

From the  
Premier Breeder  
of British Registered  
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

# Viewpoint

## THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

# Handling Horns

by Kathie Miller

Like everything else with Soay sheep, ram's horns come in a variety of configurations. They range from tight to wide curls, but most have plain spirals that pass the face and do not complete a circle.

As they age, the ends may tip out away from the face. Despite the often heated discussions among breeders as to what constitutes a nice set of horns, the bottom line is that it is simply a matter of personal preference. One is not better than another. Beginning breeders are often told to

cull rams from their flocks if they have tight horns, but this is *not* true. Some horns, like some feet, merely need annual maintenance. This is especially important in a breeding program where

preserving as much genetic diversity as possible is the goal. Furthermore, rumors about tight horns impairing an animal's ability to chew are unfounded.

Horn inheritance in Soay remains a mystery. No comprehensive studies have been done and their relationship is not

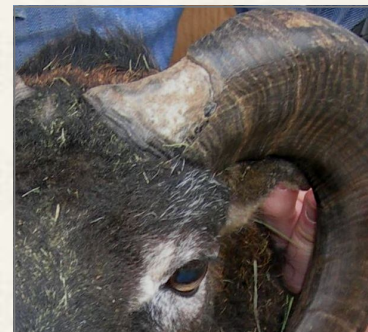


Tucker, age 8

fully understood. Wide-horned fathers often sire close- and wide-horned sons with a variety of ewes in the same season, and vice-versa.

Just how a lamb will develop seems to be "the luck of the draw."

Horns take a lot of abuse over the life of a healthy Soay and as they age they



Tucker's horn, deteriorated from age

often begin to break down (you will find this with ewes as well). This is part of the aging process, and if the horn sheath becomes brittle and breaks or chips it isn't a problem.

For the first four to six years, the horns will grow from approximately March to September with no growth over the winter. The fastest rate occurs during the first six months, and then slows and stops around age 5. The horns continue, however, to move/shift throughout the

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## The Hard Way

by Kathie Miller

Every season I learn something new about keeping Soay.

I needed a new, permanent pen, so I decided to build one inside a temporary pipe corral which housed a very bored, very lonely ram.

After slaving all day with a post hole digger and 90-pound bags of cement, the new fence was starting to take shape. I had made sure each post was in line and plumb before I poured the concrete. Now, all I had to do was wait for it to cure and

string the wire. Relishing my accomplishments, I sat down on the deck to relax.

Suddenly, I heard "BAM, BAM, BAM". I jumped up, raced around the corner, and to my horror discovered the ram going down the line bashing each pole. Within 10 minutes, not one was vertical and all were setting in hardening concrete. I would have to dig them all out, break off the concrete and start over again.



Zorba

For a number of days I avoided even thinking about it. But, for one of the few times in my life, avoiding the problem was a good thing. By the end of the week the ram had bashed the posts so hard that he had broken up the concrete, reamed out the holes and formed even bigger ones. All I had to do was reset the posts.

The lesson I learned was to never leave a ram alone in a pen with nothing to do. 🐏

## DESCRIBING HORNS

Horn descriptions (both ewe and ram) are difficult and labels are not universal.

The following four terms are what I use and are based on the definitions from a Scottish breeder friend who has kept Soay for thirty years.

While the terms are subjective and some merge, I have found them useful.

**Polled:** no horns at all

**Scurred:** stubby, misshapen horns; less than 50% typical horn

**Typical:** everything that is not polled, scurred or atypical

**Atypical:** unusual forms, including especially wide and especially narrow

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All advice in this newsletter has been used successfully on our farm. It is important to remember that every animal and situation is different. Before you try any of our suggestions, we urge you to consult your veterinarian.

## Horns *continued from page 1*

animal's life. Those that appear too close in the spring may pull away by the end of summer. Conversely, horns that appear to be wide at maturity can also tilt and push into the face

or neck as the animal ages. In the early years, we cut yearling horns if we *thought* they were going to be too close, but later discovered that this was premature and now we wait until the last possible moment. A horn should be left alone unless it is pushing into the neck, abrading the skin, or repeatedly getting caught. When these occur you will need to cut it.

Trimming horns is not a difficult or intimidating task and it does not hurt the ram. His biggest objection will be to being restrained. This is one time when how you routinely handle your animals will make a huge difference. Preparation and quiet movements are the keys to keeping this chore simple. With a bucket of pellets, I lure my males into an enclosure where they are normally fed, and from there into a small catch pen where I can easily



Ram in a headrest

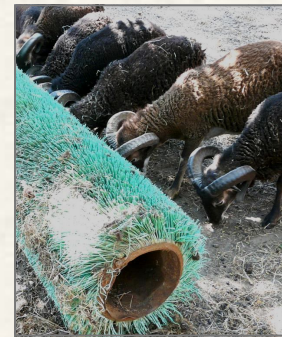
many tools that can be used: a variety of saws, clippers or loppers depending on the horn's size. I have finally settled on an "OB wire saw" which I found on line at [www.valleyvet.com](http://www.valleyvet.com) or through my veterinarian. This "saw" comes as a spool of toothed wire which you cut to length and add two

handles that are commercially available, but two strong sticks or dowels will work just as well. The ram will need

to be restrained, either in a headrest or the hands of a strong helper (it is not a one person job unless you have a headrest). Slip the wire around the horn where it is

handle them. Cutting a heavy horn requires some strength so keep that in mind when you tackle this job.

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The boys and the brush

to be cut and pull the two ends up so that you have made a horseshoe. Then quickly pull the wire back and forth, sawing through the horn until it is cut off. Be certain to keep moving as the wire heats up and will get stuck in the cut if you stop. Cut as far back as you think is necessary, allowing room for some growth, but be careful not to hit the blood supply. If you are unsure, cut an inch or two at a time. It does not hurt and is no worse than trimming his hoof. Horns can bleed profusely, so have a styptic powder such as *Blood Stop* on hand as a precaution.

Males love to rub their horns against hard surfaces, especially in the fall. This can be hard on young trees which are killed by girdling. A while ago I stumbled upon a great alternative: a used brush from a city street sweeper. Resting on the ground it is just at the ram's height and its stiff bristles make the perfect scratching post for itchy horns. This has greatly reduced the stress on my trees. 🐏

## AUGUST CALENDAR

- Muck out barn or sheds from last winter
- Evaluate hay needs and acquire hay for coming year
- Wean ram lambs (age 3-4 months)
- Begin delivery of lambs to new buyers

## TIP OF THE MONTH

Cut off  
horn pieces  
make  
terrific  
dog chews.