

From the
Premier Breeder
of British Registered
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

Viewpoint

THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

Merge with Caution

by Kathie Miller

I always like New Years Day. Most people, I expect, look forward to the Rose Parade and bowl games. But for me, January 1 means only one more month until breeding season is over.

I can go back to keeping just two pens of sheep instead of six, cut down on wasted hay, and keep a closer eye on the animals. I normally keep a flock of ewes and lambs and a large, mixed-age group of rams. A few are segregated due to age, infirmity or for health reasons. The rest have a lot of space with corners and trees where individuals or groups can create their own territory or resting areas. Rams form friendships just as ewes do and will generally relax or sleep close to a buddy. Outside of the breeding season they all get along pretty well. But, during the rut, the rules change and returning working rams to a bachelor flock after the ewes have been serviced requires some care and precaution.

I breed later than many for several reasons, but primarily because it is easier to



Rams in tight quarters.

merge the rams when hormone levels have begun to drop, which is around February. They have tired of the females and are ready for some male companionship. And they are generally more interested in eating than fighting. Further, when I work rams later in the season, ewes will often conceive more quickly and my lambing season won't be so prolonged.

It is important when reintroducing rams that they not

smell of ewes, and those who have been used for breeding should be penned away from the females for some time before they are returned to the ram flock. On my farm, however, which has limited paddocks and space, I return the rams to their field and then immediately open the paddock gate to the outside and give them full run of the rest of my farm. They are so distracted by exploring that they seem to forget new members have mixed in.

On farms with more fields and space, the easiest method is to merge two groups of rams with their ewes (after they have been together six weeks or more) and then take the rams out just before lambing, long after the rut is over. The other guy's "wives" are of

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Choosing One's Battles

by Kathie Miller

When I first started breeding Soay, I wasn't prepared for the ritual of "ram merging" at the end of breeding season. It never occurred to me that the two fellows who had been buddies before the rut would want to kill each other after.

As usual, a panic call went out to Val. "What do I do? I'm going to have two dead rams!" "Lock 'em up," she said. "Put them in a small shed where they get used to each other's smells and they'll be fine." I quickly confined them in my 8' x 8' shed with a little hay and

water. I had not gotten ten steps when I heard an awful bashing. I turned to see the shed rocking and the walls bulging. It seemed all I had done was facilitate the battle. Both rams had bloody faces and swollen eyes.

"Val, I did what you told me and now it's worse. Now what do I do?" "Maybe you need a ram hood." "Fine. What's a ram hood?" It's a mask to cover their eyes so they can't see to bash." My local feed store had no idea what I was talking about and it quickly became apparent that I would have to devise



The Sheik

something myself. My solution: bed sheets. They didn't last long, but the three of us were so weary after three days of fighting the sheets and each other we finally gave up the fight. The lesson I learned: a few bloody noses and swollen eyelids are not so serious after all. 🐑

RESOURCE GUIDE

Ram Shield

for horned rams
Premier 1 supplies
www.premier1supplies.com
They have a series of photos that illustrates the use of the shield (and how to make your own pattern).

Sheep and goat supplies:
ValleyVet.com
www.valleyvet.com

Shear Magic Hoof Trimmer

is available from numerous catalogs such as:

Ohio Valley Show Supply
www.ohiovalleyshowsupply.com or

ValleyVet.com
www.valleyvet.com
or your local feed store.

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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.

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such interest that the rams usually don't bother with each other.

If you have used just one ram, you can reintroduce him along with the two or more wethers that have been with him throughout the breeding season to a field that is new to everyone and where no "bully order" has been established. They will be absorbed with searching the field and ignore the new group that has joined them.

When you have just a few rams, they can be reintroduced to the ewes after the lambs are strong, and stay with them until September. A single ram (and his wether companions) can stay with the ewes until the next lambing season. In the UK, where distances are not so great, many breeders with small flocks only use one ram a season and then either sell or exchange it for another for the following year. Thus, they avoid the problems of reintroduction all together. This is not done as much in the States.

If none of these options are available or if you have bred early and are reintroducing while hormones are still raging, you can try the old "lock them up in the shed" routine.

Confine all of the rams in a small shed and make the space small enough that they



Milo and his buddy

can only stand up and turn around. Do not give them enough room to back up and get up a "full head of steam". In such tight quarters, they will wrestle and butt heads but will not be able to seriously hurt each other. The object is to get them to take on each other's odors



Homemade ram shields

so they no longer smell of ewes nor can they distinguish themselves from each other. (A trick one farmer uses is to spray their noses and genitals with cologne to confuse their senses. A bit of "Vicks" on the end of the

nose will accomplish the same thing.) Leave them for several days and restrict their hay and water for the first 12 hours. Release them from their tight quarters just before dark. When you release them you can spread old tires in their paddock to make running difficult. If you live in snow country, deep snow will slow them down as well.

A ram shield is another option. It is a mask designed to block the ram's forward vision, but not limit his side views. If they can't see each other they can't back up and charge. These are available commercially (see sidebar) or you can design your own, which might be necessary for our small sheep.

No matter which method works for your situation, do use caution when reintroducing rams. Fights can be serious, with contusive injuries to the brain and fractures to the neck vertebrae which can cripple or kill. 🐏

Christine Williams
www.gaerlwyd.co.uk contributed to this article.

JANUARY CALENDAR

- Merge rams back to bachelor flock
- Remove landscape cloth (view screen) from fences
- Watch for excessive fighting
- Merge ewes back to a single flock
- Vaccinate rams and trim feet

TIP OF THE MONTH

Use zip ties instead of wire when fastening things to fences. Wire stubs can cause injury, especially to the eyes.

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