

# Barbados Blackbelly Stewards Needed

By Carol Elkins

There are fewer than 400 of Barbados Blackbelly sheep left in the United States, although the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy reports that these sheep are plentiful in their native Caribbean country of Barbados. Of those in the U.S., more than half are secluded in research flocks and unable to contribute to the critically small gene pool. The other half are tended by six dedicated breeders spread across the U.S. Without more sheep and more sheep breeders, this beautiful hair sheep may disappear forever in the U.S.

Arguably the most exotic looking of the hair sheep breeds, Barbados Blackbelly are distinguished by long black strips running down either side of the face and (surprise!) by a jet black belly that provides stark contrast to their tan to dark mahogany sides and back. From a distance, one could easily mistake a flock of these sheep for a flock of African gazelle.

The Barbados Blackbelly is more than just a pretty face, however. Barbados Blackbelly are an extremely easy-care sheep that puts the fun back into sheep



*The relatively small body size of Barbados Blackbelly sheep, 100-150 pounds for ewes and 175-200 pounds for rams, is favored by natural selection. Smaller sheep tolerate heat more easily, and smaller carcasses are desirable when refrigeration is not available. Photo by Carol Elkins.*

raising. They are very disease resistant and parasite tolerant, reducing the need for expensive deworming agents and medications. They are non-seasonal breeders that plop twins out as often as three times every 18 months. And they know how to have their babies without help, eliminating those all-nighters in the sheep barn during lambing season. Because Barbados Blackbelly are a hair sheep breed, they don't need shearing and their tails do not require docking. All of that is just icing on the cake, however, compared to the quality of their meat. It is tender and mild-flavored – just grill it like a T-bone and you'll have a meal that makes memories.

Barbados Blackbelly sheep were first brought to the United States from Barbados in 1904. The breed is naturally polled (neither rams nor ewes have horns) and of a smaller stature than most woolled breeds. The disappearance of the breed went largely unnoticed because of extensive crossbreeding with horned breeds and larger wooly and

hair-type breeds. The look-alike crosses are called barbado, barbie, barbs, and other derivatives, but most people call them Barbados Blackbelly. Alarmingly, when an actual count of the true polled rams and ewes from known polled bloodlines was made in 2004, there were fewer than 100 Barbados Blackbelly sheep remaining in the U.S.

In response to this crisis, six dedicated breeders formed a Consortium in 2004 to work together to preserve the existing genetics and to build the population back to a size that would eliminate inbreeding and promote genetic diversity. Over the past couple of years, the Consortium has been able to stabilize several distinct bloodlines and more than double the number of rams and ewes. We now find ourselves in a peculiar situation – we finally have sheep to sell, but no new Consortium members waiting to purchase them. We desperately need new breeders who are willing to purchase a starter flock and grow it into several distinct bloodlines.

The Consortium is looking for a particular kind of shepherd. We've given the breed a precarious foothold in the U.S. but there is a tremendous amount of work to be done to strengthen the numbers and diversify the bloodlines. We need breeders



*Barbados Blackbelly sheep of both sexes are typically polled. Rams have a mane of thick hair which extends down the neck and brisket and may cover the shoulders. Photo by Carol Elkins.*

who understand how fragile the situation is and who are willing to make this a long-term project that probably will be non-profit for quite awhile. Because Barbados Blackbelly are such an easy sheep to care for, they are well suited for folks just getting into raising sheep, and the Consortium welcomes new breeders. However, it is important that folks weigh the seriousness of the genetic situation against the seriousness of their wanting to raise sheep. The breed can't afford trial-and-error husbandry practices and half-hearted attempts to "try something new."

If you are interested in an opportunity to really make a difference, to be able to say that you helped save the U.S. population of a breed, and you have the time and the resources to devote to this effort, then we would like to hear from you. Please visit the Consortium's website at [www.consortium.blackbellysheep.info/](http://www.consortium.blackbellysheep.info/) or con-

tact Consortium founder Carol Elkins at (719) 948-3773.

Barbados Blackbelly sheep will give you good value for your effort. They will cost you less than wooled sheep, they'll keep the weeds down in the pasture, they'll bring joy to your heart every time you look out across the field. Their babies will make you weak at the knees out of sheer cuteness. The ram lambs will make your BBQs standing-room-only and word will spread so that you'll have a ready market for lamb meat when you need to cull. If you'd like to do as much for them as they can do for you, please consider joining the conservation effort. ❖

*The Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association International (BBSAI) is the breed registry in the U.S., and Consortium members are required to register all breeding sheep. You can learn more about the association at [www.blackbellysheep.org](http://www.blackbellysheep.org).*

*For more information about Barbados Blackbelly sheep, visit the author's website at [www.critterhaven.biz](http://www.critterhaven.biz) or visit the ALBC website at [www.albc-usa.org/cpl/wtchlist.html#sheep](http://www.albc-usa.org/cpl/wtchlist.html#sheep) and click on the breed name.*

*Editor's Note: The Consortium of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Breeders have worked together to craft carefully worked out breeding programs that maintain diversity within the U.S. population of this breed, plan for future exchanges of stock, and ensure that unique lines within the population are safeguarded. Though the Barbados Blackbelly sheep is in the "Recovering" category on the ALBC Conservation Priority List because of the breed's global population, the coordinated efforts by the U.S. stewards of this breed serve as an outstanding example of ALBC member/breeders working together to the benefit of their chosen breed.*