



# Guide to Sheep Breeds for the Caribbean

In the region sheep rearing has received more emphasis than goat production. This is because of the existence of well-adapted, highly prolific breeds and types of hair sheep such as the Barbados Blackbelly, West African and Virgin Island White. Extensive research has been conducted in the region by institutions such as the University of the West Indies (UWI), Sugarcane Feeds Centre (SFC) and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI) in the area of feeds and feeding systems for intensively reared sheep, and suitable models for such systems have been developed.

The following provides an overview of the characteristics of the major sheep breeds that form the basis of the Caribbean small ruminant industry as well as 'newer' breeds that may be potentially useful for the further development of this industry.

## Barbados Blackbelly

The Barbados Blackbelly breed was originally developed in Barbados from hair sheep brought by African slave traders during the 1600s. Barbados Blackbelly sheep combine the rare attributes of adaptation to widespread environments and high reproductive efficiency. They are also believed to be more tolerant than other sheep breeds to internal parasites. The coat, which is a complete covering of medium to thick hair (no wool), ranges in colour from light brown to dark reddish-brown (tan) with very conspicuous black underparts extending down the inside of the legs. There are black points on the nose and forehead, and inside of the ears are black. Rams have a neckpiece of thick hair, which extends down the neck to the brisket; some may cover to the shoulder.

Both rams and ewes are polled (i.e. without horns). The average height at withers (the highest point on an animal's back, on the ridge between its shoulder blades), varies from 60 to 70 cm in ewes and 75 to 81 cm in

rams. Adult rams weigh 60 – 90 kg and ewes 40 – 60 kg. One of the most outstanding qualities of Barbados Blackbelly sheep is their high prolificacy, with multiple births (twins and triplets) being common. Studies have shown the average litter size can range between 1.50 and 2.30 lambs per ewe lambing. Barbados Blackbelly ewes can be bred at any time of the year, and twice per year lambing is common. The annual lambing rate is above 150%. Barbados Blackbelly lambs typically grow slower than woolled lambs, but produce a carcass with a milder flavour and less body fat. Studies for example have shown that male lambs slaughtered at 5- 7 months of age have much less body fat than do comparable woolled lambs.



Barbados Blackbelly



West African

## West African

The West African sheep is found in the Caribbean, Venezuela and Colombia. It is also known by a variety of other names such as Africana, Red African, Pelona, Rojo Africana and Colombian Woolless. Animals are usually reddish brown or rust in colour with the under parts, inner sides of the legs, ears and face, a lighter colour. Both sexes are polled, and the male is sometimes maned. Mature rams and ewes weigh 54 and 34 kg, respectively. The average height at withers for the long-legged and dwarf types is 55 – 65 cm and 45 – 50 cm respectively. The prolificacy of the

adult ewes is low to moderate, ranging from 1.15 – 1.50 lambs per lambing. The ewe's first lambing can be at 14 to 17 months of age. The lambing interval is less than 210 days and lambs average 12 kg at 120 days of age.

## Virgin Island White

The Virgin Island White breed is found in the U.S. and British Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. It is believed to have descended from the hair sheep of West Africa, but there is a school of thought that it is a cross of the Wiltshire Horn and the native Criollo. It is also known as

TT/006/06



partageons les connaissances au profit des communautés rurales  
sharing knowledge, improving rural livelihoods

*This document has been produced with the financial assistance of Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA). The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of CTA and can therefore in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the Centre.*

**Prepared by:** Michelle John, Scientist I

**Contact information:** Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute,  
University of the West Indies Campus, St Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago  
Tel: 868-645-1205/6/7; 868-645-8120  
Fax: 868-645-1208  
Website: [www.cardi.org](http://www.cardi.org)

**Published:** October 2006

St. Croix, White Virgin Islander and White Virgin Island. It is described as a relatively new breed, and is an all-white hair sheep. The breed is best known for its resistance to internal parasites. Like other Caribbean hair breeds, the Virgin Island White sheep are early maturing and prolific and will produce lambs throughout the year. It is more prolific (1.45 to 1.90 lambs/lambing) than other hair sheep breeds except for the Barbados Blackbelly. Both sexes are polled and have average weights of 32-43 kg for ewes and 50-60 kg for rams.

### Blackhead Persian

The Blackheaded Persian was developed in South Africa from fat-rumped Somali-type sheep. The breed found its way to the Caribbean several years ago, where it adapted well to the humid, tropical climate of the islands. The head, neck and feet are black, while the rest of the body is white, with the two colours sharply distinguished. Animals are long legged and polled in both sexes, and breed at any time of year but lacks prolificacy, unlike the Barbados Blackbelly. In the Caribbean region, the average litter size has been found to be 1.08, with the 95-day lamb weight being about 13 kg for singles. Mature ram and ewe weights are approximately 50 and 30 kg, respectively. The average height at withers is 55 – 60 cm. This is a meat breed but of a poorer mutton type.

