VERMONT SHEEP & GOAT

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JOIN THE BOARD: We always welcome new board members. If interested contact Bay Hammond.

FROM THE EDITOR

Knowing your animals, knowing yourself

By Mary Lake, Bethel, VT

In this issue of the Vermont Sheep and Goat Association's newsletter, we hit some of the biggest topics in raising animals: breeds, feeds, management and ambition. We introduce big questions and give various options for answers.

Unintentionally, this issue seems to highlight Icelandic sheep. Two contributors raise Icelandics and describe well the joys and challenges of working with the breed. I especially related to Jennifer Silverwood's statement that , "Heritage breed sheep do have big advantages over their commercial cousins, but many of them require skilled management and a dedication to increasing genetic diversity."

No matter the breed, skilled management and observation is key. I feel that most this time of year. In an article by Serena Fox and myself, we go over the importance of knowing the nutritional needs of your ewes during breeding and gestation.

This summer, as I was in my first trimester of pregnancy, I thought a lot about my ewes. I looked to them for inspiration, and related to them on a new level. All my ewes this year are excellent mothers, even the first-time moms, who I had doubts about. They were loud, rambunctious lambs, but calmed right down at lambing and settled well into motherhood. These ewes give me hope for the mothering instincts I'm confident are hidden somewhere inside me.

Now, well into my third trimester, I'm thinking about what my body wants me to eat, how much and how often. My nutritional needs have changed and are more demanding. On the farm here in Bethel, the sheep are in their breeding groups, finishing off the last grass of the season and putting a dent in the winter's hay stash. I'll be a few months ahead of my ewes lambing, and am anticipating that I will notice more about their eating habits during gestation than I have before. Personifying sheep isn't always helpful, but relating to how they feel physically can be enlightening and beneficial.

I hope you enjoy this issue and consider contributing to the VSGA newsletter in the future. I think I can speak for most of us when I say we'd love to hear your story!

LATE 2014 IN THIS ISSUE

The Vermont Sheep & Goat Association Newsletter is edited by Mary Lake (mary.m.lake@gmail.com, (802) 338-2250), and is a venue for sharing stories, images and reports related to sheep and goats. If you enjoy writing, reporting or photography and have content of your own or are looking for an assignment, contact Mary. Send submissions, comments or questions to the e-mail above.

HEALTH

Local shepherds give tips for productive ewes

"Flushing" ewes can improve lamb crops, but may not be necessary

By **Mary Lake**
Cornucopia Farm, Bethel
and **Serena Fox**
Stowell Farm, Waitsfield

The term "flushing" is used a lot this time of year, as sheep and goat producers separate their animals into breeding groups. Depending on your animals and your feed, flushing may be a technique for you to use to increase success at lambing and kidding.

Although not all producers know the nutritional value of their pastures or hay, most have an idea of how their animals "do" on their feed. Some flocks grow fat on just grass, others need supplemental feed – especially for ewes – during breeding and gestation. It is up to the producers to pay special attention to their flock or herd requirements and, overtime, make adjustments to their diet before the animals show a need for it.

Extension Services at Montana University say the most productive ewes are neither too thin nor too fat. And, a ewe's condition and her lambing rate are positively correlated. The Extension report explains, "flushing is the practice of increasing intake of ewes prior to and during mating." The purpose of flushing is to increase the ovulation and lambing rate. A producer can do this by turning ewes out onto their best pastures or by feeding grain, a quarter to a half a pound per head.

If a ewe's condition is good, flushing may be a waste of money.

"Sometimes flushing was disappointing, because we invested more and didn't get the expected results," Ed Jackson of Sheffield said. Jackson has been raising sheep for over 25 years and has had up to 135 ewes at one time. This fall he was in the middle of lambing a ewe flock of 50 first-time mothers. At the time of this interview, Jackson was pleased to report that 60 percent of the flock had lambed so far resulting in a lambing rate of 130 percent. Jackson didn't flush his flock because at the time of breeding they were on quality pasture and the ewes were in good condition.

Jackson checks the condition of his ewes visually and by touching along their spine. Sometimes you can tell just by looking at an animal that they are in poor or good condition. Other times, how sharp or padded the spine feels can indicate how much cover, or fat, they have.

Former UVM Extension Sheep Specialist Chet Parsons now teaches a course on raising sheep and has classes on all the major topics and issues related to raising a healthy, productive flock. Condition scoring, genetics and reproduction, and sheep nutrition are just a few of those classes.

