Planning for a compact Lambing

Most shepherds aim is to have their flocks lamb in a short period, ideally one oestrus cycle of 17/18 days duration would be perfection.

Quite a few hill shepherds I know with over 1000 ewes to lamb will only have 10 to 20 ewes left to lamb, however when one enquires for the number of ewes not in lamb, a figure which is considered to be unacceptable by lowland shepherds, is quoted.

As a general principle one needs to find out when the best conception rates for the breed one keeps are achieved.

For my Scottish Blackface flock the best results are achieved when they lamb after the first week in April, the Pedigree Suffolks are best from late February and early March, although quite a few would lamb in January, although the number of lambs would be less. Our Texels are best in Mid March, as are the Bluefaced Leicesters.

So the first thing is know your breed and plan accordingly.

For a real compact lambing the shortest period is achieved by using Laparoscopic AI, however best conception rates tend to be achieved if one lambs at the breed's best natural lambing period.

Ewes will start coming on heat when the hours of day light decrease. They should be kept separate from rams and have

no contact with the rams, either in the pens or next door fields. This is very important from the time the lambs are weaned, or for gimmer shearlings who have not produced lambs as hogs.

 So keep rams well away and when you routinely have sheep in your pens always treat your rams last. Ideally last on a Friday afternoon so their smell will have disappeared when you work again in the pens on Monday morning.

Nothing brings the ewes on heat quicker than close contact with a ram as the pheromones in his body odour have an instant effect. Therefore planning when you want to start the ewes regular 17 day oestrus cycle is very important.

Research has shown that once stimulated by the pheromones the ewe has a silent heat the following day which is usually not fertile and does not usually lead to a pregnancy when mated.

However, as one does not know in practise at what stage the ewes are the best thing is to use a vasectomised (teaser) ram (who is a perfect male but cannot get a ewe pregnant) in order to stimulate the ewes to start coming on heat.

This can also be achieved by putting as many rams as you have into your handling pens for several hours to get the entire area to smell of rams, then put the rams next to a race and bring the females into the pens and let them have nose to nose contact with the rams.

The effect on the ewes is that the ones already in oestrus will continue to cycle every 17/18 days. The ones currently not cycling will have a silent heat the following day and some will have a short duration interval of 9/11 days until their next heat 17/18 days after that.

Therefore if you want the ewes to start lambing on the 1st of April the fertile rams want to go in on Guy Fawkes night the 5th of November so stimulate the ewes a fortnight before by putting in the teaser (vasectomised) rams or exposing the ewes to the pheromones.

One of the problems with this system can be that one has a very busy period of 4 to 6 days when most of the ewes are lambing and if one lambs indoors adequate penning provision could be a problem.

However, some of you reading this may recollect lambing seasons when just about no ewes have lambed for the first 10 days and your lambing team, including the expensive nightshift, had nothing or very little to do. If you check your diaries you will find that you unintentionally synchronised the ewe's heat 147 days before.

Flushing the ewes by keeping them on better pasture for the 2 weeks the teasers are with the ewes will increase the number of eggs produced by the ewe and therefore increase the lambing percentage.

We like to do this with our pure Suffolk and Texel flocks which as a result have over 190% expected lambing percentage. Our mule and Suffolk X flocks are not flushed as they always expect nearly 200% already.

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