



## Jacob Sheep Information Booklet

Jacob sheep have graced the large estates and country homes of England for many centuries. Their impressive horn, black and white faces, and spotted bodies have no doubt contributed to their popularity and survival. Their actual origins are not known; however, documentation throughout history indicates that spotted, or pied sheep, may have originated in what is now Syria some three thousand years ago. Pictorial evidence traces movements of these sheep through North Africa, Sicily, Spain and on to England. There are many romantic stories about them being direct descendants of the flock of sheep acquired by Jacob during the time he worked for his father-in-law, as mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 30), or that they were washed ashore from shipwrecks during the attempted invasion of the Spanish Armada during the reign of Elizabeth I.

Jacobs differ from other British and Northern European polycerates (sheep with more than one set of horns) in that they have a medium-fine fleece and no outer coat. Other primitive breeds are double-coated, having a fine inner coat and a coarser and longer outer coat.

Importation of Jacob sheep to the U.S. and Canada has occurred in small numbers since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These sheep have been dispersed all over the continent and many have been crossed to other breeds. In the past, these crossbred sheep were referred to as Jacobs even though many bore no resemblance to the breed, except that they may have had spots and four or more horns. Some breeds of sheep have a marked tendency to produce the occasional lamb which is spotted. Dorset and those sheep with Merino origin, as well as Karakul, are known to produce spotted offspring. Just because a sheep is spotted, or may be polycerate, does not mean it is a Jacob.

The American Jacobs are an Old World sheep which, unlike many other old breeds, have not undergone improved breeding to satisfy the commercial marketplace. They have a more primitive body shape, are slender-boned and provide a flavorful, lean carcass with little external fat. The carcass yield from hanging weight to freezer is high when compared to the more improved breeds. Due to finer bone structure and less body fat, stocking rates on pasture are higher than the modern breeds with 25%-50% increases being reported. Ewes require less supplemental feed during times of increased nutritional need, and lamb easily, usually with no assistance. The lambs are up and nursing vigorously without help. Jacob ewes are included in commercial flocks in England due to their hardiness, ease of lambing, strong mothering instinct, and little need of the shepherd's time and attention. Both rams and ewes are easily kept with resistance to parasites and foot problems. The fleece is soft and open, light in grease, making it highly sought after by hand spinners.

The Jacob is highly marketable as breeding stock and for its products. Farm-gate sales of freezer lamb, tanned pelts, handspinner fleeces, horns for walking sticks and buttons bring the breeder financial return as well as the pleasure of seeing this handsome breed on the farm and in the fields.

The Jacob Sheep Breeders Association has taken over the work begun by the American Minor Breeds Conservancy, now known as the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, in identifying and registering this unique breed of sheep. The AMBC/ALBC began identifying Jacobs in North America in 1985. By 1988, AMBC/ALBC assisted the JSBA to form a breed association and registry from a core group of breeders interested in the continuance and conservation of the breed. The first JSBA flock book was published in 1989, with over 400 animals inspected and registered.

This booklet is meant to acquaint you with Jacob sheep, assist you in identifying the unique characteristics of these sheep, and perhaps help you to select Jacobs for your own flock.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF JACOB SHEEP

### BODY

The Jacob is a small breed, ranging from 80 pounds for small ewes, to 180 pounds for the largest rams. Visually, it is a white sheep with colored markings. These markings come in the form of black (or sun-bleached brown) or lilac spots or patches distributed over the body. The spotting pattern is random; however, it is breed-specific. The “ideal” Jacob should have distinct spots with no “bleeding” of one color into the other, making a fuzzy effect between black/lilac and white. They should never be mottled all over. The amount of coloring black/lilac to white is according to personal selection. Some prefer more dark, others more white. In sheep that have a great deal of white, it is frequently found that the dark is on the front half of the body, often a heavy dark patch over the shoulders and only small spots elsewhere. The ideal amount of colored wool to white wool is 40% black or lilac to 60% white, but it is stressed that this is only considered the ideal, and Jacobs with more or less of this figure are still considered for registration as long as they meet the other criteria of the breed standards.