In addition to feeling the animal's spine to condition score, Parsons said you can feel over the top of the 13th and 14th rib for the same sharpness of bone, or cushioning of fat.

Parsons raises about 60 polled Dorset sheep and Dorset crosses in Richford, VT, and agrees with Jackson.

"If they are getting enough, flushing won't make a difference," he said.

Parsons notes that in early pregnancy, a producer can back off on nutrition and get away with feeding out late cut or first cut hay. This means that a producer can utilize the variety of hay they produce strategically throughout the winter.

For those who don't produce their own hay, they might find they can purchase different qualities of hay at different prices.

Parsons said it is also important to think about other aspects of nutrition throughout the year to improve body condition and lambing rates.

For example, he creep feeds alfalfa to lambs before they go out on pasture in the spring because "the bigger the rumen is when they go out on pasture, the more they can take advantage of grass," Parsons said.

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FIBER

How to sell your wool

A series of articles exploring the ways to make money from your fleeces by **Jessica Dillner**, fiber artist and sheep and goat breeder, of Dillner Hillside Farm in Montgomery Center.

#2: Wool Bedding

You may already know the feeling of sitting on a sheepskin car or motorcycle seat.

But have you tried a natural wool mattress pad, bed pillow or comforter? These are a bit of heaven! Warm, lofty and comfortable, but never too hot!

The wool you grow can be sent to several mills in the Midwest, who can take it all of the way from the raw state to a finished and saleable product. These facilities wash the wool and card it into batts (long sheets of combed fiber). The batts can be made in different sizes and thicknesses. Once the batt is made, seamstresses shape them into pillows and sew cotton/muslin fabric over them to construct mattress pads or quilt inserts.

The advantages of wool bedding are many. Here are just a few:

- Wool is a renewable resource that is naturally flame resistant and hypoallergenic (repelling dust mites).
- Wool regulates your body temperature well.
- Synthetic fibers tend to be more hot and humid leading to discomfort, while wool absorbs more perspiration and allows you to feel more comfortable at rest.
- These products are grown and made in the USA, supporting our own economy.

The cost for the mill services to make bedding is fairly high and it may be difficult for a small farm to market and sell these items. Still, I strongly recommend at least trying them in your own home. Maybe you don't need to sell all of your wool, maybe you can enjoy some of it for yourself.

I began using wool bed products when I had a wool batt made for my arthritic dog's bed. I took out the synthetic fill and folded up the batt as an insert. She seems more comfortable and the cat found it, too. I have also tried wool bed pillows. Once the initial puffiness settles, they make great pillows for those who like firm ones. My favorite so far is a wool comforter insert. Any duvet cover will do or it can be actually tied into a quilt. Exceptionally cozy! Next, I want to try a wool mattress pad. After your own experiences with wool bedding, you could offer custom made items to a quilter friend or to someone you know who is looking for just such a product and make a few sales to support your farm.

Any type of animal fiber can be made into batts for bedding including mohair, alpaca, and llama. By far, the best fiber to use is any medium or down-type wool like Dorset. These wools have the best "springy, crimped " fibers to help maintain loft and shape. The other animal fibers still have the same healthy qualities but may compress more quickly and be somewhat less resilient over time.

As your bedding is used and ages, these mills also offer services to clean and "renew" the batts. They can take the wool out, wash it and recard it with some new wool and sew it back up so the product has a longer life.

Flip to page 7 to see a list of mills that offer wool bedding services.

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GETTING STARTED

New shepherd sets goal for genetic diversity

By Jennifer Silverwood
Cattywampus Farm, Topsham, VT

In the beginning, on any endeavor, there is usually a time to consider all of the details before making a decision. However, when it came to sheep, I found myself basking in their cuteness and desiring to take on the task of shepherd on my small farm with only the smallest amount of understanding of what I had just gotten myself into. After I made this decision, I started asking a lot of questions and realizing that to continue the genetic diversity that I saw at Kind Horn Farm in Duxbury, where my breeding stock would come from, I would need to be selective and careful with my decisions as a shepherd.

