

From the  
Premier Breeder  
of British Registered  
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

# Viewpoint

## THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

# Soay School

by Kathie Miller

It started about three years ago with an e-mail from strangers in Southern California. Then, in January 2008, *Hobby Farms* magazine published an article about Soay sheep and inquiries began to pour in.

“Do you have a farmstead we can stay in? We live in the city and don’t have animals, but my wife is suddenly smitten with sheep and she wants the experience of staying on a sheep farm.”

Four months later Larry and Arlene arrived from Palm Springs, a little apprehensive about what they would find in the way of accommodations. Larry seemed a bit worried he would be sleeping in a barn with the dogs or, worse yet, in a shanty with dirt floors. They were pleasantly

surprised to discover I didn’t live in a shack. We had a wonderful time and more visits followed.

One of the e-mails that followed the *Hobby Farms* article was from a couple in Seattle who had recently purchased a small farm where they hoped to someday retire. They thought Soay sheep looked like they would be



Casey updates flock records

perfect for their future plans. In the spring they flew down for a day long visit which we all agreed was not enough time so we planned a longer stay in the summer. With more time they could handle the sheep and get some hands-on experience. My flock suddenly became a “teaching flock” and “Soay School” was born.



Eric trims feet

Eric and Casey arrived on a Friday which I had planned to coincide with some maintenance chores: worming and foot-trimming of ewes, and the lamb’s second shots. I wanted them to see how do-able keeping Soay sheep could be.

The first day of their visit we did lamb shots, and the second day we wormed ewes and trimmed their feet. Worming needs to be done between two and four times a year depending upon your circumstances. Feet should

See “School” page 2

## Alice’s Old Barn

by Kathie Miller

Alice was one of those colorful characters that occasionally wander into your life. Our paths crossed when we bought our farm in Oregon.

She had been the original owner and had built all of the buildings on the place with her own hands. She had always been dirt poor, but was a very resourceful woman and what she didn’t have in wood she made up for with recycled nails. Every building on the place was made from scrap retrieved from the dump or

materials scavenged from other locations.

Alice’s building technique was most



Alice’s barn

evident in the barn. The corner posts were logs she had felled on the property. The siding was various sizes and shapes of scrap plywood. The framing, well, it was creative. The barn’s most distinctive feature, however, was the roof: the two outer walls were higher

than the center, so when it rained a large puddle formed in the middle and water dripped down on the animals all winter long.

For 10 years the old barn and I limped along together, until the sagging and leaning finally made it a hazard. But it bought me time and gave me experience until I could afford to build the barn of my dreams. Sometimes “not having the money” can be a blessing in disguise. 🐾

## RESOURCE GUIDE

“Building Small Barns, Sheds & Shelters” by Monte Burch  
ISBN 088266-245-7

“Fences, Gates and Bridges, A Practical Manual” by George A. Martin, 1974 ISBN 0-8289-0240-2

“Barns, Sheds and Out-buildings: Plan, Design, Build” by John D. Wagner, Clayton Dekorne  
Published by Creative Homeowner, 2005  
ISBN 1580112366,  
9781580112369

“Barns, Shed and Out-buildings, Placement, Design and Construction” by Byron D. Halsted, ed. reissue, originally published in 1881. Fun, interesting little book.  
ISBN 0-8289-0293-3

“Housing Soay Sheep”  
[www.soayfarms.com/shelter.html](http://www.soayfarms.com/shelter.html).  
A variety of ideas for fencing and sheltering sheep in both the USA and the UK

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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.

## School *continued from page 1*

be checked at least twice a year. If the sheep have a rough surface to walk over hooves will wear down and trimming may not be necessary.

Handling the sheep, catching them for chores such as shots, is such an important part of flock management that I wanted it to be part of Casey and Eric’s experience. If they could see how easy the sheep can be to handle it would build their confidence and give them ideas of how to design their own future farm yard.

Thoughtful facility design is essential. My barn is laid out in such a way that I can use the sheep’s curiosity to my advantage. By having lots of gates and a horseshoe-shaped area along the inside walls (two long stalls with an isle down three quarters of the middle) I can trick the sheep into thinking they have an escape route as they run through a very tempting open gate at one end of the U. By the time they figure



Series of open gates

I can make their enclosure smaller and smaller.

Building barns and pens as my budget had allowed, over a number of years, enabled me to live with the Soay before I was committed to any permanent facilities and to see what worked and what didn’t; what fences lambs could get through and which they couldn’t; what feeders I liked best, etc. It also allowed me to get to know the sheep and plan around their natural behaviors. In the end, I was able to build a barn yard that was ideally suited to working the sheep quietly.

out they’re trapped, it is too late. Gently pushing them into tighter quarters, closing a series of gates

behind them,



Eric and Hyssop, asleep

Primitive breeds in particular, of which the British Soay is one, are very easily stressed and the importance of minimizing this can not be over-emphasized (stress can kill them). Therefore it is important to work with them as quietly as possible. Planning ahead is a key to this and these chores should never be done when you are rushed. Eric, as it turned out, was a natural. He had never even had a dog as a child, but he has a way with animals and the lambs were falling asleep in his lap as he gave shots. He was besotted with these little creatures.

As we sat over dinner the last night, our discussions turned to Eric and Casey’s farm, their aspirations and designs for the future. There was no doubt in any of our minds, however, that Soay sheep would be a part of that future. My hope is that their pictures and memories of “Soay School” will carry them until they retire. But, my sneaking suspicion is that they will be back.



## SEPTEMBER CALENDAR

- Make transportation arrangements for shipping lambs going with a commercial hauler.
- Get health certificates, including blood work for older sheep, within 30 days of shipping. Allow 10-12 days for blood test results to come back from the state.
- Start plans for fall breeding season. Evaluate number of pens required and begin preparation of barn and paddock set-ups.
- Continue barnyard clean up in preparation for winter.

## TIP OF THE MONTH

Worm sheep  
at least  
2 weeks before  
or 2 weeks after  
shipping.

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