



Raising sheep the EASY way!

Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association International

Blackbelly Banner

Blackbelly Sheep—Domestic, Exotic, or Wild

By Carol Elkins

Last year, a BBSAI member in Georgia was told by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Resources Division (GA DNR) that she must purchase a wild animal license in order to raise her Barbados Blackbelly sheep. Over the course of 10 months, the BBSAI engaged in an extensive education campaign to try to help the GA DNR understand that both Barbados Blackbelly and American Blackbelly were biologically categorized as domestic sheep. We know that several U.S. states classify our breeds of sheep as "wild" or "exotic," so we provide in this article the information that you might use to educate YOUR state wildlife department if the situation arises.



American Blackbelly sheep
safariworkstaxidermysales.com

Biological Taxonomy

Whether or not blackbelly sheep are domestic or wild is not something that state bureaucracies should determine arbitrarily. Sheep, and all animals, are part of a large biological taxonomy that categorizes organisms into groups such as genus or species. Biological classification is based on an animal's shared descent from its nearest common ancestor. These taxonomies should be the first point of reference when deciding if a breed is domestic or wild.

There are seven main ranks assigned to an animal: kingdom, phylum/division, class, order, family, genus, and species, with various "sub," "super," and "infra" ranks fitted between the main seven ones.

The full biological taxonomy for all domestic sheep is provided by the Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS).^[1] Briefly, it is

The full biological taxonomy for Barbados Blackbelly is available from the International Species Information System (ISIS).^[2] It is

Ovis aries aries barbados_blackbelly

By extension, American Blackbelly would be

Ovis aries aries american_blackbelly

Class Mammalia
Subclass Theria
Infraclass Eutheria
Super order Laurasiatheria
Order Artiodactyla
Sub order Ruminantia
Infra order Pecora
Family Bovidae
Subfamily Caprinae
Genus Ovis
Species *O. aries*
Subspecies *O. aries aries*
(domestic sheep)

These taxonomies clearly fall within the subspecies "*O. aries aries*," the domestic sheep, as do Dorper, Katahdin, and St. Croix (the other U.S. hair sheep breeds) and, for that matter, all domestic breeds of wool sheep.

The GA DNR eventually agreed that Barbados Blackbelly sheep are domestic sheep and do not require a wild animal permit to own. However, they have deferred any decision regarding American Blackbelly. They argue that because American Blackbelly were developed by crossing Barbados Blackbelly with Mouflon (and also Rambouillet, a domestic woolled

sheep breed), and because Mouflon are a wild sheep, American Blackbelly are therefore "wild."

However, the biological classification of the Mouflon is disputed, so this argument is not as solid as the GA DNR would have us believe. You can read a succinct discussion of the dispute in "Mammal Species of the World."^[3] In short, the debate is whether to consider Mouflon a subspecies of "Ovis aries" as in "Ovis aries musimon" (and thus a domestic sheep) or a separate species, "Ovis orientalis" or "Ovis musimon." If Mouflon are considered a separate species, then they fall outside the category of "domestic sheep." The references provided at the end of this article can help illustrate the difficulty in answering this basic question. The five authoritative resources do not agree.

Because of the uncertainty of the biological taxonomy of the Mouflon sheep, it is more difficult to argue objectively that the American Blackbelly is 100% domestic sheep. But since Mouflon are considered the ancestral species of all domestic sheep,^[4] one could argue that all sheep have a certain degree of mouflon genetics, depending on how far back historically one wishes to go.

Management as a Classifier

I think that the heart of GA DNR's policy lies not so much in the taxonomy of American Blackbelly and Mouflon, but in the husbandry and end purpose of these breeds in the U.S. Flocks of American Blackbelly and barbado sheep run wild in game ranches and open prairies across the U.S. They have been bred and raised for the trophy market. I think it is easier for wildlife departments to arbitrarily declare American Blackbelly to be "wild" or "exotic" because in these cases, the sheep are managed differently than other domestic breeds of sheep.

They are not fenced, seasonally driven and rounded up, or deliberately pastured. They are feral and they are hunted. From the DNR's perspective, it doesn't matter what their genetics are. They pose a risk to these states' multi-billion-dollar deer and bighorn sheep populations via diseases such as scrapie and pasteurellosis that are shared with sheep and goats. The DNR believes American Blackbelly need to be controlled as wildlife.

When discussing the issue with your local DNR, in addition to pointing to the taxonomy of your breed of sheep, you also can point to the fact that the US Department of Agriculture regulates your flock by virtue of mandatory scrapie tags and a farm premises ID. You might ask your DNR why an animal regarded as livestock by one state agency can be regarded as wildlife by another state agency. That hopefully will open a discussion about how you manage your flock differently to ensure that it poses no threat to the local wildlife.

BBSAI member John Carlton has developed this type of relationship with his state's regulatory agencies. Several years ago, John spotted a photo of an American Blackbelly in Alabama's official conservation magazine with a caption of "Illegal Exotic Corsican Sheep." Having worked with (and being personally acquainted with) folks at Alabama's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), John quickly confirmed that his American Blackbelly sheep were farm animals—but only because they had scrapie tags in their ears and that John had a premise ID issued by the State Department of Agriculture. Alabama made it clear to John that his sheep could not be hunted or knowingly sold for hunting.