As a new farmer who had just invested in Icelandic sheep, I decided to do some research into gaining a better understanding about the genetics of sheep. I started my research by visiting Galusha Hill Farm in Topsham. At Galusha Hill, John Harkin raises Jacob sheep, a heritage breed on the threatened species list at The Livestock Conservancy. I asked Harkin why he had decided to raise a heritage sheep breed. He mentioned the following as the pros for raising heritage breeds like the Jacob sheep:

- Unassisted lambing
- Excellent mothering abilities
- Excellent bonding
- No mastitis or udder problems with plenty of milk for lambs
- Parasite resistance
- Diverse grazing and foraging ability
- Low impact on land and pastures
- Sound feet and slow growing hooves
- Drink less given water, prefer to forage or eat snow
- Niche marketing opportunities

John has recently begun raising more commercial sheep and has intermingled some Montedale and Dorset. He mentioned that he has had a lot more difficulty with the commercial breeds and that many of the problems he's encountered have never been seen in his Jacobs. Some of the things he has seen include parasite infections and one of his commercial ewes was dealing with milk sickness.

I asked John how he worked with his Jacob sheep genetics and whether it was difficult to maintain genetic diversity. John explained that sometimes looking in your geographical area is not enough as the sheep nearby are more than likely related to your stock. He has begun looking to states quite a distance from his farm in order to diversify.

To better understand how to increase genetic diversity in heritage sheep, I spoke with Alison Martin, Program Director at the Livestock Conservancy in North Carolina. The Livestock Conservancy is a national organization. Its roots are in Vermont where it gained its inception as the American Minor Breeds Conservancy in 1977. The name was changed in 1993 to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy and then it was shortened to The Livestock Conservancy.

The Livestock Conservancy often partner with like-minded organizations outside of the United States. This alliance helps establish an understanding whether there is a need for conservation by looking at livestock breeds outside the U.S. and paying attention to the population and breeding stocks here and abroad. When I asked Alison about breeding diversity in heritage sheep, I was surprised to find that not many farms offer artificial insemination for heritage breeds. She also mentioned that if AI was available many would have to rely on the costly surgical insemination of ewes by a veterinarian. One of the ways to insure diversity is by registering your sheep in order to keep records about bloodlines and mating in order to make certain you are increasing genetic diversity. Alison did recommend that farmers check with breed associations to find semen banks if they are interested in diversifying their flocks through AI.

It is even more difficult to make gains in genetic diversity with threatened or critical species because the gene pool is limited. Alison explained that in using threatened or critical

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Photos courtesy Galusha Hill Farm.

Both Jacob ewes and rams have horns, and they can have up to six horns.

ON THE FARM

The joys of husbandry: How anyone can benefit from shepherding

By Olaf A. Aase
Bonnehagen Farm, Stamford, VT

Photos courtesy of the author.

Clockwise from top left: An Icelandic ewe and lambs resting in the barn. Three Icelandic lambs snuggle up. An Icelandic ram shows off his horns.

It ought to be mandated that everyone, at one time or another, be involved in some form of husbandry. How else would we know the joys we can gain from caring for the land, our farms, and especially caring for the animals that feed and clothe us?

To observe and to interact with a beautiful and a well cared for flock of sheep, as in my case, is a joy and a gift that keeps on giving. There may not be much money to be made, but the rewards are measured not in the usual material ways but by the rewards that feed the soul. The intangible and the aesthetics are a much more satisfying reward.

Take for instance the pleasure and the reaction you get with the early morning greetings from your animals that are dependent on you. Being a good shepherd is synonymous with being a good servant. When they are hungry, feed is available, when they are thirsty, clean water is always there, when they are tired or bored they have a shady plot under a tree or a cool or warm barn to retreat to, depending on the season. We serve them and they in turn provide for us. A shepherd knows what is needed before the sheep know it themselves.

To serve as a shepherd is the most enduring and satisfying of all human endeavors. You remove the self and look outward not inward. The inward reflection comes after you have succeeded in filling the need for what is outside of yourself; the shepherd's mantra. Thinking of yourself will only bring depression, and the feeling of inadequateness.

Step out of yourself and out of your own way and then experience the act of serving others. The Good Shepherd said, "I came to serve not to be served."

Look to serve not to be served. Waiting to be served places you in a receiving end and that will never be totally satisfying. Serve and you enter into a never-ending desire to continue to try to become a better servant and shepherd.

Each sheep has her or his own personality. One will noisily greet you with a demand for sweet feed; another will approach you for a well-placed scratch under the chin while still another will follow you all around the barn yard in order to be the first at the feeding trough.

