

# Breed-related woolly thoughts for the Shave 'Em to Save 'Em sweater challenge

by Deb Robson

In thinking about what type of breed-specific wool to use for a sweater, three primary concerns immediately come into play:

- the **type of sweater** (cardigan, pullover, camisole, shrug . . .)
- the **recipient** (sensitive skin or tough hide? careful? determined tree climber?)
- the **characteristics of the fiber** (softness, loft, durability, tendency to felt)
- the **construction of the yarn** (woolen, worsted, novelty, singles, plied)

The chart here shows rough micron-count ranges for the wool breeds on The Livestock Conservancy's Conservation Priority List (CPL). In some cases we don't have sufficient data on the breed's fiber characteristics, so I've estimated. Micron counts give a rough indication of a fiber's softness. Other factors are involved in softness, including fiber flexibility, but this gives us a place to start a discussion of which breed's wool works best for what types of sweaters. Where there are darker and lighter areas in the bars, the dark area indicates where most of the breed's fleeces probably fall.

**Group 1:** These wools are likely to suit next-to-skin designs. Romeldale/CVM usually offers more softness and Santa Cruz more durability.

**Group 2:** These workhorse fibers may be soft enough to be used next-to-the-skin, but provide durability, loft (warmth), and a sturdier feel.

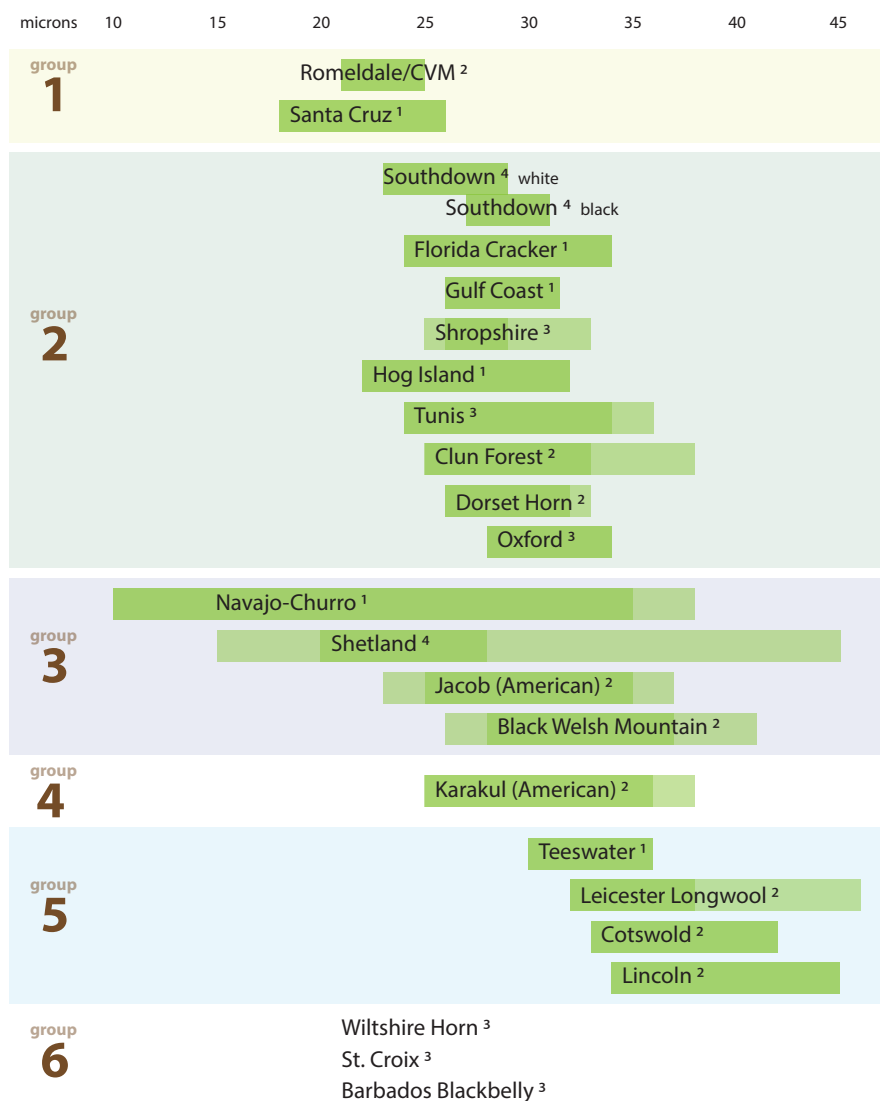
**Group 3:** As you might guess from the wide bars, in this group everything depends on the specific fleece or, in commercially spun yarn, how much fiber grading was performed before the wool entered the production process. In each breed, some will be next-to-skin soft and some will be much sturdier.

