

From the
Premier Breeder
of British Registered
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

Viewpoint

THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

Male-Bashing

by Kathie Miller

I knew fall wasn't far off when I went out to feed one evening and heard water running where it should not be.

The rams were at it again. As has happened before, they had broken the part of the main water line that comes up out of the ground and services the ewe barn and aviary. The next day I had a message on the machine from my caretaker: "You've GOT to do something about those rams Kathie. I was in the shower and my entire house started to shake." The whole mob had gone up the hill, bashed open his gate and were smashing the skirting around his manufactured home.

These first indications of rutting behavior—rubbing, sparring, and bashing—actually begin about two months before mating starts, as hormone levels begin to rise, and the mellow fellows of summer begin transforming into a gang of gladiators

as they begin the autumn ritual of competing for dominance. More aggressive fighting and the sharp report of horns clashing tell you when breeding season has really arrived. Skirmishes increase in frequency and intensity as days grow shorter and the weather gets cooler.

Stepping backward a way from each other, they then charge at a full run, striking their opponents head on.

These can be serious fights and long-term injuries, even death, can occur.

I have found that keeping a large group of males as a bachelor flock is less hazardous than keeping just two or three, even during the rut. Head-butting and bashing do still occur, but to a much less

serious degree. Cuts on the face and swollen eyes are common, but generally not serious. Cracked horns, spinal injuries and deep cuts or leg wounds do obviously require attention. Be very careful about introducing a new male member to the flock at this time of the year.

Your rams are a social group and may gang-up on a single stranger. Wethers in a bachelor flock are useful at breeding time, especially when you have just two or three



Battle scar

rams. By increasing the size of the flock without increasing the hormones, they will diffuse aggressive situations. A starter flock should always include a wether or two for this reason.

As autumn progresses, you

See "Bashing" page 2

Certainty, Unabashed and Dashed

by Kathie Miller

Over the years I have been asked a number of times, "How old must a ewe be to get pregnant?"

"Seven months," I reply with an air of authority. "How can you be certain?" they always ask. "Well, let me tell you. A number of years ago, I put my ewes to rams, and a few days later realized I had put one ewe with the wrong ram. She had been born very late in the spring and was very small, and I didn't really expect her

to lamb anyway. So I switched her. I was confident I could get away with it; she couldn't possibly get pregnant until later in the season.

When I told my friend what I had done, he said (as politely and diplomatically as he possible could), 'That is the WORST thing you could ever do!' 'Don't worry,' I replied. 'I know what I am doing. She is too young and too small. It won't be a problem. Trust me.'

One hundred and forty-eight days from the day of the switch (the average gestation period for a Soay sheep), the too young, too small ewe lambed.

Not only did I have to eat my words, I am sure my friend will never 'trust me' again. I had to pay UC Davis \$160 to determine through DNA which of the two rams was in fact the father. So when I say a ewe can get pregnant at seven months, TRUST ME. I do know what I am talking about." 🐏

RESOURCES

The following two popular books (which are easy to find) have sections on breeding and rams:

“Raising Sheep the Modern Way” by Paula Simmons, ISBN 0-88266-529-4

“The Sheep Book; A Handbook for the Modern Shepherd” by Ron Parker, ISBN 0-8040-1032-3

Some helpful online information:

The *Maryland Small Ruminant Page* has a large selection of articles on breeding and genetics: www.sheepandgoat.com/breeding.html

Sheep 201, A Beginners Guide to Raising Sheep - Breeding Systems page:

www.sheep101.info/201/breedingsystems.html

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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.

Bashing continued from page 1

will notice changes in physical appearance as well as in temperament and behavior. The fat boys from summer begin to lose condition and appear thin even when well-fed. Their scrotum begins to change in size, becoming noticeably larger. And the teardrop-shaped scent glands at the lower corner of their eyes swell and become prominent. Sheep have an excellent sense of smell and, while the function of these glands is not certain, they may be used in breeding behavior. Many rams develop a mane down the back of the neck which can also continue down the spine. This will fall out when they molt in the summer. Others may also develop a ruff of hairs under the chin and throat. These also shed in the spring. Both manes and ruffs seem to increase in length and fullness as the animals mature.

Because of changes in their temperament during

rutting season, be cautious when working around your rams; keep your eyes on their every move. If a ram has become too tame, he will lose his respect for you as the

alpha leader and treat you as he would any other adversary. Ironically, it is the friendliest ones you need to be most vigilant about. Stomping your foot, as an ewe does when she is threatened, is generally respected and they will back away. It is recommended that you carry a stick when dealing with rams. Not necessarily as a weapon, but to deflect their attention and even for self-defense. You do not need to be afraid of your rams, but you need to be alert and use common sense when working with them at this time of the year.



A rugged ruff



A handsome mane

Along with changes in temperament, there are changes in behavior. They rub their horns on nearly everything and what they don't rub, they bash. Water pipes and faucets

(taps) are vulnerable to damage as they seem to be favorites. Be sure to mount spigots above their reach and protect the pipe that runs up to them with a wire cage or box. It is this time of year that trees also suffer the most damage as rams rub the bark down to the heartwood, girdling the tree and killing it. On my farm, small pines seem to suffer the most. I have found that a chicken wire cage loosely wrapped around the trunk and fastened closed with small hog wire clips has helped. So has a collar made of landscape cloth, wrapped around the tree at horn height and secured with two or three drywall screws.

Rams can certainly be a pain during breeding season. But what would we do without them? 🤔

OCTOBER CALENDAR

- ❑ Put rams to ewes beginning late October through December.
- ❑ If you are using more than one ram *and* using adjoining paddocks, put up visual barriers so they will not fight through the fence.
- ❑ October 31st is the closing date for the Combined Flock Book of the RBST. Any entries made after that will not appear in the published flock book. December 31st is the final closing date for birth notification. If not birth notified by that date, lambs will not be eligible for later registration.

TIP OF THE MONTH

Remember:
Soay
ram lambs
can be
fertile at
four months.