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CARINA OLSSON



FAIR ISLE KNITTING

22 Traditional Patterns from Where the
Atlantic Meets the North Sea

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Preface

I love to knit, and for me, the most fun of all is Fair Isle knitting: traditional two-color stranded knitting from the Shetland Islands, with pattern panels and wool yarns in natural wool colors and colors from nature. The harsh beauty of the Shetland Islands, surrounded by the sea on all sides, has parallels in the landscapes of my native Sweden. The limestone islands of Öland and Gotland, with their windswept plains and moors and that particular kind of natural lighting you only ever find on islands, are perfect inspiration for Fair Isle patterning.

The Fair Isle technique typically includes colors that complement each other, blending in some panels and contrasting in others. The knitting in and of itself is relatively simple; the hard part is choosing your colors and shades well, so the patterns stand out.

When I began knitting Fair Isle patterns, I had trouble choosing between all the colors of Shetland yarn, never mind single and heathered shades of sheep's wool. For me, it was tempting to default to gray, white, black, and a little bit of red—those are always safe choices, in Nordic knitting tradition. However, Fair Isle patterns need more colors and contrasts than that, for the transitions between background and pattern colors. Today, emphasizing a connection with the natural world by using nature's colors is also typical for Fair Isle knitting.

So, during a visit to Shetland, I began taking photographs to practice truly *seeing* the colors in the world around me. For several years, I collected this kind of color inspiration, in order to turn my experiences in nature into palettes of yarn colors. Using these palettes, I experimented with traditional patterns from Fair Isle knitting. I knitted swatches, and once I was satisfied with my ability to capture what I saw in the natural world with my yarns, pattern choice, color arrangements, and swatches, I could design my own garments.

In this book, I explain how I work with color inspiration from nature as a tool for choosing shades and colors to use in Fair Isle knitting. With these tips, and some practice, I hope you'll go even further and develop your own patterns. I've also included some basic patterns for sweaters, hats, mittens, and more, which you can use to create your own garments. At the end of this book, you'll find a pattern library of Fair Isle motifs you can use, too.

Carina Olsson

Six sleeves with the same pattern in a variety of color arrangements (see pages 166–167).



Shetland sheep at the Hermaness
nature reserve on the island of Unst.



Fethaland, in the north part of Northmavine.

SHETLAND, SHEEP, AND YARN



The natural wool colors of Shetland sheep in Supreme Jumper Weight yarn from Jamieson & Smith: White, Gaulmogit, Katmollet, Mooskit, Sholmit, Moorit, Shaela, Yuglet, and Shetland Black.



Color Inspiration

One challenge in Fair Isle knitting is arranging the colors in a pattern in a way that looks good. It can be difficult to choose colors and shades that make complex motifs stand out and produce a harmonious composition in the various pattern panels and color changes that make up Fair Isle knitting. Traditional sweaters show fantastic color arrangements that often followed the fashions of the period. More vividly colorful periods alternated with trends for softer colors inspired by nature.

It's fun to choose your own colors and create your own garments. But I think it's also difficult to stand in a yarn shop in front of a wall of yarn in different colors, and choose. Personally, I used to get so stressed and overwhelmed by the sheer number of options that, as I mentioned, I tended to follow the beaten path and buy gray, white, black, and a little red. These are fine shades to work with, but I wanted to learn how to mix a greater variety of colors in my knitting.

It took a few years, but I've let myself take inspiration from nature. I've practiced paying attention, looking properly, and really trying to see the colors around me. Then I interpret those colors in yarn, and make color arrangements I can use in patterns. For me, the "a-ha moment" came when I really started to look. In this section, I'll discuss color inspiration, and how you can choose fresh shades and colors for your multi-color knitting so you can work your own taste and inspiration into traditional patterns.

The forest is green, and the sea is blue. But the forest contains a wide range of different green colors and shades. Moss, or a sprig of wood sorrel, exhibits greens from yellow-green to blue-green, in a number of different nuances that all harmonize. In the same way, that blue sea can have a color scale from gray-blue to turquoise to blue-black—and at the same time, the sky and the weather can play a big role in how you perceive the nuances of these colors.