The spring lambing season is another time that is filled with anticipation, anxiety and wonder. You may be greeted by a new mom in early labor, seeking your assistance and involvement with the birth of her first helpless and innocent lamb. Another is presenting you with twins that have been cleaned and are already suckling, a joyful sight. Another is a bit more shy and reclusive at this time and needs to be left alone but under watchful eyes.

To see these new arrivals, these harbingers of spring, bouncing and running around feeling the freedom from months of confinements is wonder to behold.

We are shepherds; we strive to make a difference in this troubled world, we are different, and we place others before ourselves.

Olaf A. Aase and his wife, Beverly, own a 50 acre farm in southwestern Vermont where they have 37 Icelandic sheep, two Australian Shepherds, Embden gees, Mille Fleur and Serama bantams and fantailed pigeons.

Breeding for genetic diversity

From page 4

breeding strategies where you have an A and B flock works best. In other words, a ram from flock A would be used on a ewe from flock B. This can work really well if two different farmers are working together. Although the process does not necessarily work to prevent inbreeding, it often delays. This is a sort of best-case scenario for critical or threatened breeds where the genetic diversity is scarce.

Lastly, I decided to have a more in depth discussion with Kathy Boyden at Kind Horn Farm in Duxbury. I already knew that Kathy had some excellent breeding stock, which is why I chose to purchase my starter flock from her. I decided that it would be great to hear what it would take for a heritage breed shepherd to set up an AI system on their own farm and if there have been any drawbacks. Kathy has been using AI for 5 years. She shared that she had a 62% take rate, or successful AI rate, from 6 different AI rams this year. I had asked Kathy why she chose to use AI and, of course, it was due to the excellence and superiority of the genetics coming out of Iceland. As far as utilizing AI, Kathy mentions that one drawback is the expense and the extra time commitment needed during breeding season. According to Kathy, to purchase the equipment and take a class on AI it would cost around $1,200. That cost does not include purchasing the semen and transporting it to the farm. Kathy, like Alison from The Livestock Conservancy, recommends that heritage sheep breeders find breed associations in order to work together to move the sheep around the country in order to help with genetic diversification. Perhaps, the communication and organization can also help build a resource for AI through the breed associations as well in order to make it more accessible.

One argument against using AI is the expense of needing a vet to perform a laparoscopy to inseminate the ewe. This is a costly and stressful procedure for the ewe and is not always affordable or practical for the heritage sheep farmer. A potential means of using AI that would make it less stressful and a little more affordable for heritage farmers is to try to vaginally insert the semen rather than rely on laparoscopy, which has to be performed by a veterinarian. Kathy relies on a vaginal insertion and allows the semen to find its place naturally. Although many other sources argue that this is not a reliable method, Kathy's success rate seems to show that it can be an effective way to impregnate ewes. A downfall to this technique is that you would need to be vigilante and dedicated with your time during breeding season. You would need to know your ewes and their cycles well in order to perform the procedure at the right time.

No matter why you might choose to become a shepherd, it is always good to keep in mind how you will manage your flock. Heritage breed sheep do have big advantages over their commercial cousins, but many of them require skilled management and a dedication to increasing genetic diversity.

For those interested in helping to rebuild critical or threatened livestock, you can visit livestockconservancy.org to find out more about their mission and to learn more about heritage breed animals. If you are interested in Icelandic sheep in Vermont, you can learn more about them by visiting kindhornfarm.com. For Jacob Sheep in Vermont, you can learn more at galushahillfarm.org.

Feeding for optimal gestation

From page 2

The ability to deal with parasites helps, too. Parsons dilutes his worm load by having cattle on pasture with the sheep. He grazes 12 Scotch Highland beef cattle with his flock. The cattle suck up a lot of the infective larvae that climbs up grass.

It also helps that Parsons has had over 30 years of selecting parasite resistant sheep.

Another experienced shepherd and grazier, Mark Fischer of Woodcock Farm in Weston, manages his ewes with supplemental feed at the end of gestation. Fischer is a cheesemaker who uses the milk from his flock of East Friesians. He said at Woodcock Farm they don't need triplets, so they don't flush their ewes, though the ewes are still on quality pasture during breeding.

To meet the nutritional needs of the ewes and keep good condition, Mark said they feed high protein grain and hay from two weeks before lambing through spring and milking.

Mark said the only time they feed less quality feed is between the end of grazing and two weeks before lambing.

No matter what your end product is – wool, lamb, or dairy – feeding for productive ewes make a difference, especially when done adequately enough so as not to result in over-fed or under-fed ewes.

