

THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

# Handling Your Soay Sheep

by Kathie Miller

From the  
Premier Breeder  
of British Registered  
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

# Viewpoint

Soay sheep are shy by nature, but have an undeserved reputation for being wild and difficult to manage.

When raised properly they become tame and easy to handle. Soay are extremely curious creatures and you can use this curiosity to your advantage to gain their trust. Chasing them is the fastest way to destroy trust and, once lost, it is very hard to regain. Make all your interactions calm and quiet, and if you must catch them for treatment, plan ahead. If you don't have the time, postpone your plans until you do.

Raising quiet sheep begins at birth. If the mother is calm and confident she will raise a lamb that is as well. By penning the two after the lambs are born, the ewe's only concern will be eating and caring for her baby who spends most of its first three days sleeping. While penned, the mothers enjoy a little extra nourishment and the lambs quickly learn that "the bucket" must have something good in it because mother is always excited when it appears. Teaching them that a rattling pail means food is the first step to getting the sheep to follow you. Penning also enables you to have close contact without stress, conditions them to your presence, and is thereafter associated with security, feed, and comfort. Pens can either be individual

or with just a very few animals. A small group enclosure is fine, provided each ewe can stake out a corner for herself. Ideally, these should be in a barn or shelter where the sheep are much easier to handle.

Thoughtful barn/barnyard planning is another key ingredient to easy management. A good layout can save much heartache and avoid disasters. Before you commit to any particular arrangement, visit as many farms as you can to learn how others

work their sheep. You will see that all situations are different, and what works for one may not work for another. A policy of building "as you go" has served me well as each year I learn something new about working my flock. Because I had not committed to all my permanent structures initially, I have had the flexibility to adapt as I learned new lessons over a number of seasons.



Catch-pen between fields



Series of gates



Pen inside barn

The best way to catch Soay without the help of a herding dog is to incorporate a narrow isle with gates at each end in your paddock that funnels from the barnyard into the barn or shed. Following the barn wall around a corner makes an especially good "chute", as the sheep will enter without realizing they have no escape out the other end. If you feed them here they will become accustomed to this space and not hesitate entering it. Placing the isle's entrance gate along a fence line rather than in the middle will create a natural flow, and the animals will be less inclined to bolt and run as they would if they were forced to turn a corner.

When you are going to work with the sheep, entice them into the barn and lock them up the evening before (or very early in the morning). This way you will not be rushed and can let them move at their own pace. Soay are very intelligent and they think their way through these movements. It is important to let them convince themselves this is what they want to do if you expect success.

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## RESOURCES

These sheep barn [plans](#) are generally for large operations, but you can adapt some of their ideas to your own farm.

In the US: Light-weight panels. [Shaul's Mfg.](#) makes light-weight panels in 5' and 10' lengths. They also take custom orders. The Shauls attend many shows on the west coast and ship all over the country.

In the UK: Hurdles. There is no recognized single supplier. You will have to search farm equipment wholesalers or retailers, or have them made. Livestock shows are another potential source. Do NOT buy interlocking ones often listed online, but instead only those with pins. They are available in 3', 4' and 6' lengths.

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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.

## Handling Soay *continued from page 1*

By the time you are ready to handle them, they will be relaxed and less stressed.



Step One



Step Two



Step Three



Step Four

Start by rattling a bucket of sheep pellets (ewe nuts) to attract their attention and entice them into your enclosure. If you have large barns, continue your isle concept with hurdles or light-weight panels to force them into a small sheepfold inside the barn. Close all of the gates behind you as you go: if one runs past you in the isle it will be contained and you won't have to begin again.

With large fields or pastures that connect, a catch-pen built between them is extremely useful; it will allow you to walk into one field without sheep escaping around you into the other. It will also provide an emergency pen if you need to secure an injured or sick animal. Catch-pens can either be permanent or constructed temporarily with light-weight panels (hurdles) or cattle panel. If temporary, erect them sev-

eral days ahead of time, as Soay are very wary of anything new. Put food at the far end and close the gate most of the way. Their curiosity will draw them into the space. When you are ready and they are occupied with the pellets, quietly close the gate. Once caught, you can

use more panels to make the interior space smaller.

On larger farms with large and/or multiple fields, a dog will be needed to move the sheep to the barnyard. In spite of rumors to the contrary,

Soay can be

worked with dogs that have been specially-trained to work at a distance and taught to never move too fast or too close to the sheep.

Obviously, there are times when an emergency situation requires drastic measures and an animal has to be chased and captured in any way it can. But whenever possible, try to deal with the sheep in a calm and quiet manner. Your sheep will be happier and so will you. 🐶



An especially calm ewe

## MAY CALENDAR

- ❑ Lambs are due for their first shots (Covexin 8 or DCT) at 4-5 weeks. Second shots will follow 21-28 days later.
- ❑ Watch for depressed lambs with soupy green stools which is an indication coccidiosis, which begins to appear about 17 days after birth. It can be serious if left untreated.
- ❑ Watch for sudden weight loss in lactating ewes. Supplement if necessary and encourage lambs to wean themselves by providing creep feeds.

Click [here](#) to see a video of a very tame lamb on my farm.

### TIP OF THE MONTH

You can never have too many gates.