets with meat, fat, and milk.



Scenes like this are happening in several Karakul flocks, ewes simply milked by hand for home cheese making. This very dairy-looking ewe is about 5–6 weeks into her lactation. Her tail sack has lost its bloom of fat as she is putting it into milk for her lamb and the shepherd’s family. Fat-tails can drop a size or two during an average milking season. It is a wonder of nature to watch lambs grow exponentially. It is an equal wonder to watch their mothers’ depleted tail sacks fill up with fat after lambs are weaned. The desert sheep food cache replenished. Vitaliy Tymoshchuk milking in Idaho.

Learn More

Visit our comprehensive website karakulshepherds.org and ask to become a member of our Facebook page Karakul Shepherds Alliance.

Deborah Hunter is a retired librarian in the Pacific Northwest. She is Registrar for the Karakul Shepherds Alliance and Web Shepherd for: karakulshepherds.org/ She is an Army Signal Corps Veteran.

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THE SHEPHERD**



Photo by Penny Gelhaus

Longevity and resilience are significant Karakul traits, showing both in a 17-year-old Karakul ewe right after giving birth. Her udder is large and accordingly her lamb grew like a proverbial weed. The ewe also has a broken rear leg that did not heal properly; she does not put much weight on it, but gets around quite well. Her breeding last fall is a mystery but of great benefit to the breed. Her genetics from almost two decades ago are priceless. The ewe lamb has a pink nose indicating she is brown.



Photo by Babette Turk

Anakus Luiza & newborn twins. Rams breed fat-tail ewes from underneath with a crouch, using their nose, knee or shoulder to lift the ewe's tail. Ideally the ewe helps to lift her tail as well.

Karakul Foundation of American Fat-tail Breeds

With overwhelming interest in imported fat tail breeds such as the Awassi, Afrikaner, Damara and Persian by the Arabic community in America, the Karakul plays an important role in upgrading programs. Producers can breed up and increase the number of these breeds without losing the important fat tail characteristics. Fat tail sheep are in high demand and an important sector of the American sheep industry with huge potential for growth.

Larry Meisegeier is a long-time sheep dairy pioneer of 26 years and original importer of the Awassi, Afrikaner and Damara breeds. He is Registrar for the American Awassi Sheep Association.

KARAKULS