Sometimes, completely unexpected colors appear in a harmonious

composition, colors I would never have chosen or thought I would find there. Together, they clearly complete the composition, and here, you'll find inspiration for exploring the color possibilities for your own garments!

I look at colors in two different ways; I call them “the bigger picture” and “the close-up.” In the *bigger picture*, I look for overall views, and get a sense of the whole. I get my best color experiences when I'm sitting on a bus or in the car, with momentary images that fly by, where I get only a glance to see colors and try to memorize them. At the edges of the ditches are red German catchflies, blue fire, and buttercups; together with brown earth and green leaves, in shades from gray to grass-green, these flowers form a color memory. Other roadways have moss mats in lively green shades, or perhaps, from the end of August, purple in wild heather, lighting up. Near where I live in Sweden, there's a roundabout with a variety of houseleeks. The colors of these plants change over the summer; my favorite is when it gets really dry, and the houseleeks fill that roundabout with light pink, salmon, yellow ochre, brown ombre, dark brown, and lime.

The *close-up* is a snapshot, the kind of color palette I come across when I walk—when I can stop and stand still, to get a really close look. Once, there was a house being renovated near me; I walked by it every day and didn't think much about it, but one day I suddenly saw the colors on one exposed wall, contrasting against a sofa where a tree had grayed out the sofa's rusted steel frame. Another time, I ran up the stairs to my house and then saw, out of the corner of my eye, a leaf in full late summer color, a dozen different shades of green. I backed up a few steps and looked again—it was well worth it.

There's always color inspiration nearby, no matter where you are; but it's also exciting to travel somewhere new and find fresh color environments. I'm drawn to beaches and the sea—seaweed and seagrass are a never-ending source of inspiration. Lobster cages, rope, stones, and sea glass create pictures. Islands are special travel destinations: on the Swedish islands of Gotland and Stora Karlsö, the colors have a special shimmer from the limestone in the bedrock, and on the Shetland Islands, the open horizon and lack of trees make for stronger colors than here at home in Sweden.

When you see something you like, take a picture of it. Take snapshots with your phone or camera. That way, you'll have the photos as a starting point when you want to transform your moment into a color card for your next project.

Beach glass as color inspiration—glass collected from the sea, translated into yarn (from left to right): 2-ply Jumper Weight from Jamieson & Smith, in colors 14 and 141, and Spindrift from Jamieson's of Shetland, in Leprechaun, Granny Smith, Old Gold, Pistachio, and Chartreuse.





Seaweed in Lickershamn

In yarns: 2-ply Jumper Weight from Jamieson & Smith,
in colors 202, 3, 78, 72, Fc58, Fc12, and Fc11.

Bullfinch

In yarns: 2-ply Jumper Weight from Jamieson
& Smith and Spindrift from Jamieson's of
Shetland, in colors 1, Sandalwood, Ginger,





Helgumannen (a village on Fårö)

In yarns: 2-ply Jumper Weight from Jamieson & Smith, in colors 202, 203, 27, 81, 1281, Fc44, Fc12, 9113, and Fc39.



Seaweed at Hoburgen

In yarns: Spindrift from Jamieson's of Shetland, in colors Sand, Blossom, Sorbet, Lipstick, Redcurrant, Granite, Steel, and Shaela.



