

From the
Premier Breeder
of British Registered
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

Viewpoint

THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

Girl Talk

by Kathie Miller

The fall rut isn't just a "guy thing". Ewes go through behavioral changes in the autumn just as the rams do.

Decreasing daylight-to-dark ratios trigger hormonal changes that start their heat cycles. Suddenly, your quiet flock of amicable girls turns into a mob of bickering, cranky individuals suffering from "PMS".

With Soay, rutting usually begins in mid- to late-October and lasts through December. This has the survival advantage of producing lambs when the worst of St. Kilda's winters have passed and grass is starting to grow in March and April.

With their heat cycles, ewe behaviors change and, like the rams, they start rubbing their horns and bashing each other, often several ganging up on another. These skirmishes can be quite nasty but generally last only part of a day or so. I have speculated that they correlate with estrus. Two girls who were out to kill each other yester-

day are fine friends again today once their cycles have passed.

Ewes come into heat every 17 days and those who are especially fertile will breed the first cycle they are exposed to the ram. However, not all will settle with their first breeding, and groups should be left with the ram

long enough for the females to have cycled twice (usually a minimum of six weeks). Ewes are usually receptive to the advances of the ram for only 24-48 hours during their heat, and their behavior toward the ram will tell you if they are ready to breed.

When in the mood, they will no longer resist his advances, stand quietly for him (often sniff, lick or nuzzle him), and let him mount.

Ewes in heat, especially older ewes, will seek out a ram whether he is in their

field or not. This can be a problem if you don't want your ewe bred, as she will do her best to entice him to jump the fence. A double fence (ideally with a hedge-row between) can reduce this risk; however, if you have open ewes (a non-breeding flock) it is very important to keep them as far from the

rams as you can, certainly not in an adjoining pen. A ewe calling at a fence is your clue that she is receptive, and unless you want

her bred you will need to move her.

In spite of the Soay's famed libido, they seem to be private creatures and you may go the entire breeding season without seeing any breeding activity. If at the end of two months the ram shows no interest in his ewes



Ewes bashing heads

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Birds, Bees and Lambs

by Kathie Miller

I read somewhere that sheep do not need that uncomfortable talk with their parents about the birds and the bees.

They just know what to do and when to do it. Well, most sheep.

York was a late bloomer— young, and a bit immature for his age. But I was new to breeding and assumed what I had read was true. I had been told that Soay rams were fertile at four months so, at six months, I had put him in

with a couple of ewe lambs.

When I came out to check on the little group the following day, I found a totally bewildered and confused York. He was, to confess, a bit geeky, but what did I know? It turned out that his little roommates, who were a few months older than he was, had apparently had that talk and both were in heat. The two of them were bashing each other and him. They were nudging, sniffing and licking him. They were actually fighting over him

like two jealous teenagers.

He looked up at me with this helpless, lost look as if to ask "What have you done to me?" All I could do was giggle.

Things settled down the next day and the little group went back to being cute little, happy lambs. By the time the girls came into heat again, seventeen days later, York had figured it out. They must have had that talk. Lambs arrived the following spring, and he never looked bewildered again. 🐏

RESOURCES

Good books about conservation breed strategies:

“A Conservation Breeding Handbook” by D. Phillip Sponenberg and Carolyn J. Christman, published by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, Pittsboro, North Carolina. ISBN 1-887316-00-0

“Managing Breeds for a Secure Future-Strategies for Breeders and Breed Associations” by D. Phillip Sponenberg and Donald E. Bixby, published by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. ISBN 978-1-887316-07-1

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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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and is pacing the fence, checking out any action in an adjoining pen, or seems eager to return to his bachelor flock, you can be comfortable that your ewes have been serviced.

Another consideration with breeding season is the growing size of your flock, something you always need to plan for. Soay lamb at a rate of about 120% (as a very general rule) and in a very short time you find yourself with a serious overpopulation problem. One strategy to help control this is to only breed one half of your ewe flock in alternate years; that is keep both a breeding and non-breeding flock of ewes.

This will reduce the number of lambs you produce in a year and give the ewes alternate years off. Further ewe (and castrated) lambs will not need to be separated from their mothers, giving

them more time to learn the ways of being Soay. When the mother's breeding year comes up in the rotation, she and her shearling ewe lamb can then go to the ram together.

There are a number of breeding strategies for different breeding goals. There is no one plan that fits all. When following a bloodline plan, sometimes flexibility

must be your guide. I have a young ram that has exceptional wool and a wonderful mellow personality, but who has

had a neck injury which may make it difficult for him to service ewes. He has such nice traits that I want his lambs. To increase my chances of success I will put four smaller, mature ewes



Ewes in the ram pen



A makeshift hedgerow

with easy-going personalities with him, regardless of my bloodline plan.

To preserve as much genetic diversity of the original stock, I follow a rather strict three bloodline program using three new rams every year. This will not work for everyone, especially the beginner. It requires large flocks of both ewes and rams. Even with a large flock I have to modify this overall plan from year to year.

An equally important goal for me in preserving this breed in North America has been to get as many relatively unrelated small starter flocks to as many new farms as I could, farms that could later work together to build a network. To provide the most diverse selection requires rather equal groups of ewes with each of the three or four rams I use. These choices do not always follow the strict bloodline plan I use for building my own flock. 🐏

NOVEMBER CALENDAR

- ❑ If you have pens (breeding groups) adjoining, put visual barriers on the fences to keep rams from fighting through the fence.
- ❑ Put breeding groups together. If you do not have a wether, get one (any breed) as a companion for the ram before he must be taken from the ewe at lambing time.
- ❑ Watch for runny noses/raspy breathing at this time of year. Treat with LA 200 if necessary. Consult your vet for instructions.
- ❑ When handling sheep to move into breeding groups, catch up on hoof trimming while nails are moist and soft.

TIP OF THE MONTH

Keep records of all dates: rams put to and taken from the ewes, and especially dates of gate crashes or fences jumped.