

# Merino Sheep

**Scientific Name:** *Ovis aeries*

**Class:** Mammalia

**Order:** Artiodactyla

**Family:** Bovidae



A Merino sheep's body is covered with wool and needs to be cut at least once a year. Females have no horns, are called "ewes" and weigh from 100 to 120 pounds. One sheep produces from 14-18 pounds of fleece per season. Males have spiral horns, are called "rams" and weigh from 160 to 180 pounds. The young are called "lambs" and on average weigh about 5 to 8 pounds. Their faces, legs wool are white. Merino sheep see in color, have a "270 degree field of vision" and do not have to turn their head to see behind them. They have excellent hearing and a highly developed sense of smell. There are no teeth in the upper front jaw, but rather lower front teeth that press against an upper palette. The upper lip is split which allows them to select

their favorite leaves from a plant. They have hooved feet. Merino Sheep were bred mainly for the wool they produce and are still regarded as having some of the finest and softest wool of any sheep. The Merino breed originated in Southwestern Iberia (Spain), but the modern Merino sheep was domesticated in New Zealand and Australia.

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## Range

Merino and Merino derived sheep breeds are dispersed worldwide. Numbers vary in each area.

## Habitat

Merino sheep particularly like grasslands, tend toward high plains, but can subsist wherever they can find food.

## Gestation

Merino sheep have a gestation period of 145 to 156 days.

## Litter

Sheep give birth to 1 to 3 lambs, once or twice a year. The lambs have a high degree of independence at birth (precocial).

## Behavior

Sheep are social animals and live in flocks, but the most important reason for living in flocks is protection.

## Reproduction

The age of puberty of ewe lambs varies greatly and is influenced by breed.

## Wild Diet

They are herbivores and eat leaves, grass, hay and fern.