

# Knotty Lady YARN S

## Get to Know Wool!

Holy sheep...over 200 breeds to be a bit more accurate! With so many breeds to compare, this will be the first of two articles. 'The Fleece & Fiber Sourcebook by Deborah Robson & Carol Ekarius' have 10 different families of sheep with similar qualities that I will be using to help organize this sheep load of information!

Most of the sheep we will be talking about originate from the UK, Scotland, England, Wales, and Ireland. Some breeds have been brought to various countries around the world over time and history. They have also been selectively bred to produce more breeds of sheep. Some of these UK breeds have also adapted themselves to survive better in the harsh conditions by having their surface blood vessel constrict when exposed to the cold, helping them retain heat. Also to make matters even more confusing, some breeds like the Border Cheviot, are also known as South Country Cheviot or American Classic Cheviot (pronounced: sheh - vee - uht). So ready to talk wool?

Beginning with the **Blackfaced Mountain Family** that has 6 recognized breeds: Dalesbreed, Derbyshire Gritstone, Lonk, Rough Fell, Scottish Blackface and Swaldale. This family is commonly recognized by their blackface, majority have horns, and the long, rounded "Roman Noses". The Scottish Blackface has 4 recognized strains that mostly vary by where they are located. Scottish Blackface also makes up 30% of the sheep population in England and 50% in Scotland. With their fleeces weighing in between 3 and 7 pounds and a 27 - 40 micron count the Rough Fell and Scottish Blackface are good to use if you need to spark your creativity and push your boundaries. This family's wool is better used for projects like; bags, rugs, hats, outerwear, blankets and home decor items. They are also better for felting and weaving.



Remember this scene from Marley and Me featuring Owen Wilson and Jennifer Aniston? Those are Blackfaced Mountain Sheep!

Next, we have the **Cheviot Family** (pronounced Sheh - vee - uht) that has 3 traditional breeds. The Border Cheviot that is found along the border of England and Scotland. The Brecknock Hill Cheviot found in Wales, and the North Country Cheviot found in the Scottish Highlands. Once these breed made their way to the US they were given new names and selectively bred to create more breeds. Unfortunately without DNA testing it is sometimes unclear to know if some of the developed breeds come from the traditional Cheviot family. These smaller sheep have a "clean" or white faces

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with no wool, perky upright ears, Roman noses, and dark rings around the eyes resembling eyeliner. Their wool has a natural 3D crimp that adds resilience, body, and bounce. The Cheviot wool also has the basic range of characteristics to also be under the down family, which we will talk about later in this article. Cheviot wool can be 3.5 - 10 pounds and be 25 - 33 microns thick. This means the yarn is best suited for everyday garments such as sweaters and socks, along with



They aren't cute at all!

blankets and pillows. This can tend to be a coarser wool so next to skin projects may be a bit rough. This wool doesn't mind being felted but maybe wouldn't be a top choice.

**Dorset Group** has only 2 breeds that share no relationship; the Polled Dorset (hornless) and the Dorset Horn. The Dorset Horn is a result of crossbreeding either from Spanish Merinos and then imported from Spain or from selective breeding across England and Wales. The Dorset Horn, currently on the conservation lists, thrived in England because of its non-seasonal breeding traits which can produce 2 - 3 births a year. Keep in mind twins

and triplets among sheep are common. The Dorset group is not only popular in the fiber industry but also makes a strong presence in the meat and research industries as well. This group is most known for making the Christmas lamb a trend, that is still common today. The Polled Dorset is more common and is chosen more for research purposes. They are likely to be bred with other breeds to make their fiber more desirable. The fleeces are generally 4 - 9 pounds and are 26 - 33 microns, making them a finer fleece. These dense locks are strong and feature an irregular crimp that makes them perfect for any project you have in mind...except felting!



The Dorset Group have a bigger body and if you simply remove the horns you can see both breeds.

The **Down Family** may dominate the sheep industry in the United States but not in our industry. Primarily raised for their meat, these 6 core breeds are, if you'll excuse the pun, the black sheep of the fiber world. The core breeds are the; Dorset Down, Hampshire Downs, Oxford Downs, Shropshires, Southdowns and Suffolks. This core refers to the original breeds of Southern England in the 19th Century. Other sheep breeds can have down-like qualities or even be down decedents. The colored faces and legs range from tan to black. With these sheep being breed more for their meat, it has drawn the attention away from coat quality and characteristics. This fiber is often overlooked as a fiber source because of its wide range of fleece weight, an average staple length of 4 inches and a 23 - 37 micron count. This fleece has one flaw in the fiber world; a dark, hair-like over coat that is often coarser. With that said, these sheep still produce an amazing fleece.

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Fleece can be used for next to skin, everyday accessories that are still durable. These sheep are often used by members of 4H groups and fleeces are often sold, if you are interested!

Lastly, at most extensively the **English Longwool Family** which includes the; Leicester, Cotswolds, Dartmoors, Devon and Cornwall Longwool, Lincoln Longwool, Romney, Teeswater and Wensleydale. This family is large, historic and in charge of the fiber industries "Fiber Favorite Award". It is speculated to have a common ancestor from the early Roman Empire around 43 - 410 CE. This family has similar features such as staple length at their longest can reach upwards of 12 - 15 inches. Micron count varies a lot more in this family, from 28 - 42, with the added variable of which country they are from. The English Longwool Family can be found not only in the US and UK but also Australia and New Zealand. The main difference between the breeds (as far as we are concerned in the fiber industry) is the characteristics of their respective fleeces.



