



An HJS Studio Tutorial: Easy Warm Mittens



As you probably know by now, we raise Shetland sheep in Northern Lower Michigan. I made myself some handspun wool mittens the first winter we had sheep, and they kept my hands pretty warm most of the time. When the wind and cold was really bad, I wore a pair of wool gloves underneath. As the years went by, however, those mittens started to show holes, and had to be mended many times. The yarn had been left over from a sweater I made my daughter using a Corriedale x Bond fleece from Cyril Lieschke in Australia. The wool, though beautiful, wasn't really strong enough for barn mittens, and the mitten design was not as warm as I really needed (I hadn't lived here long enough to know just how cold a windchill of 20 below really is when I made them :) So began the search for the right fibers and patterns to make a pair of really warm mittens.

I first tried making a pair of Fair Isle mittens using a diamond pattern of 50% white angora, 50% white Cormo wool (carded roving from Debbie McDermott of Stonehedge Fiber Mill) on a background of microwave rainbow-dyed Shetland yarn. They were really bright and pretty, but were knit far too loosely to be really warm, and I decided didn't want to wear mittens that would show dirt so easily while doing chores.

I finally reached the point where my original barn mittens had to be repaired nearly every time I wore them and at the same time we had an extended cold spell in January 2003, with three weeks of temps never breaking 20 F, frequently staying in the single digits with below-zero windchills. I was motivated to try again!

A generic mitten pattern is below, if you're interested in knitting mittens without having to buy a commercial pattern. I've also included some tips in using two-end knitting in your mittens.

Angora-Wool Mittens

I reasoned that if I stranded angora with wool, one stitch in one yarn, the next stitch in the other yarn, and knit very tightly, I might make some mittens tough enough and warm enough to stand up to years of winter chores. It worked too well! The mittens are so warm my hands sweat inside them even when the air temperature is near zero. And they are far too pretty to get covered with hay!

You can see a close up picture here. I used one strand of Musket colored Shetland wool. Musket is pronounced "moose-kit" and is a color generally recognized as a gray-brown. I



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had a skein of 3-ply worsted weight handspun on hand, and used that as the main color. The contrast color was a skein of 2-ply sport weight handspun angora. We had three angora bunnies left, all French; one is black (dark gray), one is blue (light gray) and one is 'tort' which is short for Tortoiseshell. Tort is a lovely caramel brown with creamy white and pale gray undertones. I had mixed these three colors randomly while spinning, then plied the ball back on itself for a really pretty skein of yarn.

This close up shows how the changing colors of the angora 'flimmer' (to use a term from one of Elizabeth Zimmerman's books) against the gray-brown Shetland background. In fact, you can hardly see the wool through the angora! See my Angora tutorial for information on how the different types of angora bunnies' wool varies. The mittens weigh about 2.9 ounces, 82 grams. The wool yarn wraps about 12 to the inch, the angora is quite variable.



Wool Mittens

Back to the drawing board! This time I decided to use all wool, so that the mittens wouldn't be too pretty to use in the barn, and to, ironically, make sure the mitts weren't too warm to use most of the time. I liked the stranding technique I 'unvented' (another EZ term), and found it's a variation of two-end knitting, traditional for mittens in Scandinavian countries, where I believe it's generally done in one color. Well, one color is way too boring to knit or to use! So I got out a different pile of yarn left over from a project.

This wool is Border Leicester, from our sheep Mary. It's softer than most BL, but still quite strong. I had dyed a rainbow of colors for a shawl project. These yarns are left over from that project, or didn't quite suit it. I used a dark almost hunter green for the background of both mittens, and varied the other colors as whimsy suited.

The first test wearing was just a couple days after the cold snap finally broke, with temperatures finally up to the high 20s and even low 30s, and eight inches of new snow on the ground. It's a good thing I took the pictures before I wore them outside! Bits of hay are now a part of my barn mittens. But that's OK—the mittens are so dense the hay can't poke through, and so warm I don't feel the cold at all. And the colors are fairly dark, so I can clean rabbit cages and do other dirty chores without having to worry about the mittens looking terrible afterwards. These mittens weigh about 3 1/2 ounces, or 100 grams, using double-knitting weight (14 wraps per inch) 2 ply handspun.

Update in 2008: Those mittens are still my daily chore mittens for nearly six months of the year, and only just in January 2008 did I have to do a small darn—a spot on the inside of my right thumb was thin. I'm very pleased with the performance and look of these mittens, after five Michigan winters.



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Generic Mitten Pattern

I wrote this pattern for some new knitters on the Internet email group Fibernet who expressed an interest in making mittens. Additional directions for the two-end mittens pictured here are below. I recommend doing a pair or two with nothing fancier than plain stockinette, maybe with stripes, the first time. Doing a pattern stitch, even as simple as the two-end stranded knitting, is tricky around the thumb increases and fingertip decreases.



