

Playing with Prairie Spun DK Neons on Small Looms

BY SUSAN E. HORTON



Photos by Matt Graves

Liz Moncrief's descriptions of Brown Sheep Company's Prairie Spun DK in Handwoven's September/October 2023 Yarn Lab intrigued me. Liz's goal for the Yarn Lab was to use the bright neon colors in the yarn line, alone or with more muted colors, to see what types of color effects she could develop. She described the yarn as not only beautiful but also elastic and bouncy, three qualities I look for in a yarn when weaving on a pin or rigid-heddle loom.

Liz doesn't weave on pin looms or rigid-heddle looms, so I decided to do my own mini-study of the yarn. I began by weaving at two different setts on my rigid-heddle loom, then tried it on two sizes of hexagons, and finally wove with it on a 4-inch-square pin loom. In addition, while Liz didn't feel the need to wet-finish her samples, I'm always interested in how yarns react to wet-finishing, and when it's wool, I also like to

know what it's like fulled. For my study, I chose two neon colors and a medium gray.

I wet-finished all the samples in the same way: by first soaking them for 20 minutes in warm, sudsy water and then rinsing them, blotting out the excess water in a towel, and laying them flat to dry. I went a bit further with two of my rigid-heddle samples. After wet-finishing them, I tossed them both in the washing

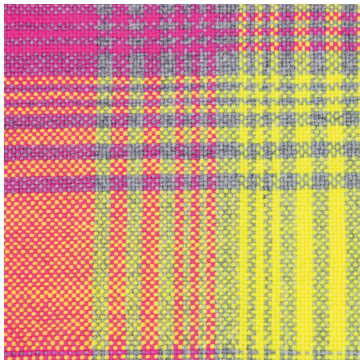
machine with a load of laundry and hot water and then dried them in the dryer with the same load. None of the colors ran in warm or hot water.

THE YARN

Prairie Spun DK: 100% 3-ply wool, worsted spun; 256 yd/100 g; 41 colorways.

Colors used in samples: DK330 Molten Magenta, DK310 Cadmium Yellow, and DK10 Rain Cloud.

The wool for Prairie Spun DK comes from sheep raised in the United States and was dyed at the Brown Sheep mill in Nebraska. Primarily considered a knitting yarn, it is smooth and resilient and has very few places of varying thicknesses within a skein.



Plain weave (wet-finished)

Setts: 12 epi; about 10 ppi.

Shrinkage in width after wet-finishing: 6%.

Shrinkage in length after wet-finishing: 19%.

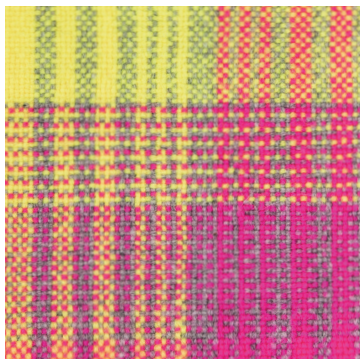
For my rigid-heddle samples, I opted to use all three colors in one go, so my first sample was somewhat wide on the loom at about 14 inches. I decided to wind a warp 2 yards long to save time and also because I wanted to know what the yarn was like to warp with—a short, narrow sample wouldn't give me the same feedback.

I didn't do anything special when warping. While winding onto the back beam, I used a comfortable tension, meaning I didn't try to pull out the springiness but wound on slowly and evenly. I tried to beat the fabric so the picks per inch (ppi) equaled my ends per inch (epi) but wasn't able to with-

out beating harder than felt natural.

I'm used to having at least an inch or two of draw-in on most cloth and was very surprised to find that the width in the heddle and the width off the loom showed only about 1/3 inch of difference. Length was another story, as the length on the loom was 22 inches and off the loom only 20 inches. Wet-finishing further changed the cloth, although again much more in the length, which shrank an additional 1 1/2 inches while the width lost only 1/2 inch.

I found the mixture of the neon colors with the gray interesting. The fabric is sturdy but soft and pliable. It is cloth you could use in a garment, for a blanket that gets heavy use, or even to sew into pillows. The neon colors caused some color shifting and showed hints of iridescence when the cloth moved.