The aforementioned lilac color is a light greyish brown or fawn color in place of black. Not enough information is known at present about the genetics of the color except that it is thought to be recessive. JSBA is tracking these animals through the registration process. Lilac sheep are born with grey/fawn patches or spots and facial markings. Some facial patches look almost black with a grey or dusty shadow surrounding the eye.

### EXTREMITIES

Jacob Sheep never have four black legs; their legs are white with black spots. The ideal is white legs with black knee patches, but spotted legs as well as white legs without spotting are also acceptable. The amount of spotting is selected according to personal preference.

Spotted sheep which grow wool below the hock and knee should be considered as crossed with another breed having the woolly leg characteristic. This is especially noticeable on the back legs. Many sheep with Merino ancestry, namely the Rambouillet, Columbia, Corriedale, etc., often have lambs with spots, as do Dorset and Barbados crosses. The first four mentioned would have lambs with woolly legs and would probably have wool forward of the horns. These lambs would tend to grow much larger than a purebred Jacob. A Dorset cross lamb would not be as large as the bigger crosses and would be harder to tell from the purebred, except that it would have a tendency to lose its color.

### FLEECE

A Jacob fleece weighs from 3-6 pounds. It is an open fleece, easily parted to reveal a soft, medium-fine wool with a good degree of springiness and a staple length measuring from 3-7 inches. The skin beneath the white wool must be pink, while that under the dark wool is black. Mottled wool and skin is undesirable; freckling does occur in the Jacob breed. Many Jacobs have a varying amount of kemp in their fleece. Kemp is short, brittle, and often kinky hair occurring more frequently towards the hind end and legs. Also, in the britch area the wool may be a great deal more coarse than that on the rest of the body. The ideal is to have a fleece which grades the same from the front to the hind end. The Jacob has a demi-luster fleece with a micron count of approximately 25 to 32. Jacob wool color does not fade to a very light grey by the first or second shearing, as do some crosses of Merino, Dorset, and other down breeds. When the crossbred sheep are young, it is impossible to tell if they are going to fade. There is a difference between the fading of a fleece color due to sun bleaching (which can often turn the outer tips of it to a lovely, mahogany brown) and the fading of grey due to age. The characteristics of sun-bleached fleece seems to be heritable, as does fading to grey. Excessively weathered fleece will often have faded to almost white. Jacobs are often thought of as being brown and white sheep, but the true color is revealed when the fleece is parted and it can be seen that the wool by the skin is black.

## HEAD

The Jacob Breed Standard states that there should be no wool forward of the horns. It is most desirable that there be a clear white blaze to the black, or dark, pigmented muzzle with even black or grey cheek or eye patches. Pink noses in conjunction with a broad white face is undesirable. Jacobs may have blue, light or dark brown, or marbled eyes, with no tendency to split upper eyelid deformity.

## HORNS

Any number of horns may be carried, provided they are well-balanced. Polled Jacobs, as well as scurred rams, are excluded from the JSBA registry. Ewes with scurred horns (insignificant horns, or horn buds which can be felt but not easily seen) have been acceptable in the past, but since the Jacob is a “horned” breed and the gene pool has become larger, it is suggested that members should try to purchase and breed only from horned ewes.

Two-horned rams should have large horns growing clear of the face, with a wide-sweeping curl resembling those of Bighorn Sheep or Karakuls, rather than the tighter curl and knobby appearance of horned Dorsets or Merino. Jacobs horns are black or black-and-white striped, never white.

Four-horned rams should have flesh between the upper and lower horns. The upper horns should not tip forward and the lower pair should not have a double curl. The horns should not grow towards the face, as this will injure the jaw, block vision, or prevent the animal from grazing properly. Malformed horns, two or more fused horns on one side and split on the other, or three or five horns is undesirable. Rams of this type may not be acceptable for registry. It is impossible to tell in the young ram how well-balanced and separated the horn set will finally be. The separation, balance and direction of horns all take time to fully evolve to what the mature ram will carry. It is advisable to wait until the ram lamb is at least six months of age before selecting. It is for this reason that rams are required to be six months of age to be registered.