Mittens are so simple you really, truly don't need a pattern. They're basically just a tube to fit your hand, with a thumb tube formed by increases. Try these directions once, and you'll be freed from patterns forever! Well, unless you want to knit for someone you can't try the mitten on and can't get measurements for. I use commercial patterns to give me an idea of sizes in that case, and convert inches to stitches by multiplying by my gauge.

My instructions assume you're knitting in rounds. To convert to flat knitting with a seam to sew up, work the mitten flat, thumb in the center, with an extra two stitches on both hand and thumb. Keep the first and last stitch of each row in garter stitch for easier seaming.

Start with a gauge swatch in whatever pattern you want to use. I like my mittens dense and nearly wind-proof. I used size 3 US needles for both pairs of mittens, using worsted weight yarn in one pair, double-knitting weight in the other. I didn't go down a size for the ribbing like normal, because it would have been nutso to try to knit worsted weight yarn on size 2 US needles :)

If your chosen stitch is thick, like garter stitch, then allow an extra multiple of four stitches. Bulky mittens need to be larger to fit around the hand comfortably.

Cuff: Measure your hand around the wrist, around the base of the thumb, and around the hand just above the thumb. Other measurements may be 'taken' by trying on the mitten while knitting. For best results, knit halfway through one needle and pull on the mitten while 4 needles hold the stitches.

Cast on: Multiply your stitches per inch by your wrist measurement, round **down** to the nearest multiple of 4 stitches, cast on three double pointed needles and knit your choice of ribbing—I like k2, p2 for mitten cuffs. Knit as long as you like. Three inches gives a nice length to allow you to put your coat on, then your mittens, and easily tuck the cuffs inside your coat sleeves. Note the number of stitches and how many rows you knit on a piece of paper, in case it's several years before you make the second mitten :)

Beginning of hand: Multiply your stitches per inch by your hand measurement. Knit one row plain (don't start your pattern stitch yet), increasing (if needed) to the multiple of four stitches (or multiple of your pattern repeat) closest to that number.



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Next row: In your pattern stitch, knit one stitch on first needle, place a marker, increase one stitch, place a marker, knit to end of round. The stitch between the markers is the beginning of the thumb increases. This area is called 'the thumb' in this pattern.

Next two rows: knit plain (in pattern stitch).

Next row: knit one stitch, slip marker, increase one stitch, knit one, increase one stitch, slip marker, knit to end.

Next two rows: knit plain.

Continue increasing on every third row, placing your increases just inside the markers on either side of the previous thumb stitches, until you've increased to about 1/2 or 1 stitch **less** than what your gauge multiplied by your thumb circumference measures. There should be an odd number between the markers. Don't pull out your work if there's not, though, it's not worth the bother :) Note how many stitches you increased, and write it down.

Knit plain on all stitches until, when you try on the mitten, the top of the knitting reaches just to the bottom of the spot between your thumb and hand. Count your rows from the ribbing, and write down the number.

Next: Knit around until you come back to the thumb. Don't knit the thumb stitches—place them on a piece of yarn or a stitch holder. Cast on some stitches to bridge the gap over the thumb—I used 3 at both 5 stitches per inch and at 6 stitches per inch. More might be needed for a smaller gauge or a different pattern. Write down the number!

Continue knitting evenly in rounds using your pattern stitch until the mitten, when you try it on, reaches about the tip of your little finger, or is about an inch from the tip of your longest finger. Count the rows including the cast-on stitches, and (you guessed it!) write down the number. Arrange the stitches on 3 or 4 needles so that the thumb is centered between the front and back of the hand, and to one side as you knit.

Decrease to tip, round style: The most wind- and wear-resistant decrease is to decrease four stitches evenly spaced in each round, but not stacked above each other so there's no obvious line of decreases. It's easiest if there's no pattern to mess with, unless you can arrange your decreases to complement the pattern. Continue decreasing four stitches each round until there's about three inches times your stitch gauge of stitches left on your needles, and proceed to weaving, below. Make sure you have an even number of stitches left at the end, which may mean **not** doing the last decrease.

Decrease to tip, flat style: The more common method of decreasing, which is easier to keep track of, matches the decreases at the sides for a flat tip. Be aware that this type of decrease definitely wears out faster than other areas on the mitten.

Flat decrease method: Knit one stitch at beginning of needle, slip next stitch, knit next stitch, pass the slipped stitch over the knit one, continue knitting plain to three stitches from the end of that side of mitten, knit 2 together, knit one (which should be at the end of a needle); repeat for second half of that round. Repeat decrease round each round until you have about three inches times your gauge of stitches left on the needles. Make sure you have an even number of stitches left at the end, which may mean **not** doing the last decrease.



