

# Southern Oregon Soay Sheep Farms

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## Soay Lambing and Lamb Care



British Soay Lambs

It is a long five months between breeding season and lambing (Soay gestation is about 148 days give or take a couple of days). Sometimes it seems lambs will never get here, but when they finally do they remind us why we keep these wonderful little creatures. During the final days of pregnancy colostrum begins to accumulate in the ewe's udder and it begins to swell. With some ewes this is very noticeable but with others it is not. "Bagging up" can start to occur weeks before lambing but some ewes don't drop their milk until the lambs have arrived. While this is a good indicator that the ewe is pregnant, it is her behavior that will tell you when lambing is imminent. Given the opportunity she will isolate herself and engage in "nest building" picking a comfortable spot to deliver her lamb.

A normal delivery takes about five hours from start to finish, but much of that may go unnoticed. The ewe will start to seem uneasy, get up and down, switch her tail, possibly paw the ground, rub against things and begin to strain. Her already swollen vulva will become very red and her water will break. The actual delivery of a single lamb should take less than an hour after the water has broken however multiple births or first time mothers may take longer. The lamb is generally expelled both forefeet first followed by the head and once they appear final delivery happens quickly. It is very unusual to have birthing problems with Soay sheep but it is useful

to familiarize yourself with the lambing process so you recognize a problem if you have it. Books such as ***A Manual of Lambing Techniques (ISBN 1-86126-574-3)*** or websites like [Sheep@ Purdue University](#) have excellent descriptions of malpresentations. If a situation arises that you or your mentor can't handle call your vet immediately. Time can be critical here and if you don't know what you are doing you can make matters worse.

Mature Soay females often twin and very rarely will naturally have triplets. Some ewes twin with regularity and some only ever have singles. They are excellent mothers and very seldom have problems. However, one should always be prepared for the unexpected. It is wise to begin the lambing season with a few items on hand; colostrum and a few days supply of lamb milk replacer (both available in powder form from the feed-store- if you do not have access to frozen sheep colostrum), a Pritchard nipple and a bottle that will fit the nipple in the event you end up with a bottle baby. In addition I always have tincture of iodine (7%) for navels and on the recommendation of my vet injectible Bo-Se and vitamins A & D.

It is very important that the ewe clean the sack off her newborn herself, in so doing they bond and learn to recognize each other. Smell seems to be the most important factor here. Leave the ewe to tend to her lamb, be observant, but do not be too eager to rush in to help, Soay mothers generally know what they are doing and are good at it; only intercede if you can see there is something drastically wrong. The afterbirth, including the placenta will be hanging from the ewe and will pass within a few hours. Let it pass naturally, do not attempt to pull it out. If it has not passed within 24 hours call the vet for advice. Do not cut the placenta shorter as its weight hanging may encourage it to drop off naturally. If it dragging on the ground tie it in a bow to shorten it and let it continue to hang.

The most important thing a lamb will do in its entire life is get an adequate amount of colostrum ("first milk") within its first 24 hours. After this antibodies contained in the colostrum can no longer pass through the intestinal wall directly into the blood stream and that window of opportunity will be closed. Colostrum also contains nutrients that fuel heat production and prevent hypothermia which along with starvation accounts for most newborn deaths. It should be standing very shortly after birth and will begin to nurse almost immediately (within an hour). Often you will not see this occurring and think it is not getting nourishment. The first couple of days lambs take lots of very short drinks. If it can stand, walk, appears alert and is getting stronger it is being well cared for by its mother. After the newborn has passed its meconium (first fecal excretion), a dark tar like substance, its normal feces will be mustard yellow and the consistency of pudding (US). This will confirm it is being fed and digesting its mother's milk.

As soon after delivery as you can (but after the mother has cleaned it and it has had its first meal) catch the lamb and immerse the umbilical cord stump up to the abdomen in 7% tincture of iodine. This is a simple precaution that will reduce the risk infection. I have found a prescription pill vial filled with the iodine works very

well for this, the stump will drop down into vial and you do not have to turn the lamb over to apply it. If it is so long that it touches the ground, I trim it a bit with surgical scissors. I also give each lamb a 0.25cc injection of vitamins A & D and a 0.25cc injection of BoSe because selenium deficiency is such a problem in my area, but as with all medications, consult your own veterinarian to see if he/she feels such this treatment is appropriate. I then tag lambs with mini ear tags so I can identify them later. When all of this has been done return the baby to its mother and let them continue the bonding process.

