



SHEEP

Sheep (plural, sheep!) are even-toed ungulate mammals. Modern research has discovered that sheep, along with other even-toed ungulates, are distantly related to whales and dolphins, in the group *cetartiodactyla*. They are ruminants, which means they eat their food, partly process it, then regurgitate and chew again. This, "chewing the cud," enables them to get the maximum nutrition from their food.



The original sheep looked a lot more like a goat than what we recognise today. The sheep that we now see in Ireland is a very different animal to that which was first taken from the wild. The first records of sheep being kept in the British Isles in Roman Times. The first breed thought to come to Europe was The Mouflon (above left). Today in Ireland there are many breeds, they are best described as mountain sheep or lowland sheep. The mountain breeds are lighter and more sure-footed, with longer wool (above centre). Lowland breeds tend to be heavier, bigger, with wool that is dense but not so long (above right).

It is thought that they originate from the area around Turkey and that they were one of the first animals to be domesticated, most likely by the people at Göbekli Tepe, then spreading West from Çatalhöyük. Sheep were first hunted in around 60,000 BC when humans arrived in West Asia from Africa. Around 10,000 years ago when they were first domesticated, it was for meat, milk and skin. (Their hair covering was similar to that of the goat, not the dense wool that we see today.) In days gone by, the traditional shepherd stayed with his sheep all year round, keeping them safe by day and night from predators such as wolves and lynx. In some parts of the world, this still happens today, or in Portugal for instance, dogs live with the herd as guardians. This has evolved over time and has become another important reason for keeping sheep. Today sheep are usually kept in flocks for meat, milk, and wool. Sheepskins are also sold in many craft shops.

Organic sheep are much better for the environment. In many mountainous areas, they can be raised successfully without taking land needed to feed and maintain the whole of the planet, which means fewer or no use of fossil fuels.

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Keeping Sheep Healthy

Sheep are not always the most sensible "kids on the block." They face great danger if they stretch just that little too far to reach a succulent morsel, and end up falling over. Once on their backs, they can often not get up and will die if not found. They can also drown, particularly if their wool is long, which makes them very heavy.

Organic sheep farming forbids the use of most commercial pharmaceuticals, so the accent is on regular rotation around the land. Herbs can be very useful, or using old pasture that has many wildflowers and herbs growing within it, rather than the popular rye-grass mix, which is a monoculture. As well as eating the grass and greenery in their field, most sheep are fed a supplementary solid food, known as sheepnuts. It is important that this diet is balanced. Overeating on the wrong type of solid food, such as grains can lead to fermentation in the gut, which causes bloat and is very dangerous.



The main threat to sheep on pasture in Ireland is parasites. Perhaps the most distressing parasite that a sheep is faced with is the bot fly. When conditions are humid and warm, and/or the sheep has any urine on its wool, a fly will land and lay its eggs, which is known as flystrike. Within hours there will be maggots hatching, which then proceed to eat their way into the sheep. If not caught quickly, the sheep will die a horrible death. Non-organic farms will dip the sheep or spray them to prevent this, but the chemicals used are not nice, and are banned for organic use; the organic farmer must be vigilant. Caught early it is possible to remove the maggots and treat the sheep for the damage caused, with no future ill effect.

There are of course other diseases, too, among them footrot and orf which are bacterial infections that come from the land. It is important to keep the land in good condition and rotate the flock, rather than keeping on the same piece of pasture for too long.

Sheep for Wool

Wool is a natural material that is water resistant and biodegradable. Organic sheep are not treated with the harsh chemicals that non-organic farmers use, and the chemicals are very toxic and persist in the environment. Their wool is organic for this reason.

Sheep need to be shorn once a year, even if the wool is not wanted, because



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otherwise it just continues to grow, eventually becoming a real hazard to the sheep. Most farms gather the sheep together and either shear themselves or bring in a team. It looks distressing for the sheep, but in fact they are very pleased to lose the wool in the heat of the summer and the discomfort of shearing only lasts a few minutes. The same cannot be said for the shearer---it's back-aching work! There are shearing demonstrations and competitions around the world, it's a very skilled job. There are a few breeds who shed their wool naturally in the summer. You may see one such breed, Soay Sheep, on Irish WWOOFing farms.



In New Zealand there was a famous sheep, named Shrek (above), who evaded the shearers for six years! Eventually, he became a National Celebrity. Click [here](#) to read about this sheep.

Once cut, the fleeces are graded, sorted, and sold. Most big concerns are those who use it these days for things like insulation as well as the traditional use of knitting and weaving into clothing or carpet. Some small-holdings may use their wool themselves, washing and spinning it to then sell or knit. It is also good laid as raw fleece in the garden, as a mulch; it feeds the soil with nitrogen, helps keep slugs off, and keeps soil warm in the winter.

Sheep for Meat

Traditionally the ram would be put in with a flock of ewes as the summer days start to shorten. This is when the sheep come into estrus and are ready to be mated. The ram wears a raddle which is a strap that has coloured dye on it. Each time he mounts a sheep he leaves colour on her rump. This colour is changed every few days. This system means that the farmer knows which sheep have been served and should be pregnant. Modern farms will now often have the ewe scanned so that they know numbers of lambs to expect.



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The changing climate in Ireland, and the market forces which demand a year round supply of lamb, mean that there is a much longer breeding season, with many lambs being born from January through to May. Lambing time is hectic for the farmer. Sheep who are lambing out in the open face predator danger, the fox is not the farmer's friend and neither is the domestic dog. Many times stray dogs, or those who are with people but not under control, have attacked, injured and killed sheep and lambs. Some farms bring the ewes into a shed, others leave them on the land. Either way, the farmer is on constant watch to help the ewes if they need it and to check the newborns as they come into the world.



Non-organic farmers use hormones to manipulate the ewe's cycle and to promote multiple births. Triplets and quadruplets are now not unusual. An organic farm does not do this, but will work with the genetic history of their sheep to promote healthy, well-formed lambs. A good ewe can raise twins, she has only two teats. If there are more lambs, or there is a problem with a ewe and her milk, then it is not unusual to foster a lamb onto another ewe. Some lambs have to have formula milk to supplement the Ewe's natural milk, or be fed entirely by bottle if for instance they have been orphaned. Lambs are usually weaned from the Ewe at around 4 to 5 months, when they are sorted. This gives the ewes a few weeks rest before the whole cycle starts again.

Once a lamb is a year old it is called a hoggett. At three years it is classed as a mutton.

Sheep for Milk



A milk flock is run on similar lines to a herd of dairy cows. The ewe must give birth each year to produce milk. How long the lamb stays with the ewe varies from farm to farm. Sometimes it can be as long as two months, for others it can be 24 hours. Once removed, the lamb is usually fed on formula milk. The milk from sheep is mainly used for making cheese, although there is a growing market for sheep's milk to replace cows for people who are dairy-intolerant.

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