The pipe bag

Sheepskin, hide, synthetic and hybrid bags compared

The air reservoir a piper holds under the arm is called the pipe bag, or simply the bag. It is made from different materials: sheepskin, goatskin, cowhide and other leathers that pipers call hides, as a synthetic bag made of plastic fabric, or as a hybrid bag with leather outside and a synthetic lining inside. They are all pipe bags, they only differ in the material.

Pipers argue about bags almost as much as about reeds. Some swear by sheepskin, others have played a synthetic bag for years and miss nothing. I wanted to know for myself, so I read what makers, teachers and experienced pipers say about it and what of that can actually be shown.

On this page I compare sheep, goat and cow hide bags with synthetic and hybrid bags. It covers the pros and cons, whether sheepskin changes the sound, what it all costs, and when it is worth moving to sheepskin.

1. What the bag does

The bag is the air reservoir of the pipes. It takes in the breath and passes it on evenly to chanter and drones through the pressure of the arm. But the breath also brings moisture with it, and this is where bags differ most. Until the 1980s only hide bags were played. Then the first synthetic bags came onto the market, and later the hybrid bags made of leather with a synthetic lining.

2. Sheepskin

Many players regard sheepskin as the best material. It is very porous and soaks up the moisture from the breath like a sponge. That is why it is valued above all by players who blow a lot of moisture into the bag and by pipers in damp climates. According to The Bagpipe Museum, a good thick sheepskin gives good control over strike-ins, cut-offs and steady blowing.

The best bags are thick and hard to manage when new. In return they stretch the least and last the longest. Thin bags stretch over the years, develop thin spots and start to leak there.

The price of that porosity is care. A sheepskin bag has to be treated regularly with seasoning, a sealant for hide bags. The Bagpipe Museum mentions about once a month.

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Bennett Pipe Bags in Scotland write that a well tied-in bag seasoned by the maker only needs fresh seasoning two to four times a season. Too much of it can get into the reeds and damage them, too little leaves the bag leaking. Sheepskin also wants to be played regularly, otherwise it dries out.

3. Goat, cow and other hides

Goatskin is tanned the same way as sheepskin. The Canadian maker Lee & Sons writes that it comes close to sheepskin in sound, needs less seasoning and lasts longer. That is the view of a maker who sells both bags.

Cowhide is especially airtight, needs little seasoning and lasts many years if played regularly and stored properly. But it absorbs less moisture than sheepskin. The Glasgow maker James Begg therefore recommends cowhide for hot climates and for players who play little, because it holds the moisture and does not dry out. An article on bagpipe.news warns the other way round: playing cowhide a lot in a damp climate gives wet reeds and drones out of tune.

Gannaway in New Zealand tans cowhide with its own process. It is said to absorb more moisture than conventionally tanned leather and to hardly give. Lee & Sons also offer a sheepskin bag with an airtight synthetic fabric on the outside, which is meant to stay airtight without seasoning and still sound like sheepskin.

Elk, kangaroo and horse hide are also named in the literature as bag materials, depending on where the hides come from. I found no test reports or maker information on them.

Assessment by Lee & Sons (maker, own rating)

	Sheep	Goat	Cow	Sheepskin Premium
Lifespan	good	better	best	best
Richness of sound	best	better	good	better
Air tightness	good	better	best	best
Need for seasoning	high	medium	low	low
High A and high G	best	better	good	better
Price	medium	medium	cheapest	medium

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4. Synthetic and hybrid bags

The first synthetic bags were the Ross bag from Australia and the Canmore bag from Scotland, made of Gore-Tex. Today Bannatyne in Scotland makes such bags as well. They are airtight but let the water vapour from the breath pass outwards. They need no seasoning, are not tied in but fitted with rubber grommets, dry out after playing and work the same in any climate. Most have an airtight zip through which a moisture control system can be fitted inside the bag.

The drawback: synthetic bags are light and soft and do not keep their shape when empty. Some players find them slippery or too thin under the arm.

Hybrid bags are leather on the outside and lined with a synthetic membrane inside. They stay airtight without seasoning, have the weight and feel of a hide bag and keep their shape. Well known are the Bannatyne Hybrid and the Canmore Hybrid with Gore-Tex inside. According to Jori Chisholm of BagpipeLessons.com, hybrid bags are the best-selling bags in the world today.