Fethaland Cowl





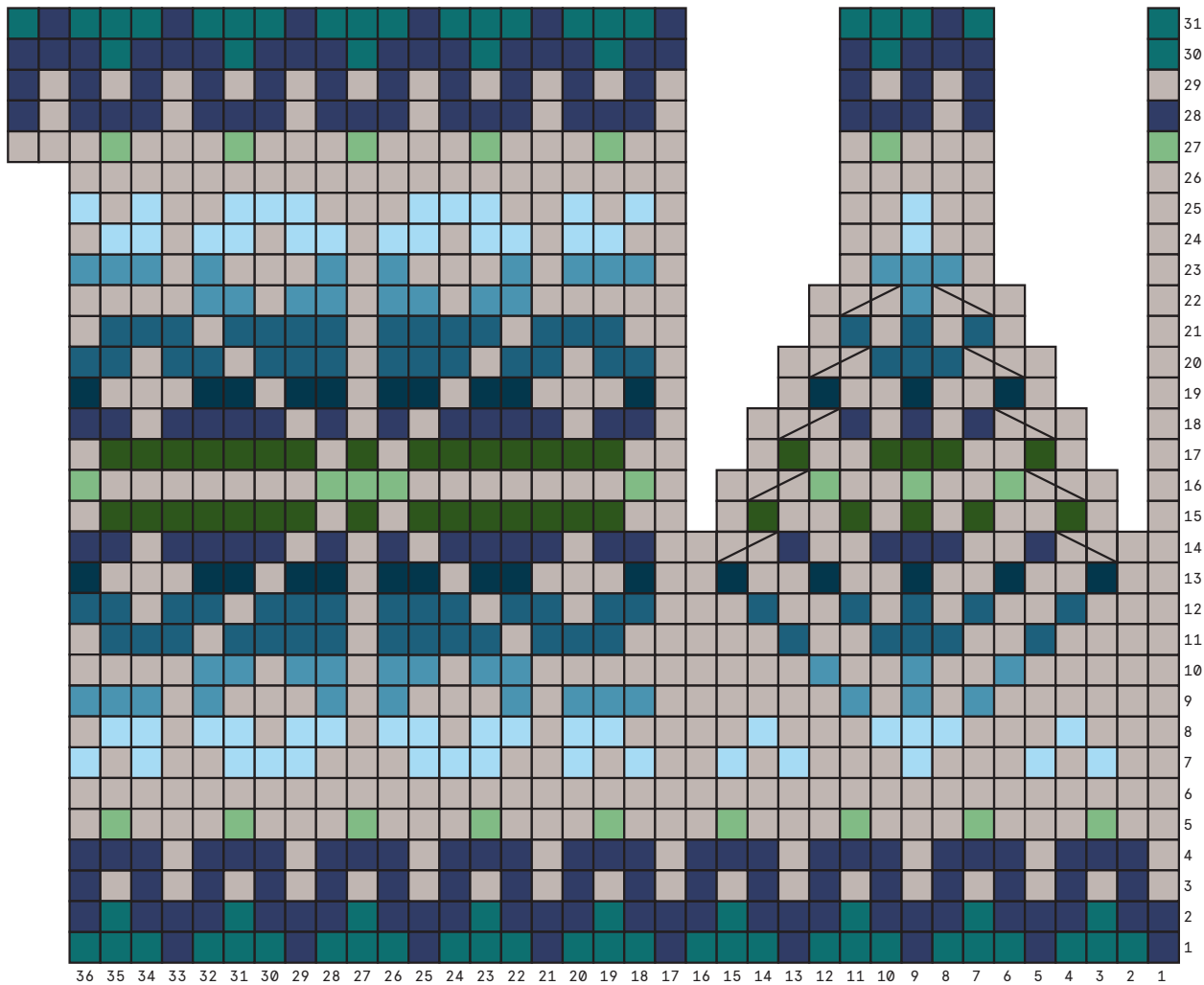


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Blue Mussel Collar