Above is a Shropshire which shows common features of the Down family.



Bluefaced Leicester Sheep

The Leicester (pronounced like the male name "Lester") has three branches; the Blueface (BFL), Border and Longwool. The BFL, unlike its siblings, is sheared once a year versus twice. The BFL is one of the most readily available breed specific yarns. Unfortunately, the Leicester Longwool is currently endangered. Leicester fleece is typically in ringlets or dreads of varying tightness, lustrous, has a natural crimp, and varies in color from white, tans, grays and black.

Cotswold sheep were well known in the Middle Ages of England and primarily used for their fleeces. Furthermore, they were respected and generated tremendous wealth for the area. Cotswold are a larger sheep that sport curly bangs, dark noses, lips and skin around the eyes. Their fleece can easily be matted and become dirty making it less attractive for spinners. Although some of the benefits to their fleece is it has a pearl-like texture, body, and doesn't need much twist when spinning. This fleece is better utilized for durable, heavyweight items such as rugs, bags and outerwear.

Dartmoors have a Whiteface and Greyface variation. The biggest differences is the Whiteface rams (male) and ewes (female) both have horns. The Whiteface Dartmoors fleece is sleeker and more hair-like. The Greyface fleece has more of a halo to the fiber. Unless spun with a texture the Dartmoors fleece is best for the heavy and durable textiles.

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Devon and Cornwall Longwools are a primitive breed, meaning no new bloodlines has been introduced for centuries. Used for both meat and fiber they produced a more substantial fleece that is good for felting. The fleece provides heft and drape, if from a young lamb. Adults produce a more carpet quality wool that is perfect for weaving and making rugs or tapestries.

Lincoln Longwool are appropriately nicknamed "big wool" for several reasons including rams that can exceed 350 pounds and they have an average of 16 pounds of fleece. This breed holds the fleece record at a total of 46 pounds and 30 inches long strands. This lustrous fiber is sturdy, handles like mohair and is great for hard wearing, sturdy fabrics such as upholstery, tapestries and rugs.

Romney have adapted to live in marshy conditions without sacrificing fleece quality. This good felting wool is large, dense and has defined crimp hanging locks. It is a perfect beginner fleece because it has many preparation methods to give you a wide range of uses that are factored into the quality. This breed is also known to carry the HH1 gene that produces coarser and hairier wool which is ideal for making carpets.

Teeswater have long, lustrous, shiny wool that can be seen in individual long and wavy locks. They are bred for white wool that is reluctant to felt. This type of wool shows great stitch definition, is sleek, shiny, that isn't airy, drapes well and yet is still very durable. With all these amazing fleece qualities it is hard to believe they have the edge on meat production compared to their cousins the Wensleydale.

Wensleydale, though similar to the Teeswater has its own unique spin on things. Wensleydale can be traced back to a single ancestor in 1839 North Yorkshire, England. That ram was born with recessive traits that gave him a blue head and ears. The fleece hangs in long distinct curly ringlets and is more supple when compared to the Teeswater. Wensleydale's produce a clear bright color when dyed. Unless the fleece is spun with a distinct dynamic texture it is good for weaving and home decor projects.

With all these flocks of sheep there are just as many similarities as there are differences. The internal biology is universal. The differences really show when you start looking at physical characteristics. Characteristics such as the body condition, fiber quality and features, which aren't always present until processing. Processing sheep wool is fairly easy.



Check out those Wensleydale bangs!

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A very broad way to explain it is once to twice a year, around spring, the sheep are herded up and shaved to the skin. Shearing is an art in itself. Shearers try to preserve fiber length and quality as much as possible. The fleeces are then baled together. A single bale can weigh up to 450 pounds and take as many as 60 animals to produce. Once these bales arrive at the factory they are put through several cleaning processes to get rid of grease, dirt, debris and vegetation. Once cleaned, the fleeces are carded, which disentangles the fiber, and is then called sliver. From here it can go one of two ways...yarn or raw wool. When making yarn, the sliver is then combed and spun. When kept raw the sliver can go through various other methods to remove vegetation, remove guard hairs or dyed.

Blocking for this series is rather variable. With so many factors of wool at play, in general, any blocking method will work on your project. Checking the yarn label will help narrow down the methods that will be available to you and even tell you if it is machine washable. Use caution when machine washing, or even wet blocking, wool because they will felt to some degree if you aren't careful. Otherwise spray/dry blocking and steam blocking are safe methods to use when blocking wool projects. Other blocking factors include personal preference and methods!

With so many wool yarn options currently available at Knotty Lady Yarns the Knotty Lady Team will be sharing there favorite wool yarns.

Meghan picks Sweet Georgia BFL + Silk  
75% Bluefaced Leicester and 25% Silk  
DK Weight with 247 Yards per Hank



Sierra picks Elemental Affects Cormo Sport  
100% Cormo Wool (breed specifics next month)  
Sport Weight with 400 yards per Hank

Lisa picks Malabrigo Mecha  
100% Superwash Merino Wool (breed specifics next month)  
Bulky Weight with 130 Yards per Hank



Was that enough information for you? Well, it may seem like a lot now but there is more to come in next months newsletter!