

Breeds of Sheep in Australia.

Australian sheep farmers have bred sheep to suit their particular climatic & geographical part of the country. Sheep have been bred for the production of meat and wool. As we are primarily interested in fibre we'll concentrate upon the breeds bred for wool production.

Sheep breeds are generally grouped under the following headings:

1. Merino
2. British Long Wool Breeds
3. British Short Wool Breeds
4. Australasian breeds
5. Recently introduced wool breeds.

1. Merino

The predominant breed of sheep in Australia is the Merino. The Merino was first introduced into Australia in 1797 and has over the years developed for wool production. It has also been used for cross breeding with British Long Wool & Short Wool Breeds for mutton and prime lamb production.



Merino sheep in full wool. Lismore. Victoria. Australia.

Merino wool is dense, soft handling and finely crimped. The wool is usually bright white in colour. The wool grows in small bundles or staples. Wool staples are commonly 65 - 100mm (2.5 - 4inches) long. Merino wool generally has a fibre diameter of less than 24 [micron\(\$\mu\text{m}\$ \)](#) .

The main Merino types include:

- ♣ strong Merino (broad) wool 23 - 24.5 μm ,
- ♣ medium Merino wool 19.6 - 22.9 μm ,
- ♣ fine Merino 18.6 - 19.5 μm ,
- ♣ superfine Merino 15 - 18.5 μm

▲ and ultra fine merino 11.5 - 15µm.

Ultra fine Merino wool is suitable for blending with other fibres such as silk and cashmere.

Special Characteristics of Merino wool

*Having a very high comfort factor Super fine and Ultra fine Merino wool is used in high end worsted cloth for suiting material .

*Merino wool is also common in high-end, performance athletic wear.

*Merino wool is the softest types of wool available, due to its finer fibres and smaller scales.

*Merino Wool has fine crimp along the entire fibre length and a natural bright white colour.

*The raw fleece has a high grease content. The grease or lanolin has antibacterial properties.

*Merino wool has good elasticity and excellent loft.

*Fine Merino wool can be difficult for beginning handspinners to spin because of its softness and shorter fibres

*Good felting wool

*Merino wool is best if spun fine

*Merino can be spun using woollen or worsted methods

*Fine wools spin well into fine yarns for knitting and crochet projects.

*The softness of fine Merino wools makes them ideal for creating garments that can be worn against the skin. They are especially ideal for making baby clothes.

*Fine wools blend well, and add elasticity and loft to other exotic fibres, such as, cashmere, alpaca, angora, camel, silk, and mohair.

2. British Long Wool Breeds

The British Long Wool breeds were originally brought to Australia for experimental purposes. These sheep are suited to high rainfall areas.

a). Lincoln

The Lincoln has a large frame and is a hornless sheep. It has long lustrous wool with a staple length of 200 - 300 mm. Its wool is very coarse, 34 - 41 microns with medullated (hollow) fibres.



Lincoln sheep.

b). English Leicester

The English Leicester has a large frame and is a hornless sheep with black feet. The English Leicester has lustrous wool with a staple length of 200 - 250 mm. The wool has a fibre diameter from 32 - 35 microns.



English Leicester sheep.

c). Border Leicester

The Border Leicester is a large framed hornless sheep. It has lustrous wool of 175 - 225 mm staple length and a fibre diameter of 32 - 34 micron. The Border Leicester is a popular breed for producing first cross (Merino ewe x Border Leicester ram) ewes. The first cross ewes are prolific at producing twins are good milkers and their lambs mature quickly for the meat market.



Border Leicester sheep.

d). Cheviot

The Cheviot is a large-framed sheep with a white hornless head that is free from wool. The Cheviot produces soft handling, chalky coloured wool with a staple length of 100 - 150 mm and a fibre diameter of 27 -33 microns. The Cheviot produces prime lamb sires.



Cheviot sheep

e). Romney Marsh

The Romney Marsh is a large-framed, hornless sheep. It has a thick top knot a white face and kemp fibres on its face and legs. The Romney Marsh produces demi-lustrous wool of 75 - 200 mm staple length and 30 - 34 microns fibre diameter. Romney marsh ewes are excellent mother and when crossed with British Short wool breeds, produce high quality lamb.



Romney Marsh Ram.

3. British Short Wool (Downs) Breeds

The British Short Wool Breeds are commonly known as Downs breeds. They grow wool which is comparatively harsh to handle, chalky (flat lustre) in appearance, has a staple length in the 50 - 130 mm range and a fibre diameter between 23 - 27 micron.

The downs breeds have fine grain meat and are commonly used as prime lamb sires.

a). Southdown

The Southdown has a small chunky frame and a wide back. Its head is well covered with wool and it is polled (no horns). Its wool is harsh to handle and has a short staple length, generally 50 - 75mm and a fibre diameter in the 24 - 29 micron range.



Southdown Ram

b). Dorset Horn and Poll Dorset

The Dorset Horn has a medium sized blocky frame, a wide long back and wool that grows down the face to the top of the muzzle. It has heavy curled horns (the poll Dorset is without horns). The wool is chalky white in appearance and relatively harsh to handle. The wool staple length generally grows to 75 - 125 mm and the wool fibre diameter is in the 26 - 32 micron range.