### The 'newer' breeds Dorper

The Dorper is a mutton breed developed in the 1930's from the Dorset Horn and Blackhead Persian, for the arid extensive regions of South Africa. The breed has the characteristic black head (Black Dorper) and it is also possible to find animals with white heads (White Dorper). Dorpers are considered one of the

most fertile sheep breeds. It is polled, has good body length and a short light covering of hair and wool. The Dorper skin is the most sought after sheepskin in the world because it has a smooth grain and no wrinkles. It is used in the manufacture of high quality leather clothes and gloves. The breed shows exceptional adaptability, hardiness, reproduction rates and growth (reaching 36 kg at ages of three and a half to four months) as well as good mothering abilities and regarded as an 'easy care' breed which requires a minimum of labour. The Dorper has a long breeding season which is not seasonally limited. Lambing intervals can be eight months. Consequently under good feeding and management conditions the Dorper ewe can lamb three times in two years, producing approximately 2.25 lambs on an annual basis.

### Katahdin

The Katahdin is a breed of hair sheep developed in the United States. It takes its name from Mt. Katahdin in the state of Maine where it was developed primarily from crosses among the Virgin Island White, Suffolk and Wiltshire Horn. Katahdin are hardy, adaptable, low maintenance sheep that produce superior lamb crops and lean, meaty carcasses. The hair coat of the Katahdin varies in length and texture among individuals and can be any colour or colour combination, though white is commonly preferred. They are medium-sized and efficient, bred for utility and for production in a variety of management systems. Ewes have exceptional mothering ability and

lamb easily; lambs are born vigorous and alert.

The breed is ideal for pasture lambing and grass/forage-based management systems. Their smooth hair coat and other adaptive characteristics allow them to tolerate heat and humidity well. Katahdins are also



Virgin Island White



Blackhead Persian



White Head Dorper



Black Head Dorper



Katahdin

significantly tolerant of internal and external parasites and if managed carefully require only minimal parasite treatment. Liveweight of a mature ewe in good condition is usually 54 – 73 kg; a mature ram will weigh 82 – 144 kg. Mature ewes usually have twins, occasionally producing triplets or quadruplets. Average birth weight of twins is about 3.6 kg. Ewes and rams exhibit early puberty and generally have a long productive life. Lambs produce a high quality, well-muscled carcass that is naturally lean and consistently offers a very mild flavour.

### References

American Dorper Sheep Breeders' Society. nd. Breed standard of excellence. Available from: <<http://www.dorperamerica.org/Breed-Standards.htm>>

Archibald, K A E. 1993. A review of the small ruminant sub-sector in the Caribbean Region. In: Proceedings of a Regional Small Ruminant Workshop on Opportunities and Constraints for the Development of a Sustainable Small Ruminant Sub-sector in the Caribbean Region, Barbados, 15-17 September 1992. St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute, pp. 23-31

Benn, A, Lallo, C H O and Neckles, F A. 1993. Small ruminant production – a key link in systems for sustainable agricultural development. In: Proceedings of a Regional Small Ruminant Workshop on Opportunities and Constraints for the Development

of a Sustainable Small Ruminant Sub-sector in the Caribbean Region, Barbados, 15-17 September 1992. St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute, pp. 287-291

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Barbados). nd. Breeds of hair sheep. Available from: <[http://www.agriculture.gov.bb/default.asp?V\\_DOC\\_ID=1300](http://www.agriculture.gov.bb/default.asp?V_DOC_ID=1300)>

Oklahoma State University. 1996. Breeds of livestock. Available from: <<http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/sheep>>

Rastogi, R K, Williams, H E and Youssef, F C. 1980. Barbados Blackbelly sheep. In: Mason I L (ed.) Prolific Tropical Sheep. Rome: FAO and UNEP. Available from: <<http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/004/X6517E/X6517E02.htm>>

Schoenian, S. 2004. Maryland hair sheep resources: hair sheep breeds. Available from: <<http://www.sheepandgoat.com/hairsheep/index.html>>

Schoenian, S. 2005. Maryland sheep and wool festival parade of breeds: breed histories and characteristics. Available from: <<http://www.sheepandgoat.com/parade%20of%20breeds.htm>>

Schoenian, S. 2006. Sheep101.info. Available from: <<http://www.sheep101.info/breedsS.html#Stcroix>>