



An HJS Studio Project: Knit Shetland Tote Bag



This is another project inspired by the spinning group I belong to. They decided to make knitted totebags the group project in 2002 (see also Mitered Mitten Set, for my response to our 2004 project). One spinner provided photocopies of a pattern from a knitting magazine as a starting point. Some members of the group did exactly that bag, while others experimented in various ways.

My bag is probably the farthest from the original pattern—they basically have just two things in common—they're handknit, and they're totebags! I hope to be able to get a photo of all the bags to put on the website at some point, but for now will have to settle for mine alone.

This isn't an exact pattern, but rather a narrative of one process of creating an item of handspun yarn. Anyone who would like to can copy the process and come up with something similar, but I hope most readers will be inspired by the process to come up with something totally, uniquely their own.

The first thing that comes to mind in discussing something like this is I didn't follow the pattern. It was intarsia, I prefer fair isle; it had sections knitted back-and-forth, I prefer all circular knitting; etc. I just can't follow a pattern, no matter what! I've always been like that, even before I began to knit. A little of the 60s rebellion sunk in, though I wasn't quite yet a teen back then?

Still, the pattern was inspirational. I hadn't really given any thought to knitting tote bags, though I love bags and containers of all sorts (suppressed desired to get my life organized and controlled, maybe?). Crocheted, macraméd, sewn, quilted, but no knit bags of any description.

Next, I was up to my eyeballs in handspun 3-ply worsted weight yarn I made from roving from our Shetland sheep—the finished bag uses about 20 ounces, or 560 grams of wool yarn. Lovely natural colors, from natural white through two browns and a gray to natural black. Yummy!



Holly Shaltz
PO Box 136
Boyne City MI 49712
(231) 582 3206
fax (231) 582 0426
holly@hjsstudio.com

page 1 of 4

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And I was interested in doing a fair isle project—hadn't done one in ages.

So, these inspirations all came together in this bag. From the bottom, the process of designing and making it went something like this:



Major hassles getting the base of the bag right. I wanted an oval base, having originally some idea of a stiffened liner for the bottom. Eventually, I cast on about 2/3 of the overall number of stitches I ended up with for the body of the bag, and knit an oval in stockinette stitch rounds. The ends of the bottom were increased at six points each, while the sides of the bottom were knit straight. When the bottom was large enough, I switched to moss stitch and stopped increasing, to make a definite turned edge.

I sewed the cast on edge to itself when I was done knitting. This wasn't a very elegant approach to the problem. If I do something like this again, I will knit from the top down, and after decreasing at the bottom to the desired size and shape, weave the remaining stitches for a seamless, and stronger, bottom. Or, pick up stitches on the back side of the cast-on row, and knit out from there.

I ended up starting and then tearing out four or five times before I finally got the bag's bottom good enough. On the plus side, I kept my daughter company as she tried to milk our goat that spring. The goat was less than cooperative, to say the least, and the bottom of the bag was baptized in milk more than once!

Going up the sides required just a couple decisions. Did I really want to make the bag this big? (It finished at about 40 inches / 100 cm around, about 20 inches / 50 cm from top to bottom.) Yes, I did, emphatically, if making it smaller meant redoing the bottom yet again! OK, then what patterns will I use for the sides? I alternated narrow and wide patterns, as that's one of the traditional approaches to fair isle knitting. And the background color of each band became the pattern color of the next. Other than that, I just chose patterns I liked and which would fit into the number of stitches I had without too much increasing or decreasing.



I wanted to incorporate a Shetland lace pattern, too. Most of the yarn was spun 3-ply to a worsted weight from roving, with just a touch more twist than I usually use, to help reduce pilling. The lace yarn came from the fleece of my favorite ewe, Darling, who had died the previous Christmas. I combed her wool and worsted spun it into a heavy-ish single, then two-plied it. Using larger needles than the rest of the bag, it knit to the same gauge, and I



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PO Box 136
Boyne City MI 49712
(231) 582 3206
fax (231) 582 0426
holly@hjsstudio.com

page 2 of 4

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chose another traditional Shetland pattern. It doesn't show in this picture, but this combed yarn is much shinier than the rest of the yarn.