It is important that BBSAI members take an active role in educating

Does being hunted make an animal "wild" and "exotic"?



Black goat www.fab.com



Jacob sheep www.taxidermy.net



Barbado sheep
[www. http://clovercreekranch.net](http://www.clovercreekranch.net)

ing their state officials and local veterinarians. I live in Colorado and recently sold Barbados Blackbelly sheep to a resident of North Dakota. When my vet spoke to the ND state vet to arrange the import permit, he was told that Barbados Blackbelly were considered an exotic sheep breed and would require a special permit for transport. I have worked with my

vet for many years and he is well versed in the history of Barbados Blackbelly sheep and the difference between them and American Blackbelly. When my vet informed the ND vet of their error, the ND vet reconsidered, saying that the "horned breed" was exotic and not the Barbados Blackbelly. My vet didn't pursue that misconception, but it would have been the next subject for discussion had I been trying to transport American Blackbelly to North Dakota.

"Alternative Livestock"

The growth of the "alternative livestock" industry is an indicator of the evolving role that animals play in American economy and society. Elk, deer, bison, emu, and ostrich are considered in most states to be "alternative livestock." In a few states, American Blackbelly have been added to the list. At one time, there were clear distinctions between domestic livestock and free-ranging wildlife. Species could be neatly assigned to each category. Each category, in turn, had its own public regulatory agency that enforced management policies. Free-ranging wildlife species were regulated by state departments of wildlife to maximize hunter yield; livestock species were regulated by federal and state departments of agriculture for health and marketing concerns.

These boundaries are now very blurry, as indicated by the phrase "alternative livestock" itself. The changes resulting from the growth of the "alternative livestock" industry produce conflicts between individuals and groups that

respect animals, often involving particular species and the manner in which they should be managed. This is the situation facing American Blackbelly sheep.

BBSAI as a Resource

When defending the livestock status of Barbados Blackbelly sheep, the taxonomic data are definitive and members are encouraged to use the BBSAI as a resource to provide that data. In addition, Barbados Blackbelly sheep have been under the watch of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (<http://www.albc-usa.org>) since 1977, and were upgraded to a "recovering" breed of agricultural animal in 2005.

As the registry for American Blackbelly sheep, the BBSAI is not involved in how its members manage their flocks, but generally trophy ranches don't register their rams, and conservationists do. So we believe we best represent breeders of American Blackbelly sheep that are considered domestic agriculture and we will help you defend this position with your DNR. We believe that lumping all American Blackbelly sheep into

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the "wild/exotic" category simply because some of these animals are hunted does a disservice to the breed, does nothing to address the perceived risk that these sheep might pose to wild deer flocks, and reflects badly on state agencies who are already criticized for overextending their authority and making it difficult for farmers and ranchers to continue to stay in business.

The BBSAI will be happy to help its members document and defend the "domestic sheep breed" status of their sheep, regardless of

breed. We believe that with good documentation and a well-formed argument BBSAI breeders can be influential in helping their state agencies understand that both Barbados Blackbelly and American Blackbelly sheep are domestic sheep.

References:

1. The Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS) is the result of a partnership of federal agencies, including the Departments of Commerce, Interior, Agriculture, and the EPA; the Smithsonian Institution; and other international agencies, organizations, and taxonomic specialists, formed to satisfy their mutual needs for scientifically credible taxonomic information. The full biological taxonomy for all domestic sheep can be viewed at http://www.itis.gov/servlet/SingleRpt/SingleRpt?search_topic=TSN&search_value=552475
2. The International Species Information System (ISIS) provides a global database for the world-wide zoological community that contains information on 2.6 million animals -- 10,000 species -- and is constantly growing. The full biological taxonomy for Barbados Blackbelly can be viewed by ISIS members at <https://app.isis.org/abstracts/Abs79417.asp#11.0>
3. Wilson & Reeder's "Mammal Species of the World," now in its 3rd edition, is a standard reference work in zoology giving descriptions and bibliographic data for the known species of mammals. The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History maintains an online site for accessing current information, including taxonomic, as it is compiled. The taxonomy for *Ovis aries* is provided at http://www.vertebrates.si.edu/msw/mswcfapp/msw/taxonbrowser.cfm?msw_id=13224 and includes in its comments section a full discussion of the dispute regarding the classification of mouflon.
4. A discussion of the ancestry of modern domestic sheep is provided by the Encyclopedia of Life at (<http://eol.org/pages/311906/details>) They note that the name *O. aries* is often used to refer only to domestic sheep, but has also been used more broadly, depending on which forms are recognized as distinct species—for example, including mouflon as well. The taxonomic backbone of the Encyclopedia of Life is provided by ITIS.
5. The Taxonomy Browser is a tool provided by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI). It contains the names and phylogenetic lineages of more than 160,000 organisms that have molecular data in the NCBI databases. The full taxonomy for domestic sheep is available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Taxonomy/Browser/wwwtax.cgi?name=Ovis%20aries> 