Poll Dorsets and Dorset Horns are renowned as prime lamb sires and are usually mated to crossbred (Merino cross), British Long Wool or Merino ewes.



Poll Dorset ewes

c). Suffolk

The Suffolk has a medium blocky frame, wide back and black head, black legs and black hooves. It is hornless. Its wool is 75 - 100 mm in staple length and a fibre diameter in the 26 -33 micron range. The Suffolk is renowned for its hardiness, the exceptionally quick growth of lambs and high meat dressing percentage.

The White Suffolk is an Australian breed developed for Australian conditions. The White Suffolk was developed from breeding programs involving the Suffolk breed, which was initially crossed with white wool breeds (mainly the Poll Dorset). Its head is white and free of wool and hornless and its legs are white. It is predominantly a high performance meat sheep breed.



Suffolk Ram



White Suffolk Ram (Ida Vale Stud W.A)

d). Texel

The Texel is a well-developed, evenly proportioned heavily muscled, lean sheep. It is polled with a clean white face and black nostrils. The wool is generally dense, 100mm in staple length and in the 30 - 36 micron range. The Texel is predominantly a meat breed.



Texel ewe.

4. Australasian Breeds

The Australasian breeds include the Coopworth, Corriedale, Polworth, Perendale, Poll Dorset, Gromark, Cormo and South Suffolk. The Corriedale and Polworth have been developed as dual purpose sheep and have good wool producing and meat characteristics as well as good reproductive performance.

a). Corriedale

The Corriedale is a dual purpose sheep. The breed was developed by mating purebred Merino ewes with English Long Wool Lincoln rams. The subsequent half bred progeny were then inbred for seven generations to maintain the new 'pure' breed.

The Corriedale has a large framed body which is practically free of skin wrinkle. It has a polled head, dark hooves and wooled legs. The wool is 100 - 150 mm in staple length and has a fibre diameter in the 25 - 32 micron range.

Corriedale wool is ideal for beginning hand spinners as it has a good staple length and will spin into a medium to thick yarn. The wool is moderately soft. Corriedale wool is also good for felting projects.



Corriedale

b). Polwarth

The Polwarth is a dual-purpose sheep bred from a Lincoln-Merino Cross. The Polwarth is Three-quarter Merino and one quarter Lincoln, and closely resembles the Corriedale in general appearance. The Polwarth has a large framed body, usually with some neck folds, polled, has no kemp on the face and legs and is well woolled. The wool is 100 - 130 mm staple length with a fibre diameter of 23 -25 microns (visual count : 64s, 60s, 58s).

The Polwarth is well suited to wetter, colder areas where medium and strong woll Merinos fail to thrive. The Polwarth is a dual purpose breed with almost equal emphasis on meat and wool production. The ewes are good mothers.



Polwarth

c). Coopworth

The Coopworth is the result of combining Border Leicester and Romney Marsh bloodlines. It was developed in New Zealand. The Coopworth has clean legs, is polled and has excellent mothering and milking ability. It produces a white lustrous wool of 150-200mm staple length and 30-35 microns (visual quality count: 40-46s).



Coopworth

The table below summarises the Australian breeds and their fleece characteristics.

Breed	Fleece Characteristics	Breed Characteristics
Corriedale	Staple length: 100–150mm Micron: 25–32 um (Visual quality count: 50–58s)	White legs, ears, face, black hooves, hornless, broad head with wide black nostrils.
Polwarth	Staple length: 100–130mm Micron: 23–25 um (Visual quality count: 64s–58s)	Merino/Lincoln crossed with Merino. Soft white face, black mottles on nose, white legs, no kemp on face or legs.
Coopworth	Staple length: 150–200mm Micron: 30–35 um (Visual quality count: 40–46s)	Border Leicester/Romney cross. White open face, clean legs, polled.
Cormo	Staple length: 90–130mm Micron: 18–23 um (Visual quality count: 74–60s)	Developed from superfine Saxon Merino/ Corriedale cross. Fast growing, medium frame, open face, polled.
Perendale	Staple length: 100–125mm Micron: 28–32 um (Visual quality count: 50–56s)	Cheviot/Romney. White open face, dark nostrils and feet, white legs, polled.
Gromark	Staple length: 150–250mm Micron: 27–33 um (Visual quality count: 50s)	Corriedale/Border Leicester. White open face, clean legs, polled
South Suffolk	Staple length: 75–10mm Micron: 24–26 um (Visual quality count: 58–60s)	Brown to black open face, brown to black legs, black hooves.

5. Recently Introduced Wool Breeds.

Finn Sheep.

A recent import from Finland and Denmark. Finn sheep are a fast growing, lean sheep breed. Multiple birthing of triplets and quads is common.

The Finn is a white fat tailed breed. The head is polled, the face free from wool and it should have white feet. The wool is even, soft and lustrous. It is a white wool with good even staple length and lock. The crimp is well defined and even from staple base to tip. Micron range 20 – 26um.



Finn ewe with quadruplets.