How to sell your wool

From Page 3

Here are several mills that offer services for making wool bedding:

Zeilinger Wool Company, Frankenmuth, Michigan, zwool.com, (989) 652-2940.

Frankenmuth Woolen Mill, Frankenmuth, Michigan, frankenmuthwoolenmill.com, (989) 652-8121, ext. 2.

St. Peter Woolen Mill, St. Peter, Minnesota, woolenmill.com, (507) 934-3734.

A sample of what it costs (approximately) to have made:

2 standard size bed pillows

- Send about 10 lbs. of raw wool, pay $8.00/lb. to wash and card it
- Add $23 for each pillow to have them sewn
- Total would be $134 excluding the shipping costs

Queen size comforter insert

- Send 8 lbs. of raw wool, pay $8.00/lb. to wash and card it
- add $50 to have a cotton fabric cover sewn and hand tied
- Total is about $114 excluding shipping

It may seem like a lot but it is less expensive than buying retail even with the shipping and its wool from your own sheep!

CALENDAR

For further event details or to post your own event visit our Events page at vtsheepandgoat.org

December 6

Intro to SEO and Digital Advertising for Farmers. Learn how to increase your Web site's visibility with Search Engine Optimizing. This class is offered by BTV Search, a team of Web experts based in Burlington. To learn more about them visit btvsearch.com. $5. 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., UVM's Davis Center. Contact: Kyle Bombardier, kyle@btvsearch.com, (802) 318-2911.

January 13

Whole Farm Planning for Beginning Women Farmers: Join other farming women for support and camaraderie learning about whole farm planning. Beginning women farmers (those with 2-10 years running a farming business) in Vermont can learn more about holistic management practices in a program developed by Holistic Management International specifically for women in their first 10 years of managing a farm business. This is a 10 session course. $150 to $500, sliding scale. For more info, or to learn about the next session visit www.uvm.edu/newfarmer/. Contact: Heidi Krantz, Heidi.krantz.1 @uvm.edu, (802) 223-2389, ext. 203.

January 16 & 17

19th Annual VT Grazing & Livestock Conference: *At the Junction of Livestock and Environment.* This year's conference features keynote speaker Joe Orefice of Paul Smith's College, and hosts workshops and intensives on swine production, water quality, poultry economics, predator management, forages, animal behavior, and more. This event will be held at Lake Morey Resort in Fairlee, VT. For more info visit http:// www.uvm.edu/~pasture/?Page=conference.html.

January 27, 28, 29

84th Annual Vermont Farm Show: Vermont's largest agricultural showcase will be held at the Champlain Valley Expo in Essex Junction. For agricultural professionals and rural homeowners, it is an opportunity to meet with vendors, preview products and machinery, attend trade association meetings, seminars and network within the greater agricultural community. For more info, visit vtfarmshow.com. Contact via message from the Farm Show Web site or (802) 461-8774.

February 5

Bedded Pack Winter Manure Management Training: Compost specialist Brian Jerose and other partners will help you understand how to build and maintain a pack to meet your needs. The day will also include calculations for bedding, building and costs; NRCS requirements to

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CALENDAR

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receive funding; animal health; and a Q&A with a farmer experienced in managing a pack. $25. UVM Extension Office, 29 Sunset Dr., Suite 2, Morrisville, VT. 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Form more info contact UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture, (802) 656-5459, jcolby@uvm.edu.

Febuary 11
Wholesale Market Production Webinar: Join Annie Rowell, Program Manager at the Vermont Food Venture Center to learn about wholesale markets (product specs, delivery container types and more). We'll review food safety requirements, learn about how farm agreements work and share resources available to farms, including sample enterprise budgets and a resource guide. For more information visit: www.uvm.edu/newfarmer, email newfarmer@uvm.edu or call 802.2389 X203.

Febuary 14 & 15
33rd Annual NOFA VT Winter Conference at the University of Vermont. Save the date!

March 11
Vermont Organic Dairy Producers Conference: UVM Extension's Northwest Crops & Soils Program and NOFA-Vermont's Organic Dairy and Livestock Technical Assistance program invite you to attend the Vermont Organic Dairy Producers Conference at Vermont Technical College in Randolph. Save the date!

VSGA Annual Meeting

The annual meeting will be held at the Vermont Farm Show on Jan. 27, 28 or 29. More details will be made available as soon as possible and posted to the VSGA Web site.

vtsheepandgoat.org

Vermont Sheep & Goat Association

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