

Heritage Sheep Breed FIBER PROFILE



Shetland

Shetland sheep are part of the Northern short-tailed family. Their point of origin is Shetland, a group of islands located north of mainland Scotland and west of Norway, with cultural ties to both. The sheep (and their fleeces) relate obviously to the other Northern short-tails in Scandinavia, as well as having especially close ties to the North Ronaldsay and the Soay in the British Isles.

It's said that you can find a Shetland fleece appropriate for any textile project you have in mind. That's true. It also means that any single Shetland fleece is not predictive of the qualities you will find in another—unless you ask the shepherd or seek out a similar breeding program. The



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two locks shown here roughly represent the extremes within the breed. The upper fleece is evenly crimped, without a component of hair. The lower fleece has a crimped undercoat and a wavy outercoat.

Within Shetland, textile traditions have taken advantage of all the wool types, yielding fine laces, practical hap shawls, Fair Isle patterned garments, and bed covers known as taatit rugs.

Fleece weight	2–5 pounds (1–2.5 kg), usually in the range of 2–4 pounds (1–2 kg); yield 65–80 percent, usually on the higher side.
Staple length	Depends on type. In general, 2–4½ inches (5–11 cm). Some fleeces have a range of 4–6 inches (10–15 cm), while others are as long as 6–10 inches (15–25 cm). Some people question whether the longest fleeces, with staple lengths of 6–7 inches (15–18 cm) or more, remain true to the wool's history; others prefer to breed for length.
Fiber diameters	Most fibers 20–30 microns, with some as fine as 10–20 microns (neck wool from the finest fleeces) and some as coarse as 30–60 microns or more (outercoat on a sheep with a hair component). The Shetland Sheep Society (in the U.K.) gives an average fiber diameter of 23 microns.
Lock characteristics	Regardless of style, dense with triangular locks, wider at the base and somewhat pointed. The fine fibers are nicely crimped, and the longer, coarser fibers, if present, are wavy to nearly straight.
Natural colors	A full range of browns, grays, blacks, creams, and whites. The grease seems darken and yellow the color, and the wool often washes up lighter and whiter than it appears when raw.



lock photos reproduced to the same scale



lower photos © Deborah Robson