**Group 4:** Karakul stands alone in this "group." To make a sweater that performs the way you want from Karakul, you'll need experience to deftly combine fleece, yarn design, sweater concept—and welcoming recipient.

**Group 5:** The longwools can make surprisingly successful sweaters that will excel in durability, sheen, and stitch definition. The sturdiest sweaters from the longwools will employ

worsted-spun yarns for maximum smoothness. That said, I have woolen-spun longwool sweaters I love.

**Group 6:** These sheep shed their wool. Both Barbados Blackbelly and Saint Croix can be used to make . . . hair shirts. A dedicated and creative handspinner could make a sweater from Wiltshire Horn by combing to remove the hair component and spinning the undercoat.



## Conservation Priority Listing status as of 2021

<sup>1</sup> Critical    <sup>2</sup> Threatened    <sup>3</sup> Watch    <sup>4</sup> Recovering

# Basic yarn and pattern resources for the Shave 'Em to Save 'Em sweater challenge by Deb Robson

## What kind of yarn & what type of sweater?

Any sweater involves a significant commitment, beginning with purchasing yarn or obtaining fiber and spinning. I find that my design process proceeds through a shifting dialogue between what I have in mind to make and the fiber or yarn, as I get acquainted with it and discover how it feels and what its properties are. I'll start with an idea in mind and as I proceed with the steps of making the sweater, I constantly test my ideas and evaluate whether I want to continue on the current path or make adjustments. Usually where I end up is close to, but not precisely aligned with, my initial plan.

There is no way to overestimate the value of swatches. Swatches will tell you whether you like the fabric you are producing (can it be improved by shifting needles up or down a size?), the stitch pattern your sweater calls for (if it doesn't have a natural rhythm, or includes maneuvers you find not just challenging but annoying, you'll want to make a change), and the potential fit between sweater design and fiber choice. Swatches save time. They are their own "project," like making a small batch of cookies to test a recipe before pulling out the big mixing bowl and making enough for a party.

If you're new to sweater-making, it can be good to start with a small one (for a toddler or child) or a simple one (for either child or adult). If you're proficient, the sky's the limit.

## Basic pattern resources

If you're new to sweaters and would like a series of templates in a bunch of sizes, a number of options have been published over the years. One of the most versatile and easiest to follow is Ann Budd's *The Knitter's Handy Book of Sweater Patterns*. It includes:

- **six basic sweater constructions**

- drop shoulder
- modified drop shoulder
- set-in sleeve
- saddle shoulder
- raglan
- seamless yoke

- **fifteen sizes**

- in 2-inch gradations, from 26-inch chest circumference (two-year-old child) to 54-inch chest circumference (adult large)

- **six gauges**

- 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 stitches per inch (12, 16, 20, 24, and 28 stitches to 4 inches/10 cm, or bulky, aran/heavy worsted, worsted, sport, and fingering weight yarns)

- **yardage estimates for yarns are included.**

To stick in your bag when shopping, you may be able to find a copy of Ann's *The Knitter's Handy Guide to Yarn Requirements*, a laminated fold-over reference.

There are other terrific resources for more experienced sweater-knitters, but if you're in this group you'll have channels for finding them.