Blue Shimmer



Seaweed



Lichen Field



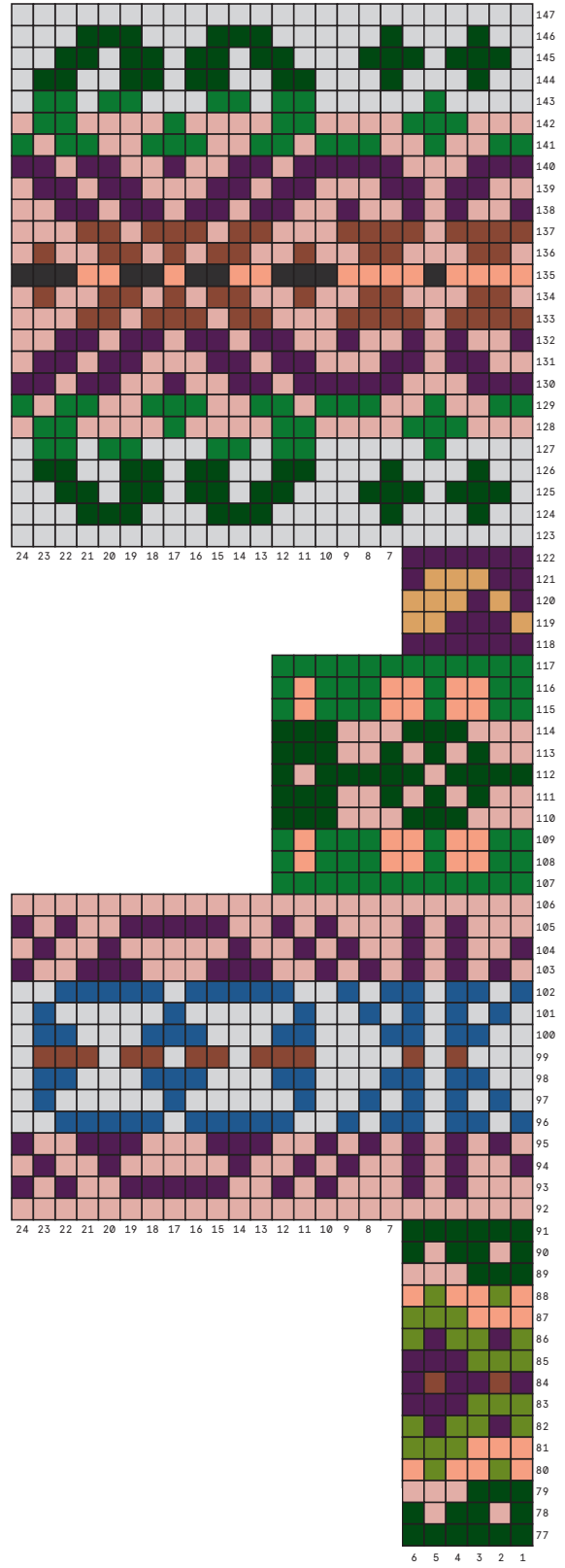
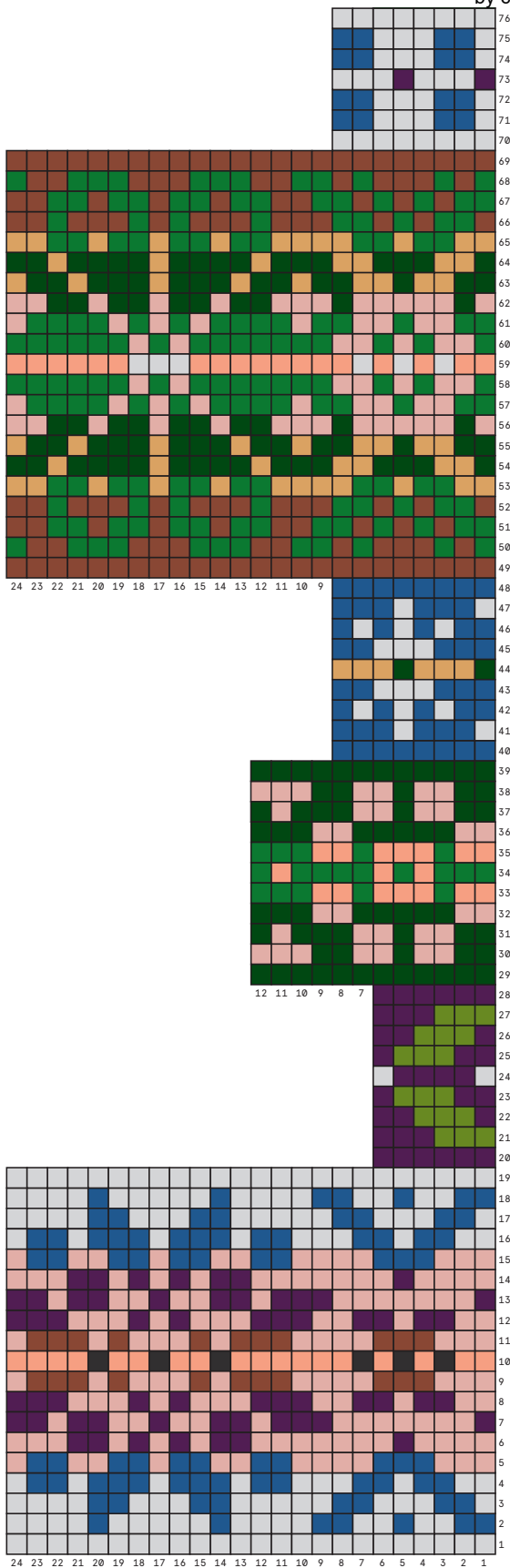
Beachcomber

