

Navajo/Jacob Sheep

Native Range Map



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Artiodactyla
Family: Bovidae
Genus: *Ovis*
Species: *aries*



Photo courtesy of Chris Tucci

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** This is a totally domesticated animal that does not exist in the wild. The Navajo/Jacob sheep is a cross breed between the Navajo and the Jacob breeds of sheep. (A breed is a group of organisms within a species developed by artificial selection and maintained by controlled reproduction.) They graze on pastures and hilly grasslands.
- **Exhibit Location:** Domestic Animal Barn

Characteristics Due to the fact that this sheep at the RGZ is a cross between two specific breeds, it is best to describe each:

- Navajo sheep are a narrow, light-bodied sheep, with long, clean legs.
 - Weight: males (rams) = 160-200 pounds; females (ewes) = 100-150 pounds
 - The coat is long on top and soft underneath, with colors ranging from white to black, gray, browns, pinto, and spotted. The wool is coarse and easy to spin. The outer coat is 4-6 inches long; the under coat 3 inches.
 - Rams are horned, and frequently multi-horned (4 horns). Ewes are generally polled (no horns).
 - They are highly resistant to disease.
- Jacob sheep are small in stature.
 - Weight: males (rams) = 120-180 pounds; females (ewes) = 80-120
 - The coat is a medium- fine fleece with no outer coat. The wool is black or lilac (deep gray or blue/purple cast) with white spots. The wool is open, soft and light, with little grease (lanolin). This makes it great for hand spinning. When sheared, this medium-weight wool weighs 3-6 pounds. The black wool, which grows out of black skin, frequently is shorter than the white wool, which grows from white skin.
 - Both sexes are horned with 1 or 2 pairs. Some rams and ewes can have up to 3 pairs of horns. Rams have larger and more impressive horns than the ewes.
 - They are resistant to parasites and foot problems.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** not found in the wild; **In Captivity** 15 years

Behaviors

- Sheep are followers by nature and will instinctively flock and move together.
- Due to their 4-chambered stomachs, in which microorganisms break down plant fibers so the sheep can absorb the nutrients in their diets, they are called ruminants (cud-chewers). They will lay down in the pasture, field, or barnyard and “chew their cud,” helping in the digestive process.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** peanut butter logs, pine trees and branches, scents on branches (peppermint, etc.), broom brushes to rub on, fresh vegetables hung around their yard, furniture rearranged in their yard

Reproduction

- Jacob ewes will cycle during the first fall following their birth, and most often the ewe’s first lamb is a single.
 - They generally cycle in the cooler fall months and have 1 or 2 lambs (sometimes 3) in the spring. Lambs show their spotting and horn characteristics (2-4 horns) at birth, with the horn buds being more readily apparent on ram lambs.

- Jacob lambs may be weaned at 2 months of age, but most shepherds don't remove lambs from ewes until 4 months of age.
- Jacob ewes are excellent, protective mothers.
- Navajo ewes frequently breed out of season.
 - The gestation period is about 150 days. Twins are common, triplets happen often.
 - The Navajo ewes produce plenty of milk on poor range and experience little lambing (birthing) difficulty. They are very protective of their young.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** not applicable (not found in the wild)
- **At the Zoo:** hay, grain, vitamin E

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- Jacob sheep may be one of the oldest breeds of domestic sheep in the world.
- Navajo sheep were developed in the United States from the Churro, a Spanish breed of domestic sheep.
- Predators: wolves, coyotes, cougars

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- In mid- to late spring, when the weather will be staying consistently warm, the sheep are sheared (wool shaved off). Approximately 8-10 pounds of wool is sheared off. This will then grow back through the year, to be sheared again the following spring.
- Navajo sheep were first brought to America in 1540. Few pure bred Navajo sheep are found in the United States today. There are about 500 in flocks in Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Washington State.
- Navajo sheep wool is used in the famous Navajo Native American blankets and rugs.
- The Jacob sheep's irregularly spotted fleece act as camouflage and the horns act as some defense against predators.

Sources:

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