Wanting the bag to be fully functional (ie, things could fall through the holes in a lace pattern), I knit a backing first of plain black, working straight up from the previous fair isle section. Leaving those stitches on one needle, I picked up stitches around the bag and knit the lace section in front of the backing. Finally, I knit the two together at the top, and continued for a couple rows of plain black before moving on to the next fair isle section.

Pockets! A totebag isn't hardly worth the name without pockets. I knit flaps of black wool to line the pockets. The outside top edge of the pocket is finished off with an picot border hem which is turned to the inside and stitched down.

One pocket is on the side, and measures 10 inches / 25 cm wide, 8 inches / 20 cm deep. The other pocket is on one end, and measures 6 inches / 15 cm wide, 9 inches / 22 cm deep, just right to hold a water bottle or pair of sunglasses. I would probably make the side pocket deeper if I were going to do it over again—because of the floppy nature of knitting, it won't hold something heavier than a magazine without trying to spill it out, if the bag as a whole is nearly empty.



As I knit, I had plenty of time to ponder the top edge. I knew I wanted a bag that I could sling over my shoulder, but I also knew I might sometimes want to carry it like a handbag. So I decided to make a twisted cord, and incorporated it as a drawstring into the top edge of the bag in a very sturdy, yet attractive manner. The photo (next page) shows the cord coming out of the tunnels I made with the edge.

First I knit an inch of moss stitch. Then I bound off a few stitches, and cast them on again on the next row, in eight places around the bag's top edge. I knit another inch of moss. Next I made the twisted cord, and laid it in place inside the edge of the bag. Finally, I bound off and attached the edging to the inside of the bag, with the cord in place, by knitting up a stitch from the inside of the bag and binding it off with a stitch already on the needle, all the way around. No sewing, and nothing to weaken or wear out over time! This arrangement allows me to choose how to use the strap. Pull all four through the holes, and the bag works like a handbag—doesn't drag on the ground when I dangle it from my hand. Pull through two portions of the drawstring, and it's a great shoulder bag. Pull just one portion of the cord through the holes, and it's long enough that, having placed the tote on a sled, I can pull the sled while holding the bag's drawstring, making sure the bag doesn't slide off the sled, when I walk to my neighbor's house in the winter. Of course, this latter



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PO Box 136
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page 3 of 4

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option probably isn't necessary for most people :)

I bought some nice fabric to line the bag with. I planned a lining with, of course, lots of pockets, and figured it would be my knitting bag. However, taking it to the Michigan Fiber Festival taught me the advantages of the natural stretchiness of knit cloth! I was able to fit several pounds, yes, **pounds**, of roving and top in the bag, and still have room for all sorts of other things. It's practically a Mary Poppins bag (it has since gained the nickname of "Black Hole Bag"). I

may eventually add some knit patch pockets to the inside, but I don't think I will ever line this tote. Besides, it's big enough to put my purse inside, to hold things that might otherwise lose themselves through the stitches!

Finally, no, I don't plan to felt this bag, though many have suggested it. Partly because I like the stretchiness, partly because there's several different types of Shetland wool in the yarn, which might felt at different rates, possibly causing the bag's silhouette to change, and partly because I like the clarity of the patterns the way they are.

A last little point of trivia that will probably interest nobody: I changed my style of fair isle knitting while working on this bag. I have used the 'one color in each hand' method of two-color knitting for well over two decades. But for some reason, possibly due to the size of this project?, that wasn't comfortable for me this time. So I tried keeping both yarns over the forefinger of my right hand after the first couple of pattern bands. I was able to knit very nearly as fast as when I'm using just one color, and still keep the tension loose enough that the bag doesn't pucker. Why this happened, I don't know, but it seems to be sticking. Maybe I'll change back again in another two decades!



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page 4 of 4

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