

Nevada

Sheep (*Ovis*)



Vocabulary

Ewe	female - mature weight 130 to 180 lbs.
Lamb	baby or young sheep
Ram	male - mature weight 200 to 300 lbs.
Wether	male, neutered
Color	mostly white, but some breeds are black, brown, gray, or reddish tinted
Market weight & age	120 to 140 lbs. at 5 to 10 months of age, depending on breed, feed and management conditions.
Maturity	2 to 3 years of age.

General Information

Lambing time, when ewes have their baby lambs, is usually in the spring. Winter storms have passed and grass is growing so ewes can produce a lot of milk for baby lambs. **Gestation period** is approximately 150 days. First lambing for a ewe is one year for some breeds and two years for most range breeds. Lambs have a birth weight of 5 to 8 lbs. for twins, 7 to 11 lbs. for single lambs. Twins are very common. A ewe may have 3 or 4 lambs, but can nurse only 2 at a time. The excess lamb will become a **bum** or **orphan** and be raised on artificial milk.

Sheep are managed as **flocks** while cattle are managed as herds. Over 90% of the approximately 80,000 sheep in Nevada are in large flocks and managed part of the year on public rangelands. Most range flocks will average 1.2 to 1.5 lambs born per ewe, and 1.0 to 1.2 lambs marketed per ewe. These sheep range mostly in Elko, White Pine, Humboldt, Lander Counties and some in Lyon County. There are small farm flocks in almost all counties. Farm flocks may exceed 2.0 lambs born and marketed per ewe.

There are over 300 major breeds of sheep in the world with over 30 breeds in the U.S. In addition, there are several sub-species of wild sheep. The Desert Bighorn and Rocky Mountain Bighorn are wild sub-species native to the U.S. Most breeds of sheep are polled (naturally hornless), although in some breeds the rams may have horns and the ewes are polled. Both ewes and rams in the wild sub-species will have horns, but the horns are much larger on the ram.

Sheep are herbivores (plant-eating) and are ruminants, with 4 compartments to their stomachs. This lets them eat foods such as grass, shrubs and weeds that we cannot eat. Sheep have front teeth only on the lower jaw, and a dental pad on the upper jaw in front that allows them to bite off plant parts. Most range sheep in Nevada are white-faced and have a strong “flocking instinct” (like to be with other sheep).

The herder controls where the sheep graze, where they get water, and where they bed down at night. The herder will have a herding dog, such as the Border Collie, to help control and move the flock. Suburban small farms often have sheep, sometimes referring to them as “lawn mowers and weed eaters.”

Predators can be a major problem for ranchers and farmers with sheep. Examples of predators are coyotes, mountain lions, uncontrolled dogs, bears, foxes and eagles at lambing time. Most herders also have guardian dogs to help them protect the sheep.

Environment

Properly managed livestock grazing is an important ecological management tool, and can be used in many situations to benefit the land. Public land managers and sheep producers recognize many ways sheep can benefit the land: 1) they are herded, thus permitting greater control when prescribed grazing is needed; and 2) sheep will consume a wide variety of plants, from shrubs to weeds to grasses. Some examples of how sheep are being used to help the environment include:

Weed control - Sheep like weeds. Sheep can control unwanted vegetation under power lines and other areas. Sheep will eat many weeds which are invading Nevada’s rangelands and meadows and crowding out native species.

Firebreaks - Sheep were shown effective in 2000 to create a 200-ft. firebreak on Carson Hill next to a major new subdivision in Carson City.

Revegetation - Sheep are sometimes used to trample in seeds that are aerially seeded on mine heaps, leach piles, in forests around eroded areas.

Stimulate growth for other species - Allowing sheep and cattle to moderately graze shrubs in the spring stimulates shrub growth, similar to effect of pruning the shrubs in your yard if they are pruned. This provides more palatable and nutritious shrub forage for fall and winter use by deer, elk and antelope.

Food Products and Nutrition

Mutton and lamb are good sources of protein and contain many important vitamins and minerals like iron, B-vitamins and zinc. Protein helps build muscles and strong bones. Iron and the B-vitamins give people energy. Zinc helps make hair healthy and shiny.

Leg of lamb, loin, rib, sirloin and rib chops are popular meat cuts. Mutton, or meat from older sheep, is popular with some ethnic groups.

Although not many sheep are milked in the U.S., over 200 million sheep are milked around the world. Many gourmet cheeses are made from sheep milk, due to its higher fat and dry matter along with lower lactose content. Some nomadic societies milk sheep to produce cheese that can be kept for extended periods without refrigeration.

Wool

Sheep provide us with **wool**, the fuzzy covering that grows on a sheep. Sheep are sheared (given a haircut) once a year. The wool that comes from a sheep is called a **fleece**. Wool is the most versatile natural fiber known to man, and has a wide range of uses. Wool is sometimes used to absorb oil and other chemical spills because it is highly absorbent. Wool has excellent insulating properties, and is the preferred fabric in extremely cold and extremely hot climates. It is also resistant to flame. Fine wools are used in the finer fabrics in men’s suits, women’s suits and dresses, slacks, and softer and lighter sweaters and vests. Medium wools are used in heavier sport coats, sweaters, and lighter blankets. Coarse wools are used for heavier blankets, heavier topcoats, and upholstery products.

Pelts and By-Products

Lamb pelts are used to make sheepskin coats and vests, decorative rugs, car seat covers, and many other items. In the Middle East and Central Asia, nomads make their tents, often called yurts, from sheepskins. Sheep and lambs provide many other byproducts, such as lanolin and pet food. Cleaned sheep intestines are used as casings or covers for sausage.

Activities

Dyeing with Kool-Aid: Buy 1 skein white 100% wool yarn. Cut to desired length. Use 1 package Koolaid + 2 cups hot water + 1 Tbsp. Vinegar. Let sit. Rinse in cold water. Experiment with solution strengths and length of dye vat time.

Felting (*the process of making a nonwoven fabric using heat, moisture and pressure*) – Use fine-textured unspun wool fleece. Put wool into hot, soapy water, and remove a small amount for each person. Have them make a marble size ball by squeezing and working by hand. Rinse, than add another layer of wool and repeat until the desired size. This ball should be hard and bounce. Some uses of felt are - hats, vests, warm lining for boots and yurts (tent-like homes). Resource – “*Felting by Hand*” by Anne Vickrey.

For Additional Information

<http://www.ansi.okstate.edu>

<http://www.sheepusa.org>

<http://www.americanwool.org><http://www.lambchef.com>

For sheep production information in Nevada contact University of Nevada, Reno, College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources – (775) 784-1660.

“In God’s Light,” northwestern Nevada, photo courtesy of Linda Dufurrena.

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