5. Does sheepskin sound better?

Many pipers report that with sheepskin the pipes sound fuller and livelier, the drones strike in more easily and cut-offs are cleaner. Robert Wallace, editor of Piping Press, speaks of the extra fullness of sound that pipe majors in bands are looking for, and of a bold sound. Roddy MacLeod of the National Piping Centre in Glasgow says sheepskin bags help to produce a more resonant sound. The dealer Lyons Bagpipes calls the sound of hide bags broader, more harmonic and more vibrant, and a seller of sheepskin bags speaks of a rich, warm tone. I found words such as softer, rounder or more pleasant in none of the sources.

What is meant is mostly two things: more sound in the high notes, that is high A and high G, and richer drones. The Dublin Grade 1 band St. Laurence O'Toole went back to sheepskin after many years on synthetic bags. It expected more volume and more body in the high notes. Piper's Dojo says openly that there is no definitive proof of a better sound, but that experienced pipers largely agree. A pipes|drums report from 2012 cites surveys according to which more than half of the Grade 1 pipe sections and about 27 percent of top soloists played sheepskin.

Against this stands a test by an Australian pipe maker and reed maker. He tested seven bags on the same stocks, among them sheepskin, cowhide, Gannaway, Bannatyne Hybrid and Bannatyne synthetic. Neither his measuring equipment nor the pipers found an audible difference. His reasoning: the bag is clamped between arm and ribs and cannot

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vibrate by itself, like a drum with a finger resting on it. The sound is made in the reed. He does admit that his sample of pipers was small. One piper replied that you cannot hear this sound, you have to feel it.

Robert Wallace, too, has played a Gore-Tex bag since 1987. He finds no loss of resonance as long as the pipes are good and the reeds are set up properly. He understands why bands choose sheepskin for the bold sound, but notes that they only have to play for seven minutes at most.

There are three explanations for the differences pipers hear. The first is moisture. According to Robert Wallace, reeds that are too wet become unsteady, while reeds that are too dry sound dry, thin and reedy. Sheepskin keeps the moisture in the bag even, which benefits the reeds. The second is what sits inside the bag. Jori Chisholm says a sheepskin bag without a moisture control system sounds different from a hybrid bag with one, but not better. As soon as tubes and canisters sit in the bag, the typical sound is gone anyway. This fits a measurement by the Australian reed maker: with drying tubes on the drone stocks, well tuned drones were measurably quieter than without.

The third explanation is the bag itself. The pipe maker Julian Goodacre listened to a bag with a stethoscope and heard very different amounts of vibration in different areas. In a physics forum it was said that the material may slightly affect the high overtones, but that the effect is small. Also, the piper hears his pipes differently from the audience.

My conclusion: many pipers describe the sound with sheepskin as fuller, more resonant and livelier, especially in the high notes and the drones. I found no measured evidence that the sheepskin itself improves the sound. What is established is that sheepskin handles moisture differently, is mostly played without anything fitted inside the bag, and feels different. That affects the reeds, the tuning and the blowing, and can change the sound that way.

6. What does it cost?

The prices come from Kilts & More in Mühlhausen, Germany (in euros, including VAT, excluding shipping), from Bennett Pipe Bags in Bathgate and from James Begg in Glasgow (in pounds, including UK VAT, excluding shipping and customs). On top of that come seasoning for a hide bag and, where needed, a moisture control system for synthetic and hybrid bags.

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Bag	Type	Dealer	Price
Bannatyne without zip	synthetic	Kilts & More	€125.00
Canmore with zip	synthetic (Gore-Tex)	Kilts & More	€141.80
Bannatyne with zip	synthetic	Kilts & More	€148.00
Hide Leather Bag	cowhide	Kilts & More	€183.80
Canmore Hybrid	hide with Gore-Tex	Kilts & More	€194.30
Bannatyne Hybrid	hide with synthetic	Kilts & More	€199.00
Canmore Beaumont Hybrid	hide with Gore-Tex	Kilts & More	€220.00
Gannaway with zip	cowhide	Kilts & More	€369.60
Hideskin	cowhide	Bennett	£150 to £166
Sheepskin, Goatskin	sheep or goat	Bennett	£200 to £222
Cowhide Zipper	cowhide with zip	Bennett	£240 to £256
Double Sheepskin	double sheepskin	Bennett	£250 to £272
Sheepskin Medium	sheepskin	Begg	£340.00

On lifespan, the figures for sheepskin differ. Chisholm knows players who replace their sheepskin bag every 6 to 12 months. The Bagpipe Museum gives one to two playing seasons, Piper's Dojo about two years for beginners and somewhat more with practised care. According to Chisholm, synthetic and hybrid bags easily last three to five years and longer, according to Piper's Dojo even ten years. Cowhide lasts many years with good care.