Sample swatches with alternative color combinations in the patterns for the Blue Shimmer Vest. Choose your own colors for this vest.



Block sweater on a jumper board, pinned out to a size a bit larger than final measurements. The sweater will pull in slightly when you remove it from the board.





- A
- B
- C
- D
- E
- F
- G
- H
- I
- J
- K







Bellis Gloves

I knitted the fingers for these gloves in different colors to brighten them up. The little flower motif reminds me of the common daisy, *Bellis perennis*. On Shetland, flowers have long been used as knitting motifs, primarily on children's sweaters.

I very much like the color combination on the Beachcomber Cowl and Gloves, so I used those colors again, except this time I included green. If you find a combination you like, you can change it by omitting or adding new colors, while keeping most of the palette the same.

Yarn: CYCA #1 (fingering) Jamieson and Smith 2-ply Jumper Weight (100% Shetland wool, 126 yd/115 m / 25 g)

Yarn Colors and Amounts:

A-87: 50 g
B-203: 25 g
C-Fc 61: 25 g
D-Fc 7: 25 g
E-121: 25 g

RIBBING

With smaller dpn and Color A, CO 72 sts. Divide sts across 4 dpn (= 18 sts per dpn) and join, being careful not to twist cast-on row.

Work around in *k2, p1* ribbing until cuff is 2¾ in / 7 cm long.

HAND

Change to larger dpn and knit 1 rnd with Color A.

Work following chart on next page.

On Row 18 of chart, place 16 sts on a holder for thumb at the side: knit until 8 sts rem on Ndl 2, and place these 8 sts + first 8 sts at beginning of Ndl 3 on a holder.

CO 2 sts at end of Ndl 2 and 2 sts at beginning of Ndl 3 (cast on the new sts with 2 yarnovers per needle, and knit them through back loop on next rnd). There are now 4 new sts and a total of 60 sts.

Continue following chart.

FINGERS

Little Finger: With Color A, k7. Place next 23 sts on larger circular and then place next 23 sts after that on second larger circular—these sts will rest while you knit little finger.

CO 2 sts (with 2 yarnovers, which you will knit through back loops on next rnd); knit rem 7 sts = 16 sts for little finger. Divide sts across 4 dpn = 4 sts per needle. Do not knit too loosely or the needles will fall out.

Knit around until finger is halfway up your nail. Shape tip with k2tog at end of every needle until 8 sts total rem.

Cut yarn and draw end through rem 8 sts; tighten. Weave in ends neatly on WS.





For two-color stranded knitting, I hold both yarns over my index finger. I hold the pattern color (yellow) closest to the knitting and the background color (dark) furthest away from the knitting.