## TAIL

Most animals have docked tails, since they are more of a nuisance than an asset to the animal. However, it is up to the breeder’s personal preference. In some areas of the country, long tails can cause health problems, such as fly strike. If you should come across a tailed Jacob for sale, its length will give you a clue as to its purity. Wild sheep have short tails, 4 inches or so long. With domestication came the lengthening of the tail. Jacobs belong to the medium-tailed group. Other modern breeds of the U.S. (finewools, downbreeds and longwools) have long, heavily-woolled tails. Fat-tailed sheep fall into a separate category. The Jacob’s tail reaches only just to the hock and can be easily lifted by the animal. The tail head should set slightly below the straight of the back. This slight sloping allows for a more natural and easier lambing, and shows that the animal has not been “improved” to increase leg muscle size.

## BREEDING

the Jacob ewe matures early, successfully lambing at her yearling age. Twinning is common, triplets not infrequent. The ewe’s udder is small, held tight to her body. Birthing problems are rare; mothering instinct is strong and protective. The lambs are strong, up and nursing vigorously without assistance.

The Jacob ram also matures early, with ram lambs successfully breeding by six months of age, or even as early as four months. The scrotum is shorter than in modern breeds, not extending below the hock, with the testicles held close to the body.

The most obvious clue as to the purity of a Jacob is in its offspring. Jacob sheep will produce spotted lambs. Jacobs also possess a dominant black gene. If the ewe produces a black lamb with only a few, or without, white markings on its extremities (i.e. the crown of the head, one or two feet, tip of nose, white blaze on the face, or a white tail) on an otherwise black body, then most likely either one or both of the parents of the lamb is not purebred.

## SUMMARY

Jacob sheep have many unique phenotypical characteristics. Many of these are described as “desirable” or “ideal”. In any breed, it is difficult to find one animal to qualify as “ideal”. Being mindful of that, we present this as a guide to help you select good Jacob breeding stock. It would be wrong for Jacob owners to run out and cull everything from their flock that does not meet the “desirable” or “ideal” Jacob standard. The ability to exercise your own preferences, as in percentage of color, number or horns, spotted or whit legs, large patching type of spotting over smaller spotting, etc. alls the breeder to have his or her own flock look exactly like he or she wants it to look, not the same as everyone else’s flock. It is also necessary to maintain the genetic diversity that exists today if this Old World breed is going to continue in the future.

The following are RECOMMENDATIONS to follow when choosing breeding stock:

- (1) Choose a ewe lamb at least four months of age; a ram lamb at least six months of age
- (2) Horns are evident at four months--choose an evenly-balanced set on the lamb
- (3) Black or striped horns--never white
- (4) Good facial markings
- (5) No wool forward of the horns or below the hocks
- (6) No evidence of split upper eyelid deformity
- (7) Color pattern within the Breed Standard
- (8) Evenly-growing fleece with little kemp and britchiness
- (9) Open, springy and soft fleece with a sheen to it
- (10) White legs with or without spots--not all black legs
- (11) Black or striped hooves--not white
- (12) Choose lambs with good bodies--well-placed legs without tendency toward bow-leggedness, cow hocking, or knock-knees, or a narrow body.

Again, it will be difficult to find an animal that meets ALL the breed standard “desirable traits” criteria. For those who are new to Jacob sheep, the best advice we can give is to start looking at as many Jacobs as possible, identify the different characteristics, then select animals that have the characteristics that are important to you. You will have a flock that reflects you and your preferences, not someone else’s.



We hope you will join us in conserving this interesting and unique breed of sheep. It is not necessary to be a breeder to be a member of the Jacob Sheep Breeders Association. Membership in JSBA provides a quarterly newsletter, inclusion in the annual Flock Book, registration of sheep privileges, and a breeder listing.