

November Spinning Sample - Qiviut by Peggy Bowman

Qiviut is the underdown of the muskoxen - this fine layer of hair insulates them from brutally cold arctic winters, and is naturally shed each spring.

This yarn sample of qiviut is from a “castrate” named Kobuk, one of approximately 45 muskoxen living at the Large Animal Research Station (LARS), University of Alaska, Fairbanks. A friend gave me 4 ounces of his qiviut when she came to visit last year.

The LARS sells every ounce of qiviut they harvest - most is sold to the native cooperative in Anchorage called Oomingmak; the rest is left as raw fiber or processed into wonderfully blended or dyed yarns, and sold on line. The sales support the care and feeding of the muskoxen, a herd of arctic caribou and domestic reindeer.

It wasn't until I'd volunteered to comb muskoxen at the LARS last May that I worked up the courage to spin this luscious fiber. After having combed the muskoxen, scoured the pastures looking for naturally shed qiviut, picked vegetable matter and other “goodies” from the qiviut bound for processing mills, then de-haired my own four ounces of Kobuk's qiviut, I have a new appreciation for the high price of the fiber, the yarn and the finished goods.

Those of you who spin are probably familiar with Celia Quinn, who is a noted spinner and weaver. She lives in Homer, Alaska, and has volunteered to help comb the LARS herd of muskoxen every year for the last five years. I was privileged to spend two and a half days working with her, and she was gracious and generous enough to share her knowledge of spinning and weaving with her handspun qiviut.

I spun this sample from uncarded locks of qiviut. I de-haired the fiber until I couldn't distinguish the short, fluffy “good stuff” from any of the finer guard hairs, then spun and plied it to the approximate size of Zephyr wool/silk. I plan to use the qiviut as weft in some handwoven scarves, one of which will go to the friend who gave me the gift of Kobuk's qiviut.