Two-Color Stranded Knitting

Fair Isle knitting is a type of two-color stranded knitting, which means you knit with two colors at the same time. One color is used as the pattern color and the other as the background color. In general, with two-color stranded knitting, the pattern color should stand out against the background color, but the tricky part about Fair Isle patterns is that the pattern and background colors may change places. In particular, the “O” sections of an “OXO” pattern may swap pattern and background that way.

In order for a pattern color to contrast as clearly as possible with the background, you should hold the yarns such that the pattern color always lies closest to the knitting, and the background color lies farthest from the knitting. It's important to be consistent and not let the yarns change positions—unless the pattern and background colors swap in the motif, that is, in which case you should also swap the positions of the yarns on your finger.

The way you hold your yarns for Fair Isle knitting is a little different, and depends on how you learned to knit. Here in Sweden, most people knit using the continental knitting method, meaning the yarn is held in the left hand, and you don't have to lift your hands as you knit. I hold both the pattern and the background color over my left index finger, with the strands slightly separated and alternately tensioned under and over my

other fingers. Other knitters separate their yarns with the pattern color over the index finger and the background color over the middle finger.

Shetland knitters use the English knitting technique, where the yarn is held and thrown with the right hand, which automatically pulls the yarn a little extra hard and tends to result in firmer knitting. When knitting with two colors, many knitters who knit this way divide the yarns, holding the pattern color in the left hand and the background color in the right hand. This is a good way to separate the yarns so they don't twist around each other.

Floats

While you're knitting with a pattern color, the background color hangs at the back of the work until it's time to switch colors and knit with it. When you pick it up and start working with it again, it'll be caught back up in the knitted piece, but there will be a hanging strand or a “float” left on the wrong side of your work, spanning the backs of the stitches that were worked in the other color. It's important to make sure your floats don't draw in, but they shouldn't be too loose, either. When floats are too tight, the right side of the knitting becomes bubbly and the stitches get pulled; the knitted fabric looks uneven. If floats are too loose, it's all too easy to catch fingers or toes in them when you put on or take off a garment.



The Shetland Times
Established 1822 | Printed & published in Shetland

LANDMARK UP FOR SP...
Family to sell Toll Clock st...
Centre after 30 yr...
-page 4

It's the most wonderful...

with introduction by Dr Carol Christophersen

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15

Child's jumper c.1913

Fair Isle allover c.1920's

Scarf c.1860's

A SHETLAND PATTERN BOOK

A SHETLAND KNITTER'S NOTEBOOK

MARY SMITH
CARRIE BUNYAN

Beet c.1913

Fisher's cap

Sleeveless pullover c.1920's

Fold-over cap

Allover Prince of Wales

Fair Isle allover c.1920's

Wapsworth jumper w. traditional Shetland patterns c.1920's

Fair Isle cardigan c.1950's

Fisher's cap

Blouse 1924

YARN TYPES AVAILABLE

HUMPER 2/26	106
SUPREME 2/26	107
DOUBLE KNITTING 3/26	108
CHUNKY 2/26	109
110	110
111	111
112	112
113	113
114	114
115	115
116	116
117	117
118	118
119	119
120	120

Please refer to the Price List when a chart shows the colour range for each quality.

The colour chart has been prepared using Anora yarn.



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Made in the
SHETLAND ISLANDS
of Scotland