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Weaving: Arrange the palm half of the stitches on one needle, the back of your hand stitches on one other needle. Your yarn should come from the right back stitch (left handed knitters, please consult a book, I don't have a clue how to convert this procedure for you :) Break off with about a half yard left—that's more than enough. Thread the tail onto a blunt tapestry needle.

1. Pass the needle into the first stitch on the front needle as if to purl it. Leave the stitch on your needle, but pull the yarn through it snugly.
2. Pass the needle into the first stitch on the back needle as if to knit it. Leave it on the needle, pull yarn through snugly.
3. Pass the needle into the first stitch on the front needle as if to knit, slide that stitch off the needle, pull yarn through snugly.
4. Repeat step 1.
5. Pass needle through 1st stitch on back needle as if to purl, slip stitch off needle, pull yarn snug.
6. Repeat step 2.

Continue weaving by repeating steps 3-6 until the last stitches are off the needle.

Thumb: You're not quite done—it's time to get back to the thumb. Multiply your stitch gauge by the circumference of your thumb near where it joins the hand. Round up a bit for a comfortable fit.

Pick up on two needles the stitches you left on the holder. With a third needle, pick up (using the yarn from your ball and leaving a 4-5 inch tail) enough stitches so the total is enough for your thumb, plus or minus a couple for your pattern stitch if needed.

At 6 stitches to the inch, I have 13 stitches on the holder, and pick up another 6, giving me about three inches, which fits very well though my thumb measures 2 5/8 inches. Since my pattern is the stranded two-end knitting, it's a bit thicker than plain stockinette, so the thumb needs to be wider.

Anyway, knit around on however many stitches you like until, when you try it on, the tip of the knit thumb is just past the tip of your real one, with the join between mitten hand and thumb being nestled right down again the same join on your real hand. Count and write down the number of rows.

Next row: Knit two together around. Break yarn with an eight-inch tail. Thread it on the tapestry needle and pull the yarn through all the stitches on your needles. Pull tight, stick the yarn through the tip of the (knit :) thumb, darn a few stitches across the tip inside your thumb, and weave in the end.

Darn in your remaining ends to finish your mitten, and you have your own pattern to repeat for the second mitten!

Two-end Knitting

To adapt this pattern to two-end knitting you need to choose two yarns that will knit to about the same gauge on your needles. After knitting the cuff and the first stockinette-stitch row, in which you increased to your hand stitches, continue knitting so:



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Knit one stitch with one yarn, then knit the next stitch with the second yarn, carrying the unused yarns at the back of your knitting. Continue in this pattern throughout the mitten.

Can't hardly be any simpler than that! Some tips to manage the knitting:

- ❖ An odd number of stitches will allow you to knit without a noticeable 'jog' in the pattern each round.
- ❖ Your gauge will probably be much snuggier than with regular Fair Isle or normal stockinette knitting. Do your gauge swatch in pattern, or assume your gauge will be one-half to one full stitch per inch tighter than a swatch done with one yarn. You could manage your tension so that the gauge is loose. But that would defeat the purpose of dense, wind- and cold-resistant knitting.
- ❖ Keep your yarns in the same position, relative to each other, throughout your knitting, to avoid tangles. I held both yarns over my right forefinger, with the main color near the tip of the finger, the second color between the first and second joints.
- ❖ The thumb increases really can't be kept 100% in pattern. I found I liked using the main yarn to make the increased stitches, then I kept the rest of the thumb stitches in pattern with themselves, not worrying if they matched the rest of the mittens. Every other increase is 'off' from the hand's pattern, but it doesn't show much.
- ❖ And the decreases for the tip of the hand can look a little off as well. I liked keeping the two stitches between the decrease stitches in pattern, and didn't worry too much about the actual decrease stitches. If you're using yarn that contrasts very highly, or is very light or bright, you will need to decide how to handle the decrease stitches (that is, if you care about those kinds of details :)
- ❖ I didn't bother to try weaving in pattern. I simply used the main color yarn for that purpose. It's not at all noticeable.
- ❖ Be aware that your second mitten might turn out a bit snuggier than your first! At least, mine did when I knit the angora ones. I think it was because I kept trying on the first one to see if it fit, while the second I just followed my pattern. Try on both mittens periodically as you work for best results :)

Conclusion

Free yourself from commercial patterns, and the worry of whether your handspun will work in a given pattern! A good gauge swatch and a body to measure things on are all you really need to knit wonderful one-of-a-kind items for you and your family. Keep a notebook and place all your scraps of paper in it that have the notes of the patterns you make up. It can save you much time when you want to make another pair of mittens, or anything else, in a particular size. Feel free to email me if you need to bounce an idea off someone. I'll be glad to hear from you.



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