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## The Dutch Spotted Sheep

Since 2013, English, Scottish and Irish sheep breeders have had interest in a typical Dutch sheep with spotted white and black (brownish “bleached” in the sun) wool. Since 2015, a small number of them have been imported in England and Scotland. Probably because of this, breeders in the aforementioned countries are now interested in the Dutch breeders’ activities regarding the spotted sheep. The text below is aimed to answer most questions raised till now.

The history of the Dutch Spotted Sheep (DSS) only goes back to around 1880. Furthermore, it is not really a breed and there is no flock register. It is therefore more of a sheep-type, historically only common in the western part of the Netherlands.

We, the *Nederlands Bonte Schaap* Breeders association - abbreviated to NLBS - have tried to reconstruct the history of the Dutch spotted sheep (DSS). What we know now is mostly based on what has been told by old farmers, taken from old newspapers and from checking the archives of the well-documented Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. We have also tried to interest some professional organisations and found the Wageningen University and Research (WUR) willing to do some scientific testing to find out if and which other breeds are in the pedigree of the DSS. They are more than willing to do so but, unfortunately, the NLBS is lacking funds to do so.

To summarize:

Based on descriptions and studies of paintings owned by the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam we know the history goes back to round 1880. Sheep on paintings before this date look more like a Moorland-type of sheep! Spotted sheep in the paintings since then look like the DSS as we know it now. From old farmers and old documents, we know that the DSS were held in an area in the western part of the country; roughly in the area between the cities of Leiden, Utrecht and Rotterdam. The soil in that area is peat bog and in medieval times this was a huge lake with swampy areas. In the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century farmers and authorities made some low embankments (quays), approximately 1 metre above the water level. Those embankments are normally between 1000 to 1500 metres long and quite often connected with other embankments. They have an average width of between 3 to 5 metres, but sometimes up to 10 metres when used for horse-driven transport. When possible they are made using clay, resulting in a thin layer of clay on top of the peat. Even today you can see this in the landscape.

After the embankment had been realized, the water from the lake was pumped out using windmills resulting in large swamps. After a few years, farmers started reclaiming (and developing) the newly obtained land.



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It was necessary to make these embankments more robust against the water by covering them with grass. Under no condition trees were unacceptable as they could destroy the embankment in a storm and, thus, water would flow back!

The farmers used sheep to *maintain* the grass but more importantly also to eat saplings. Mostly DSS were used for this, while they were also used on the reclaimed land, in a later stage, to transform the peat bog into sod, strong enough to carry cows.

This is the main reason that the area between the aforementioned cities is still below sea level, up to approx. 8 metres but on average 1 to 4 metres.

Due the length of these (connected) embankments, the DSS had to be able to walk long distances. What's more, the PH level of the peat bog is acid – up to PH 4,5 - and they must be able to withstand this.

Even today a lot of embankments have survived but are now mainly used as recreational bike lanes and for walking.

The DSS is now mostly held on meadows, quite often small areas not big enough for profitable dairy farming, or in combination with dairy farming to improve the quality of the vegetation.

Since the 1950s some farmers have made use of other breeds, like the *Texel sheep*, to get a sheep with specific qualities. Later (1970-1980) other new, specially created, breeds were used to bring special qualities into the DSS. The last 20 years the DSS has not been, for most of the time, mixed with other breeds anymore.

In 2005 legal regulations were set against the Scrapie illness. For that reason, only rams of the genotype ARR/ARR are allowed, but only one DSS breeder in the Netherlands had these rams then available.

A group of 6 DSS breeders had understandable concerns about the risk of in-breeding and so the association NLBS was founded. Although the start was without this specific breeder, it had his firm support!

The Dutch Spotted Sheep breeders are thusly organized in the *Nederlands Bonte Schaap* association. The association has nearly 100 members who have in total some 2.500 ewes. It is estimated that over 1000 farmers and hobbyists have spotted sheep.

About a quarter of them are "free riders" and make use of the breeding activity of the members.

The aim of the association is to improve the quality of the DSS. For that reason, a breeder's guideline is formulated (however, not yet translated).



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The association organises at least two meetings a year. During these meetings, say, an hour is spent on organisational matters and in the second part of the meeting, a guest speaker gives a presentation about a current topic, obviously related to sheep breeding. Over the years the most common topics have been health, feeding, breeding and regulations.

Now, about 15 of the members have the Scrapie resistant status and are MVV free. Only these breeders fulfil the legal requirements for export. Most breeders have a maximum of 15 ewes; only 4 of them have over 45 ewes.

Only one of these four is currently exporting to the UK - last year about 20 and 60 lambs this year. As far as we know an initiative has recently been taken into consideration to set up a flock register for the DSS in the UK.

Good quality lambs with the Scrapie resistant status and MVV free are limitedly available and quite often already reserved/ordered for before birth!

On top of that, only a limited number of breeders are able express themselves in English fluently and only one of them is willing to do all the paperwork and make the transport arrangements. Those who have only a small number of lambs (of which the hobbyists form the great majority) are not interested in exporting at all.

Only 1 member exports sheep. Another had been exporting to Denmark in the past but stopped due to too much "red tape".

To avoid the risk of in-breeding, the association is now considering to set up a register of all MVV free sheep. The association is currently running a test on a software program in the cloud (ZooEasy) with central data entry and access for every participant, to find out the inbreed percentage via proof pairing.

A specific problem is that MVV registration must be carried out by one of two organisations using their database system. Both support the legally mandatory sheep registration of the government, but unfortunately ZooEasy does not. A test is set up now to find out how to export data from the 2 systems and import these files into ZooEasy, to avoid manual re-entry and unavoidable mistakes.

In the 2016 autumn meeting of the NLBS meeting it has been decided whether the MVV free sheep will be registered. Especially the large group of members with up to about 15 ewes are probably not interested in this initiative. When there is no interest, it will be up to the MVV free breeders to set up their own animal registration on a voluntary basis. It is to be expected that, one way or the other, a registration will start soon.

Remark: In the meantime it has been decided to organise and facilitate the import of data from 4 different software packages. This will start in the spring of 2017. Only those who contribute to



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the system with data are authorized to access and check the in-breeding factor. The effectiveness of such a system will, for apparent reasons, remain poor for the first years.

A description of the ideal breed will be translated soon. Together with this explanation we will put this on our website: <http://nlbs.nl/home/about-us/>

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