

ICELANDIC

Summary

The Icelandic is hardy and appears to thrive on coarse vegetation. It is an intelligent primitive breed with flighty characteristics, and in some instances, this may make it slightly challenging for the novice to handle. However, its grazing and browsing attributes are highly desirable, making it worthy for careful consideration on nature conservation sites with scrub or rank vegetation.

Hardiness – hardy, thrifty and intelligent.

- *Thrifty* – maintain condition well throughout the year on coarse vegetation.
- *Supplementary feed* – not necessary in extensive situations. However, as twins are common, ewes with lambs at foot will be able to more easily rear them if provided with supplements.
- *Hardy* – has a dual coat; provides good protection against adverse weather conditions. Its fine, dense undercoat is moulted in spring, and the outer coat of long hairs cast irregularly during the year; this moulting of hair is a primitive feature.
- *Intelligent* – very aware of the weather and seeks out shelter when the sky darkens.

Physical Attributes & Husbandry – an interesting breed to own and handle, requiring routine husbandry.

- *Handling* – more docile than most primitive breeds. However, some are flighty, wild and difficult to handle. Most will quickly learn to come when called or if nuts rattled in a bucket. Sheep dogs may be used to 'guide' a flock; if too much pressure is exerted, the herd will tend to split.
- *Fleece* – long and dense; likely to become entangled in Bramble and other thorny vegetation. Prone to matting/felting in high rain areas; thus fleece does not always shed and the new coat grows into it, which can cause problems.
- *Hooves* – good feet, although grow quickly on soft ground, and possibly faster than other hill breeds.
- *Size* – medium. Great variation in weight, although ewes may weigh up to 60kg; rams 90kg.
- *Appearance* – short fluke-shaped tail. Variety of natural colours, multicolour and markings, including grey, black, brown, moorit and apricot. This variation makes it easy to identify individuals. Two horned in both sexes; occasional lambs with four horns. May be polled.
- *Mineral requirement* – may be far higher than other hill breeds. Regional mineral deficiencies may translate into deficiency conditions in individuals.
- *Breeding* – ewes highly protective towards lambs. If crossbred, small-headed breeds should be used to avoid lambing difficulties.



Grazing Characteristics – a breed with good browsing ability and suitable for coarse grazing.

- *Grazing ability* – prefers coarse rushes and sedges to finer grasses. Eats the flowers of Nettles and Thistles, and the whole plant when they start to die back. In an upland location, eats Nettles and Thistles at all stages of development. Will eat grasses, but not keen on modern ryegrasses or clover; prefer tougher grasses.
- *Browsing ability* – very keen browsers, preferring the hedge to the pasture. Strips Brambles, Hawthorn and Blackthorn of leaves. Strip bark of variety of both mature and young trees in the winter, often killing them. In North America, Icelandic sheep eat Pine and Fir tree needles. Appears to avoid Heather.
- *Social impact of grazing* – forms hefts and generally sticks with its own kind.

Interaction with the Public – suitable for use on public access sites.

- *Reaction to people* – very inquisitive and in some situations will come to the fence to see what is happening.
- *Public perception* – easy going nature of the breed and its attractive appearance, makes the Icelandic a very popular choice for the public.

Marketability – a breed with a range of niche marketing opportunities.

- *Meat* – a slow maturing breed which produces lean tasty meat; fat tends to accumulate round the internal organs rather than as part of the joints. Suitable for direct sales or niche marketing.
- *Wool* – produces a high quality fleece, suitable for hand spinning and felting.
- *Breeding* – ewes can be put to a terminal sire to produce a heavier, faster maturing meat lamb.
- *Skins* – tanned skins fetch good prices when the colours are attractive, or the skins parti-coloured.

Sites where Icelandic sheep are in use & contacts

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
Kindrochaid Argyll			Eric and Sue Bignal 01496 850330
Edge of Denbigh Moors	Welsh Uplands	Has kept Icelandic sheep for 15 years, along with Black Welsh Mountain and Foula Shetland. Adore trees and hedging as dinner. Put them in a field and they will instantly look for the weeds etc. Grass is not top of the list. Treat them like goats and you will be on their wavelength. Has made some interesting observations on mineral deficiencies. Considers Icelandics as browsers rather than grazers. Very characterful. Can have late lambing seasons.	Jill Tyrer 01745 550515
Ramsden Oxfordshire	Cotswold grassland.	Polled and horned Icelandics in a wide range of colour and pattern.	Mary Castell 01993 868704

References

CASTELL M (1997) *Three Iron Age Sheep: the Icelandic, the North Ronaldsay and the Shetland Country Garden and Smallholding* November 1997, pages 41-43

CASTELL M (1997) *Is the Icelandic Sheep a British Primitive?* The Ark, winter 1997, pages 13-14