

# MERINO SHEEP

BY JACKI SONEWALD, INTERPRETER SPECIALIST



For hundreds of years, the Merino flocks were prized so highly that to export one from Spain was punishable by death.

Three years ago, the world was introduced to a wily sheep named Shrek, who hid in a New Zealand cave avoiding the clippers for six years. When he was finally discovered and given the haircut he'd been avoiding, the 10-year-old Merino sheep was 60 pounds lighter.

Shrek's story is just one example of the hardiness of the Merino breed. Producing fleeces known around the world as the softest and finest wool, the Merino sheep is one of the oldest and the most popular breeds of sheep in the world. The Merino can trace its ancestry back to sheep brought from North Africa to Spain by the Moors in the 12th century.



For hundreds of years, the Merino flocks were prized so highly that to export one from Spain was punishable by death. Not until political upheaval in Spain, during the early 19th century Napoleonic Wars, did the rest of the world begin to see official exports. Merinos crossed with native French sheep at the time became the foundation stock for the Rambouillet breed, known also for its fine wool – a near match in softness to the Merino.

There are three types of Merino sheep. Type A, also known as the Vermont or Wrinkly Merinos, is characterized by its very wrinkly skin. Farmers thought the many folds of skin would allow the sheep to produce more wool. What farmers got was a sheep that is very hard to shear and fleeces that contained various lock lengths. As a result the Wrinkly Merino is very rare.

The type B Merinos produce fine wool and lambs for market. The type C, or Delaine, Merino make up the bulk of the Merino breed. These smooth-skinned sheep are found all over the world, but are concentrated mostly in United States, Australia and New Zealand.

#### Sources:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3665735.stm>

<http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/sheep/delainemerino/index.htm>