Plain weave (fulled)

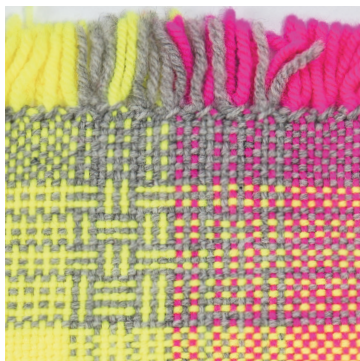
Setts: 12 epi; about 10 ppi.

Shrinkage in width after fulling: 15%.

Shrinkage in length after fulling: 35%.

I wove this sample directly after the first sample on the same warp and wet-finished them together. After

they dried, I fulled the second sample as described above. The fulling reduced the width by another inch, and the length also lost about an inch. I also noticed that the fringe changed during fulling, and the hand of the cloth developed a lovely bounce.



Plain weave (wet-finished)

Setts: 10 epi; about 12 ppi.

Shrinkage in width after wet-finishing: 7%.

Shrinkage in length after wet-finishing: 13%.

For the next two samples, I put on a slightly narrower warp at 10 epi using the three colors and including some sections of log cabin. Just as in the first two samples, there was very little draw-in on the loom. Although these three colors look very different when placed side by side in balls, their values must be similar because the log-cabin sections showed only very

slightly. That said, I found some of the mixtures of gray with the two neon colors intriguing because of how the gray's tone shifted. Ironically, my ppi for these two samples was 12. In essence, I wove two very similar cloths, and just switched the ppi and epi!

If you live in a place where you can wear wool scarves and shawls, I believe items woven with this yarn at these setts would be wonderfully soft and cozy. I recommend finishing the fringe. The yarn didn't felt with handwashing, but over time, it would, as shown in the next fulled sample.



Plain weave (fulled)

Setts: 10 epi; about 12 ppi.
Shrinkage in width after fulling: 19%.
Shrinkage in length after fulling: 22%.

This cloth had a slightly lighter hand than the fulled cloth woven at 12 epi but was equally bouncy. As far as I could tell, it would be perfect for a blanket: smooth, soft, and not at all scratchy. The fringe also fulled, highlighting the importance of twisting or braiding it before wet-finishing for a nicer finished look.



Plain weave on pin looms (wet-finished)


1" hexagons: about 1" × 1"; woven on a fine-sett Penny by Turtle Looms.
2" elongated hexagons: about 2½" × 4½"; woven on a fine-sett Elongon by Turtle Looms.
4" squares: about 3½" × 3½"; woven on a Zoom Loom by Schacht Spindle Company.

This elastic yarn loves pin looms. If you've ever tried linen or another inelastic yarn on a pin loom, you know what I mean; doing so can be hard on your hands and patience. The Prairie Spun DK was easy to wind and weave on all three of the pin looms I used. It is so springy I did need to watch that it didn't bounce right off a pin, but that was easy enough to do. I wove a bunch of shapes and then found myself arranging them in different ways. The bright, tiny hexagons seem destined to become something fun—patches, flowers, or critter eyes. The other shapes could be the basis of pretty scarves or other wearables.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although I didn't try setting this yarn at 8 epi on my rigid-heddle loom, I was tempted by the lovely light hand of the pin-loom squares. The elongated hexagons were nice at what appears to be about 12 epi and ppi, but the squares were a little better. The loom I used for the squares effectively weaves at 8 epi and ppi. As I mentioned earlier, I like to beat my fabric in a way that

is comfortable for me, rather than trying to achieve a specific sett. When I saw that the ppi for the fabric sett at 10 epi was 12, I was fairly certain my ppi for 8 epi would create a weft-heavy fabric. I encourage you to sample with this yarn at 8 epi if you are more disciplined than I am, because I believe your resulting fabric would make a wonderful shawl or scarf.

I enjoyed working with Prairie Spun DK yarn so much that I've already added a few skeins to my stash. Besides the neon colors, it also comes in a wide range of more muted colors inspired by the prairie that surrounds the Brown Sheep mill. This is a yarn sourced, spun, and dyed in the United States, making it even more attractive to me as a weaver. 

For some unknown reason, SUSAN E. HORTON loves to tinker around with all sorts of fibery things, whether they are new-to-her yarns or colors she hasn't woven with before. She is the editor of Handwoven and is grateful that at least some of her tinkering can be shared.