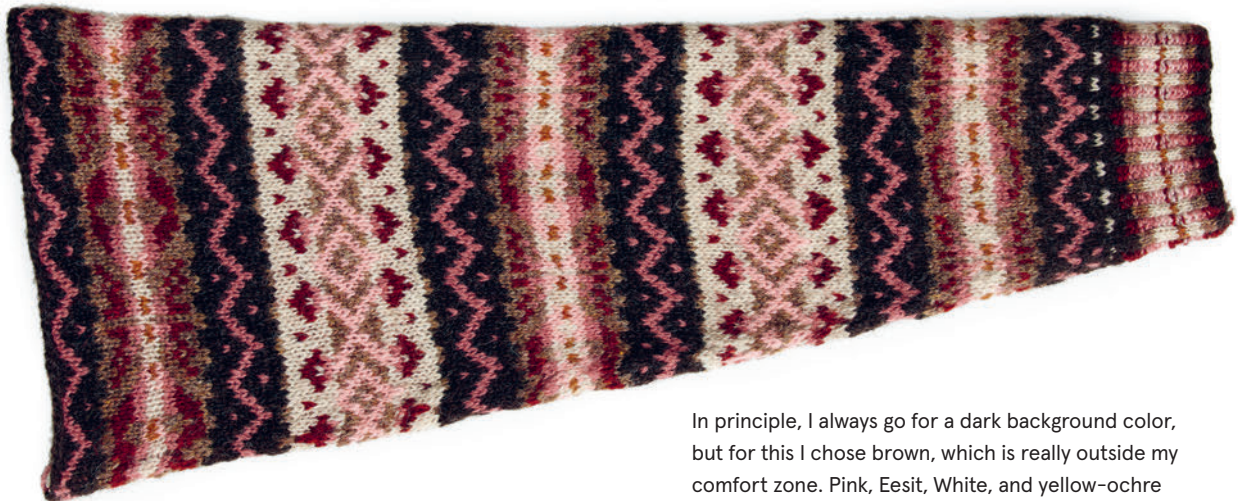


HAND FRAME
KNITTED



I wanted to test a combination of colors that were more tone-on-tone, so the pattern would be diffuse instead of contrasting sharply. I began with my favorites, pink and purple, and then added blue, which goes well with both. I chose green as a contrast color because I was afraid that otherwise the pattern would disappear altogether.

—Kristina Hellberg



In principle, I always go for a dark background color, but for this I chose brown, which is really outside my comfort zone. Pink, Eesit, White, and yellow-ochre were givens. I picked the red as inspiration because a red skein was lying on my table, and “bingo.”

—Karin Liljekvist



I chose two color spectrums from light to dark, as both contrasted against each other (green and pink), and using yellow as a contrast color lifted the piece.

—Karin Faeh

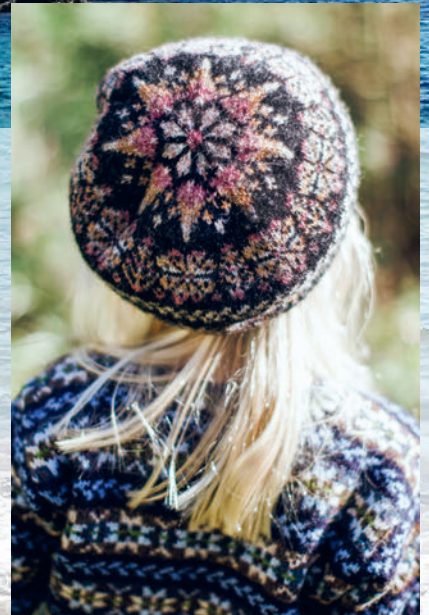
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FROM SHETLAND TO ÖLAND

The centuries-old art of Fair Isle knitting evolved on the Shetland Islands, combining traditional motifs, borders, and pattern panels with local sheep's wool and natural dyes, for a distinctive look that's instantly recognizable even today. Now, Carina Olsson, one of Sweden's leading experts in Fair Isle knitting, is here to guide knitters through this technique's fundamental principles: how to choose and combine colors in vivid, organic palettes inspired by beaches, sunsets, and the rugged natural landscapes along the coasts of the North Sea; how to work patterns for sweaters, mittens, hats, and gloves in classic Fair Isle style; and how to design a Fair Isle sweater of your own, using your favorite motifs and colors.

Inside, you'll find:

- 22 designs for garments and accessories, with pattern panels of varying size and complexity.
- A pattern library of traditional motifs ranging from edgings for cuffs and necklines to classic Nordic stars and eight-petaled roses.
- Technical tips and easy-to-follow explanations to help you decide how to arrange Fair Isle patterns, understand what ribbing and texture will do to the overall look of a design, and use colors and contrast to eye-catching effect.



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