

Shetland Fleece Clinic

By Rich Johnson, *Whispering Pines Shetlands*

As we all know, Shetlands come equipped with many fleece types, so don't take this to be the definitive guide on the breed, but I will attempt to contrast the different types and, at the same time, illustrate some reasons to go with each type.

First of all, it's not unusual to encounter double-coated Shetlands on your Shetland journey in the US. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a double-coated Shetland. They are common. What you need to determine is what you want to do with the fleece. Below is an example of a double-coated Shetland fleece.



This sample is very straight and coarse. It has nice luster, which is to say it's silky. It will spin up very well. But you would never use it in next-to-the-skin garments. It's far too coarse for comfort. And without crimp, it lacks the elasticity that you want for some projects. This particular sample is about 34 microns on average, and the CV is over 30%, but not much over. This fleece is about 9" long.

It is not a breed standard Shetland fleece by any stretch of the imagination, but that doesn't mean it is bad, necessarily. But I can't see using it for anything other than rugs. I think it's an example of the type of fleece that starts a lot of arguments between breeders. When you say something does not meet the breed standard, people take exception to it, but, in my opinion, this one doesn't. Why? For one, 34 μ is too coarse. Shetlands are supposed to be fine. Secondly, there is no crimp here. Some might try to argue that it's wavy (which is what the breed standard states), but that's equivalent to saying blue is almost green. This fleece has no movement at all in the finished product. It has no elasticity whatsoever.

Now, given that this sample has two very distinct coats, you could easily spend the time to separate them and then the finer inner coat could be used for clothing, but it will still lack the elasticity that you desire. As I said, it comes down to what you want to do with the fleece. But the bigger question might be why would you choose Shetland if you are making rugs and/or other items that require extra durability, without crimp?



The sample above is also double-coated, but not as extreme. I've seen Shetland fleeces ranging from 2" to 16", and this one is closer

to 6". It has good luster, but also lacks crimp like the first example.

In terms of fineness, it is about 32 μ with a 30% CV. It's certainly not my ideal, but it is pretty silky, and doesn't feel as coarse as the first sample. You can do a bit more with this fleece than the last one, because the outer coat (guard hair) isn't as dominant, but it still lacks the crimp to really provide good elasticity to projects. And I know there are things you can do during the spinning process to compensate for the lack of crimp, but when you compare it to finer fleeces, there is a very noticeable difference. In terms of spinning properties, it's probably equivalent to the first sample. Both will spin up easily, which makes them a favorite of beginning spinners.

To sum up the first two samples, both are Shetland, but not good examples of the breed. If these fleeces were the norm in the old days in Shetland, the breed would not have been called the finest of the British breeds. That's not to say they didn't exist, however.

Next is a sample of a fleece that I think is a pretty good example from an adult Shetland. You can see distinct crimp here.



The staple is 4", which is what I have found to be a good length. As far as fineness, this one is about 29 μ with a 23% CV. Nice luster, but not as nice as others that I've seen. Having made products from this fleece, I can say we are pretty satisfied with it. You might say that 29 μ is at the very upper limit of what wool authorities would call fine, and you'd be correct. But you have to evaluate fleeces against multiple criteria, and this one grades out pretty well overall. It has a lot of good properties. And coming from a three-year old ewe, this is not bad at all. There are two coats here, but they would be difficult to separate. If you are into separating the coats, you might be better off with a fleece that contains a more pronounced difference between them. Icelandics have such fleeces and a lot of people like them for that reason.

The next sample is from what I would call a fine fleece. This is basically what we breed for here at Whispering Pines. That doesn't mean anyone else needs to follow what we do, but I'm merely illustrating what we are after.



This fleece falls somewhere between 26 and 28 microns with a 20% CV. It's about 4" long and you can see the crimp quite clearly. This fleece is fully functional in that it has nice luster and fineness to go along with the other classic Shetland properties. It could be used in most projects, including those requiring extra durability. It really has no limitations for use. It's not as fine as some of the best Shetland fleeces I've seen, but it's very good. This fleece would not need to be separated into two coats because there really aren't two of them.

The final sample is what I would call an extra fine Shetland fleece. It's not Merino fine, but it is still very fine.



In Shetland parlance, an extra fine fleece should have an average micron of between 21 and 24 microns. Some would disagree with my assessment on that, but I've seen too many really nice 24μ

fleeces to say that they are not extra fine. And yes, you can notice the difference between one of these fleeces and say a 28μ Shetland fleece. Again, I don't think there's much of a downside to fleeces this fine. I would think you might give up some durability with the really fine stuff, but for years, they used Shetland fleeces in the UK for shawls and other next-to-skin applications. And they were able to do that because of the versatility of the fleeces. It has properties that allow it to be used in many applications. Shetland fleeces are very unique in the totality of their properties, which includes durability. Shetland fleeces were commonly used in the hosiery industry back in the day. And that was another thing that made them so unique. They could be used in a demanding application like that, and yet still had excellent fineness. A good Shetland fleece handles like nothing else.

Shetland fleeces can also be quite diverse. Shetlands are very diverse in terms of the various attributes that make up the breed; fleece is one example of that. I have seen single sheep that had three types of fleeces on it. The neck and shoulders were kind of like the third sample shown – very decent-to-good – with lots of utility. Not extra fine, but still pretty good. Then by midside, the fleece resembled the second photo in this article. As you moved back a few inches, you were into something more like the first photo. The back half of the sheep really was very limited in terms of what you could do with it. For all intents and purposes, you started out with a three pound skirted fleece and ended up with less than a pound of what I would call decent and reasonably crimped, and maybe another pound of fleece that wasn't terribly coarse, but still had limited functionality. You can find sheep like that without very much difficulty if that's what you like. As I said, it really depends on what you like in your fleeces.

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Welcome to our new members!

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