Spread over the years, a £340 sheepskin bag lasting one to two years costs £170 to £340 a year. A Bannatyne Hybrid for €199 lasting three to five years costs €40 to €66 a year. For the player, synthetic and hybrid bags are therefore clearly cheaper.

7. Which bag for whom?

For beginners, all sources that give a recommendation advise synthetic or hybrid. Chisholm considers the advice to start on a hide bag to learn moisture management to be wrong. Piper's Dojo writes that beginners cannot hear the fine difference yet anyway and that reliability matters more. As an affordable way into hide, it names the Gannaway cowhide bag.

Anyone who plays irregularly or lives in a very dry climate is better off with synthetic or hybrid. A sheepskin bag dries out within a few weeks' break and starts to leak.

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Anyone who plays for long stretches, for example at outdoor performances or in rain, needs a moisture control system. Without one, the reeds in a sheepskin bag get wet over time and the tuning is lost. Heavy rain can even damage a sheepskin bag permanently.

Moving to sheepskin is worthwhile, according to Piper's Dojo, for advanced pipers looking for the best possible sound, at least to try it out. The sources point to these requirements:

- You play every day or nearly every day.
- You are willing to do the seasoning, tying in and care yourself.
- Your performances are rather short, or you can brush out the drones in between.
- You blow a lot of moisture into the bag.
- You play in a band whose pipe major wants the sheepskin sound.

A tip from the Bob Dunsire forum: before buying an expensive sheepskin bag, first buy a cheaper cowhide bag in the same size and check that the size suits you. The wrong size is expensive with sheepskin. Chisholm also points out that many pipers in top bands play sheepskin in the band but a hybrid bag with zip and moisture control system in solo competition.

My own experience: beginners are best off practising with a synthetic bag first. It is easier to handle than a heavy sheepskin bag or another hide bag. Only once your playing is reasonably secure to secure is it worth thinking about a change. You do not have to be a professional for that. But moving to sheepskin or another leather is not necessary to make progress. Every piper decides that for himself.

If you play a sheepskin bag, you should play for at least half an hour every day. Our breath carries a lot of moisture from the lungs. This moisture keeps the leather supple, or as pipers say, it keeps the bag alive. Without it, the bag dries out and starts to leak. If you would like to know more, feel free to send me an email through the contact page on dudelsack-regensburg.de.

8. In short

- **Sheepskin:** absorbs moisture best, good feel under the arm, many pipers hear a fuller sound. On the other hand expensive, high maintenance, short lifespan and sensitive to dryness and heavy rain. Needs daily playing.
- **Cowhide:** airtight, little care, long lifespan, cheaper. Absorbs less moisture.
- **Goatskin:** according to the maker, between sheep and cow.
- **Synthetic:** affordable, no care, the same in any climate, long-lasting. Feels light and soft.

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- **Hybrid:** feel of a hide bag without the care, long-lasting, very stable tuning with a moisture control system. The best seller today.
- **Sound:** with sheepskin, many pipers hear a fuller, more resonant sound, especially in the high notes and the drones. The difference has not been measured, and in the only test I found none could be heard.

As of October 2026. Sources: Jori Chisholm, BagpipeLessons.com (“The Truth About Pipe Bags”, 2 April 2026), Piper’s Dojo (“Is A Sheepskin Bag Right For You?”, 27 July 2025), Robert Wallace, Piping Press (“PP Academy: Pipe Bags” and “Editor’s Notebook”, 30 September 2020), Julian Goodacre (“Bagpipe Bags, Form and Function”, Chanter, February 2007), The Bagpipe Museum (“Hide Bags”), Lee & Sons Bagpipes (“Pipe Bag Comparison”), Lyons Bagpipes (“Choosing the right pipe bag for you”), Scottish Bagpipe Bags, bagpipe.news (“Maintenance, part 1”, 21 November 2020), pipes|drums (report on St. Laurence O’Toole and 31 May 2012), Bennett Pipe Bags, James Begg Bagpipes, Kinnaird Bagpipes, Bob Dunsire Bagpipe Forums, chiffandfipple.com and scienceforums.net. Prices at Kilts & More, Bennett Pipe Bags and James Begg, October 2026. Prices may change.

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