## So really, how much yarn?

Because of the wide range of possibilities in sizing and construction details, it's good to consult one of the guides to yardage, whether in print or one of the several online versions. These tend to be *extremely inadequate* guidelines to sweater quantities of yarn, centering on an "average" (what's that?) adult garment. Estimates are all over the place. I've crunched some numbers and come up with some generalizations for a chart. It is as useful as all generalizations are: not very! A sweater for a big person needs more yarn than one for a little person. If you want a shawl collar, more length, or cuffs to roll up, you'll need significantly more yarn than for a plain crewneck pullover. Knitted cables consume yarn at quite the increased rate. Crochet and garter stitch use more than stockinette.

Jimmy Beans Wool has a calculator into which you can plug some information and get a more targeted estimate for knitting projects. It might be helpful, although it doesn't accommodate much refinement.

<https://www.jimmybeanswool.com/secure-html/onlineec/knittingCalculator.asp>

With handspun or small-lot yarns, always spin an extra bobbin full or buy *more than you think you will need*. It's possible to design your way out of a corner if you run short, and I've frequently needed to do so, but if you don't have to invest brain cells that way then your mental capacities can be used for planning the next project.

**A handmade sweater you love will bring you decades of pleasure. Worth it? Oh, yes.**  
And rare-breed wools can be the best.

# Incredibly rough estimates of how much yarn you might need for a sweater by Deb Robson

## Insanely approximate yarn quantities

I've looked at a lot of yarn estimating tables and calculators, and the numbers end up all over the place. I've crunched them down to something that includes a lot of people's best guesses. It's not going to help a lot because of the number of potential variables, but this may save *you* some time being confused and frustrated on the internet. I've focused on adult sweaters.

## How to get a better guess

These are the techniques I actually use—other than just picking up a bunch of skeins at a festival, sensing their mass in my hands, guessing whether that's about the amount I'd sense in an existing sweater, and adding a skein or two. Or, in the case of fiber, getting a nice, big, puffy bag full (see tip 2). Then, later, figuring out how much I've got and what I can make with it.

1. **Find a pattern** that is what you want to knit or as

similar as possible and check out its yarn requirements. I do this a lot when I'm ordering by mail. Then add a skein.

2. **Weigh a sweater** that you have that is similar in size, gauge, and complexity to the one you want to make. This is a good starting point for people buying fiber. I think in terms of 1½ to 2 pounds (750 to 950 grams) of clean fiber for an adult sweater to fit myself in approximately worsted weight handspun. Yes, I'll have some left over, but I'll have breathing room. Warning: I wear a women's small or medium; people who wear larger sizes will want to get more. (I love buying bulk fiber.)

## Buy extra yarn or fiber

Always buy extra yarn. You can make a hat or mittens or scarf out of any that you don't use for the sweater. If the recipient doesn't want to be super matchy-matchy, you can almost certainly find someone else who will enjoy the bonus item.

Yes, this chart looks nuts. The second estimated number is often  $2\frac{1}{2}$  times the first number. But consider: the first is a small adult (say, 32-inch/82 cm chest or bust) and the second is an extra large adult (say, 52-inch/132 cm chest or bust). Given that context, it starts to make some sense.

For extra guidance and orientation, check out the free designs by Tin Can Knits (on Ravelry and at [tincanknits.com](http://tincanknits.com)). Sizing goes from birth to generous adult.

Craft Yarn Council size	What we'd call it	Stitches in 4 inches/10cm	Adult, small to extra large		Increase for oversize, extra length, shawl collar, hood, cables	
			yards	meters	yards	meters
2	fingering	23–26	1200–3000	1100–2750		
3	sport	21–24	1000–2500	900–2300	up to 3500	up to 3200
4	worsted	16–20	800–2000	750–1800	up to 2500	up to 2300
5	bulky	12–15	600–1500	550–1400		

A quick note on fiber choice and sensitivity: Primary places where a person may notice that a fiber is annoyingly coarse include the wrists and the back of the neck. Check for other skin-access points in the pattern you're contemplating. Tuck a swatch in the location(s) and see whether keeping it there remains comfortable.