Occasionally a newborn will get off to a slow start and appear weak (often a twin). A simple way to check for hypothermia is stick your finger in its mouth, if the mouth is warm it is okay. In this situation I segregate the ewe and lamb/s in a small pen "jug" so that curious flock mates would not trample it and so that the ewe will bond with the lamb. When I am confident it is strong enough and has bonded with mom they are returned to the rest of the flock. Because I do not have a predator problem (because of Livestock Protection Dogs) I do not routinely jug the ewes and lambs because social interaction among these sheep is so important to them and the ewes like to check out each others babies.

If you need to move a lamb to a more secure location from where it was born, stoop over pick it (them) up and carry it holding it down close to the ground where the mother will not lose sight of it. Slowly back away in the direction you want to take the lamb coaxing the mother to follow, make sure she keeps the lamb in her sight. If it cries all the better, she will follow its cry. If you simply pick it up and walk away she will not see it and will panic that it is lost.

It is not uncommon for a ewe to reject a twin or for a young ewe to reject her first lamb. Sometimes a mother simply cannot produce enough milk to feed multiple offspring and in this case you *may* have to supplement the ewes milk with milk replacer. Do not disturb the lamb when it is nursing, but if it is obviously still hungry it will sometimes *also* take a bottle, but only offer it after it has successfully nursed. Very often once it has been on a bottle it will not go back to nursing the ewe. If the ewe will not let the lamb nurse confine it/them in a small pen and restrict her movement with something like a head gate (which holds her from moving forward or backward) and give her hay and a little grain as a distraction. This can give the lamb a chance to work out getting its first meal without her moving away from it. In the case of twins, where one is larger and getting most of the milk place it in a small pen (wall off a corner of the jug) beside the mother but where it can't reach her **after** it has eaten and leave the smaller lamb with the ewe. Watch them all very carefully and after the smaller one has nursed return the bigger twin to its mom and sibling. Continue to watch them closely. If none of this works and the ewe simply rejects her lamb entirely you will need to care for the newborn yourself. Orphaned lambs are referred to "bummers" or "bottle babies" and it is important to have lambing supplies on hand before the season begins for just such a case. If the baby has not gotten colostrum from its mother (which it must get with the first 24 hours of birth), it will need it from an outside source, ideally fresh or frozen (thawed in a

warm water bath not in the microwave) from another ewe (or goat) or a powdered form such as **Nurse Mate** which is available from [Pipestone Vet Supply](#). Every effort should be made to provide 10 percent of the lamb's body weight with this "first milk" over the course of the first 24 hours and the sooner it is started after parturition the better. After that you will need to switch to lamb milk replacer (many brands are available, but Pipestone Vet Supply has an especially good one). Do not mix colostrum and milk replacer, finish one then start the other allowing some time in-between the two. Feedings should be every two hours the first few days, four times a day after that, eventually reducing that to three then two and finally one until it is fully weaned at between ten and twelve weeks of age. Try to spread bottles out evenly over the course of the day so that the first feeding is very early in the morning and the last one shortly before you go to bed. A quarter of a cup at each feeding has worked well for me in the very beginning, but that will increase as the lamb grows, it should be getting between 10-20 percent of it's body weight in milk a day depending on the outside temperature and its condition for the first four weeks or so. Then gradually start cutting back as it begins to eat hay. Be careful not to over feed at any one time. Under feeding can also be a problem and if the lamb has an arch in its back, cries excessively or shivers because it is cold it is probably not getting enough milk. The most common problem I have had is diarrhea (scours), which can have a number of causes, but is often due to too much or too rich a formula given in too short a time. If you suspect this is the cause reduce the amount given at each serving (increase the number of servings if need be). Mixing the milk replacer with a little more water than suggested so it is not so rich (2 1/2 cups instead of 2) and adding 1/8 tsp. of Deliver granules (a supplement for calves) to 3/4 cup of formula will often control the problem. If it does not consult your vet. While a lamb will start picking at hay within a few days of birth it will be four to six weeks before it's system will be adequately developed to digest roughage but it will be ten to twelve weeks before it can live exclusively on a diet of hay and be completely weaned. To take some pressure off the mother a commercial medicated creep feed can be started for the lambs when they are about six weeks old. This will also help with the control of coccidiosis (see below). Serve this in a creep pen into which the lambs can pass, but the ewes cannot.



