

# VIEWPOINT

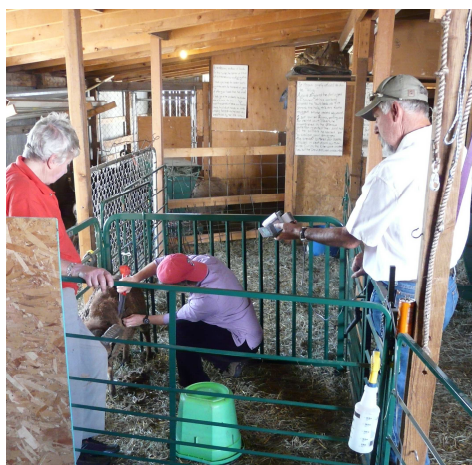
From the Premier Breeder of British Registered Soay Sheep  
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## "In the Grease" A Wool Gathering

by Kathie Miller

As I wander around in the muck and cold tending my sheep, the Indian Summer of September seems so long ago but at the end of the month a group of us got together in Peyton, Colorado for our second annual Midwest British Soay Breeders Gathering. Three of us converged on the Denver airport from opposite directions on the planet and others drove as many as 24 hours (with sheep in the back of their cars). Our plan had been to exchange ideas and trade a few lambs. But over the spring of 2011's planning a couple of fortuitous things happened; Christine Williams from Wales, the former breed Secretary for the Soay Sheep Society in the UK, agreed to attend and Deb Robson author, lecturer and former editor of Spin-Off Magazine, whose life long passion is fleece, changed her schedule so that she could also be there.

Both provided extraordinary learning opportunities especially for new members. Christine has been raising Soay Sheep (as well as Boreray and Balwen) for more than 20 years (and other breeds before that) and has a wealth of knowledge about raising sheep; her hands on



demonstrations of handling, shearing and castration were extremely helpful. People also had an opportunity for private conversations with her about their own questions and problems. Deb, who has an international reputation in the fiber and spinning/knitting world, provided us with information about processing and marketing Soay wool that we could have not gotten any where else.

I must confess spinning is never going to be my thing, I can't sit still long enough, but I have always had an appreciation for the fleece and have carefully collected it each year. In the past it was sent to a small mill in Connecticut, but I have never marketed much to individuals and Deb gave us some great ideas on how to do that.

### Meeting with Deb Robson

As it happened, shortly before the gathering, Deb had contacted both Christine and myself seeking details about Soay and Boreray Sheep; the other sheep of St.Kilda about which nothing is written. I had read she lived in Colorado and so in one of our e-mail exchanges I mentioned that both Christine and I would be in Peyton the 24th of September; this would be the once in a lifetime chance to interview Christine (the world expert) about Boreray Sheep. It was an opportunity she wasn't going to miss and changed her schedule to meet us the day before the gathering. Because a number of us had arrived early her visit morphed into a lecture on wool, in particular the finer points of Soay wool, including a how to wash it giving breeders another way to market it other than "in the grease" (raw/uncleaned).



The only lessons I had ever had about washing wool involved the washing machine, were more complicated than I was interested in dealing with and had always left me with the fear that I would turn my prized fleece into felt. Here is the simple method, that did not involve the washing machine, that Deb taught us.

### Washing Fleece

1. Use a kitty litter tray with a screen in the bottom you can lift out
2. Put the raw wool on the screen in the tray
3. Then put tray in the sink (bath tub works well) with the hottest tap water and let the wool soak for 15-20 minutes
4. Lift the screen out of the tray and set it aside
5. Tip the bottom of the tray and drain the dirty water
6. Fill the it again with clean hot water and add 1/2-2 Tblsp. of Power Scour
7. Place the screen with the wool back in the tray of and let it soak another 15-20 minutes. Keep the water a consistent temperature- don't let it cool down too much. Cold water will re attach the debris to the fibers that the hot water has soaked out.
8. You may need to repeat the Power Scour, but the second time use 1/2 as much as the first time and let it soak another 15-20 minutes
9. Drain the tray and rinse the wool with hot water by soaking it 15-20 minutes. You may need to rinse a second time
10. Drain the tray and gently press the fiber down onto the screen to drain it and let it dry. If you have a spin cycle in your washer that does not add more water, place the wool in a net laundry bag and run the spin cycle of the machine.
11. Remove wool from the bag and lay the fleece out to dry. Let it dry completely.
12. To store the dried wool place layers between sheets of black and white (no color) printed newspaper and carefully store in a sealed box into which you have placed cedar shavings, but be careful the shavings don't touch the wool which will stick to them.

In the past I have always discarded wool from my rams, some of it extremely lovely, because of the smell. Rams shed earlier in the season than the ewes and often the preorbital scent gland (in front of their eyes) is still swollen imparting a strong "rammy" smell to their wool. Deb assured us that this smell would disappear with washing and their wool should never be thrown out because of it.

Spinners are drawn to Soay wool because of its novelty, its color and its softness. It mixes beautifully with other fibers as well as being lovely on its own and can be a wonderful value-added product from our farms.

### Problem Solved

by Kathie Miller

For years I have struggled with the problem of providing minerals to my rams, no matter what I tried it was bashed, smashed or tipped over. The \$10 blocks I had tried were consumed in almost 24 hours, so that was not an option, besides they are usually molasses based and the sheep can pull their teeth out chewing on them. I have often suspected the reason my old rams have had problems with their horns chipping was inadequate mineral consumption. I have always used sheep salt (with added selenium and no copper) which they consume well but at different rates at different times of the year. The ewes have never been an issue - the girls don't bash everything to pieces like the rams do. At this years gathering I finally got my answer. In complaining to Daryl Riersgard of LaFour Ranch about my problem he said "a pick-up truck tire", I didn't understand. "Go to Big R (a national chain of US feed stores) and get a rubber bowl that will fit in a pick up tire", he said. "They can't tip it over, they can't bash it apart, the most they can do is move it around." The minute I got home, I raced to the back of my barn because I knew I had an old tire back there and as luck would have it I already had a bowl that fit it. Daryl was right, they bash it, they shove it, but they can't break it and they can't tip it over. Problem finally solved.



December 2011



## Monthly calendar

Watch rams weight in particular; animals that carry fleece over the summer get hot ,don't eat as much and hide the fact that they are getting thin going into winter.

Worm as necessary, worms can also cause weight loss

If worming ewes remember that Valbazen can cause birth defects in lambs so never use it on pregnant ewes.

If sheep are really down on weigh supplement with soaked sugar beet pellets and not alfalfa which can cause urinary calculi (which can be fatal) in rams.

## Resource guide

**Christine Williams**

<http://www.gaerllwyd.co.uk/>

Gaerllwyd Flocks, Rare Breed Sheep in the Hills of South Wales

**Deb Robson**

<http://www.drobson.info/>

Deb recently publish an encyclopedia of Fleece and Fiber, including Soay available on Amazon and even Kindle, it has a wealth of information about 200 fiber breeds and details about their fiber. Even if spinning, and knitting are not your thing it is a fascinating read.

[\*\*The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook\*\*](#)

[\*\*More Than 200 Fibers, from Animal to Spun Yarn\*\*](#)

by Deborah Robson, Carol Ekarius

ISBN 1603427112

For more about the gathering go to

<http://britishsoaysheep.com/> Announcements and Events

For more about wool visit

<http://www.soayfarms.com/meat.html>

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