

Cole Creek Wool

Coated sheep add diversity to century-old ranch

Casper – “I don’t have a background in agriculture, and neither does my family. When my husband Kem and I moved back to his family’s ranch four years ago I really didn’t know what I was going to do, or how I would contribute out here,” says Washington state native Shelly Nicolaysen, who today owns and operates Cole Creek Wool from her home northeast of Casper. She sells her Rambouillet and Rambouillet/Merino cross wool as yarn, roving and raw fleeces.

“Right after we moved back we docked the lambs. A couple days after docking, Kem’s sister came back from checking the sheep with this little lamb that was on death’s doorstep. She was leaving in a few days and I remember thinking ‘I can’t watch this lamb die.’ Today Bones is very much alive and one of my coated sheep,” explains Shelly of her introduction to the sheep business.

Later that same summer “Bonnie” and “Clyde” joined Shelly’s herd of bum lambs after their mother died.

“Clyde is a wether and when fall came I didn’t have the heart to ship him. Kem’s relative Sharon Brondos is a spinner in Casper and while visiting one day she mentioned that our ranch has really good wool, but it’s dirty, and that’s a problem for hand spinners. She said some people put coats on their sheep to keep the wool clean and that hand spinners will pay a premium for those fleeces.

“That was my way for Clyde to stay on the ranch. I started coating my sheep and it’s worked great. People like the wool and it’s soft and clean,” explains Shelly of how she started coating her sheep.

When Shelly moved to Wyoming she knew nothing about wool and Sharon provided her with several books. Shelly’s in-laws also helped her learn the ropes.

“The first year I read all about wool and learned from Kem’s family. They know a lot about wool from the commercial perspective and are a really good source of knowledge. I learned what the markets for my product were and what a good fleece looks like among other things.

“My father-in-law has a great eye for fleece and he really helps me out at shearing. I’m starting to get more confident, but he will still lean over and nudge me with, ‘Hey, better grab this one’ sometimes. His wife does a lot of hand felting and knows a lot about wool, too. She’s a big help and also very excited about my business,” comments Shelly.

Her increased interest in wool spurred her husband and father-in-law into introducing Merino genetics into their straight Rambouillet herd as a way to bring their wool’s micron count down.

“When we first moved back the herd averaged 21 microns. Today we’re just starting to see the Merino influence and our count is down to between 19.5 and 20 microns,” explains Shelly, who sorts out the choicest fleeces during shearing and reserves them for Cole Creek Wool. While these fleeces are considered “dirty” from a hand-spinning standpoint, Shelly sends them to Mountain Meadow Wool mill in Buffalo for processing. This is her second year processing fleeces and the added roving and yarn products have been well received.

“They do a great job, and I am able to tell them what I want done with it. Some they clean and card and send back as roving and some I have them spin and turn into yarn,” notes Shelly. This year she sorted out just over a dozen fleeces to be processed. One challenge of her business is determining how many fleeces she needs to meet demand each year.

“I’m always worried about having too much and right now I’m sold out of yarn and having to wait for this year’s to be processed. Figuring out supply and demand has been a big challenge. I am only familiar with the sheep side, so the crafting side is something I’m still learning about. Having the commercial herd gives me a huge amount of flexibility. I can grab extra fleeces and if I don’t have the demand for them they can go in the bale the following year,” she notes.

Another challenge for Shelly has been pricing her products. Since she is a low-volume producer, her processing fees are considerably higher than if she was high-volume.

“Figuring out how to price everything was tough because it seemed insanely expensive, partially because of my processing fees. I was pretty uncomfortable with that at first, but people are willing to pay because of the quality of the wool, the fact that it’s made in Wyoming and because Mountain Meadow does such a beautiful job. I was very doubtful initially but am learning people are willing to pay a premium for my product,” comments Shelly.

Her coated fleeces are marketed through Sharon, who is involved in several spinning forums online. “I let her know when I have a fleece available and she puts a post on the forums,” explains Shelly. Cole Creek Wool roving and yarn is currently available at Dancing Sheep and All That Yarn in Casper, Cowgirl Yarn in Laramie or through Shelly.

“Our next step is building a website. This has been a pay-as-you-go business and hopefully this summer we can get a website up and running. Then I will use that as my primary means of marketing,” says Shelly.

Another goal she has is adding to her coated flock. Now that she has an established market for those fleeces she would like to add a couple more ewes to her current six with coats.

“Next year during lambing we will probably grab a couple ewe lambs and bottle feed them. We’ve tried grabbing a couple off the range herd and coating them, but that didn’t work,” says Shelly with a laugh. “They found their way back to the herd and we had to go catch them and get the coats off. So bottle feeding a couple and ensuring they’re easy to handle is the way we will go.”

Cole Creek Sheep Company has raised sheep northeast of Casper for over 100 years and Shelly’s business adds another dimension to the century-old operation.

“It’s been really interesting to watch Cole Creek Wool and our commercial sheep enterprise. The two have supported each other well and there’s no competition between them because they’re using two totally different wool markets. We’re continuing to get better micron counts each year in the commercial herd and having those numbers allows me a lot of opportunity.

“It’s been great. I like marketing it as an all natural, all Wyoming product. I’m trying to get the word out there that Wyoming wool is incredibly high quality. Right now I just want to do more with it,” says Shelly.

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