Creep pen where lambs can go but mothers cannot

If you have kept the bummer away from the flock it should be returned to the barn at least during the day as soon as you can so that it will begin to pick at hay and socialize with its siblings. Bottle babies become very tame and when artificially raising ram lambs handle them as little as possible and curb your temptation to make pets out of them. A very tame ram lamb can grow up to be a very disrespectful threat as he sees you as simply another adversary to be challenged. They can also be especially aggressive with other rams. These can be dangerous and if you simply cannot resist temptation to make your ram lamb into a pet your best option will be to neuter him.

### **AS THEY GET OLDER**

**Coccidiosis** is a common problem with lambs, especially bidders. Lambs are generally infected shortly after birth, but signs of clinical disease (scours) don't show up until after a 17 day incubation period and most outbreaks occur in three to eight week old lambs. Treating the ewes prior to and throughout lambing season with a feed supplement medicated with a coccistat can greatly reduce the incidence and severity of attacks in the lambs by reducing the number of eggs shed by the ewes in their droppings. However, this does not mean you will avoid the problem entirely and if you see soupy green stools, the lamb appears to be lethargic and or depressed this can be an indication of coccidiosis. Once lambs have it they further contaminate their environment and pass it on to others. Often cases will clear up in a few days, but if they do not, are severe or if the entire flock is infected have a fecal sample evaluated by your vet to get an accurate diagnosis and treatment plan. Treatment is relatively easy, but left unattended it can be a very serious problem.

### **Vaccinations**

I vaccinate all lambs at about four weeks of age with a second dose to follow approximately a month later. (Opinions vary about when this should be done and range between four to eight weeks.) You can use Covexin-8 or CDT; 2ccs of either and 21-28 days later a second 2cc dose of the same product used for the first injection. This will protect the lamb for the first year after which it will need an annual booster. Ram lambs must be vaccinated (given a tetanus shot (Covexin-8, CDT or tetanus antitoxin) when they are banded. (See banding below)

### **Worming babies**

My vet also recommends that I worm lambs when they get their second baby shot. Your own vet can advise you if this should be done, which is the best product for your situation and what dosage you should give.

### **Weaning**

Ram lambs can be fertile as early as four months of age and so I usually take from their mothers, who are often glad to have them weaned, about that time. Ewes generally wean their lambs themselves and so ewe lambs are not separated from their mothers until they leave for new homes at three or four months and those that stay here stay with their mothers. Mothers and daughters especially tend to form lifelong bonds

### **Banding -Castration (neutering ram lambs)**

Which method is the most humane to use for neutering (wethering) a male Soay is a hotly debated topic and opinions vary. Do some homework and decide which is the best method to use on your farm. In the USA a widely used technique and the one I feel most comfortable with after my own research, is banding (ringing). This is done here between four and six weeks, but is dependent on the size of the lamb. However, in the UK it is illegal to band after the first week; it varies in other countries. Elastrators and bands (with instructions) are available at feed stores and through catalogues. I try to coordinate banding with vaccinations so that the lamb does not need an additional tetanus shot. A burdizzo can be used to castrate older lambs, however I have my adults and those lambs that are too late for banding done surgically by my vet.

### **A BIT ABOUT MOMS**

**A note about lactating ewes** Lactation is very stressful on ewes, especially older ewes and it is not uncommon for a new mother to suddenly appear very thin a few weeks following after parturition. These animals should be supplemented. I have found soaked sugar beet pellets to be especially helpful with this. Soak one portion of dry pellets to two portions of water for 24 hours. To this I also add a small amount of soy bean meal if I have it. Each ewe then gets about three quarters of a pint of soaked pulp with a few Tablespoons of soy sprinkled on top. In the case of

one very small ewe that had triplets I began this process as soon as I realized she would be nursing three lambs and I would need to boost her milk production. As the lambs are weaned wean her off this ration.

**and Ewes that don't seem to have enough milk** Occasionally a ewe will appear to not have enough milk, especially with twins. Supplementing her can stimulate milk production and is a better alternative for the lamb than putting it on a bottle.

There are many good books and sources on the Internet to add to your knowledge about lambing, but your best aids will be experience and a mentor who has been through it all before.

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