

# **Successful Fostering of Lambs by Hans Porksen**

The reasons why one fosters lambs are many but everyone wants to be sure that the foster ewe accepts the lamb she has been given. To be successful she looks after it as if she had given birth to it herself. In this article Hans Pörksen, who farms in the uplands of Northumberland describes a method his farm manager Ian Fenwick has perfected, which has rarely been known to fail within our flocks.

On our farm we mainly foster lambs born as multiples, which in our case are triplets, onto ewes, which are having singles. Our experience is that ewes rearing triplets need a lot of extra care and attention and certainly a lot more concentrate and possibly creep feed for the lambs, if they are going to be as good as the ones reared as twins.

The success of Ian's system depends on having the ewes scanned accurately. If one makes sure that the ultra sound scanning is done when ewes are 40 to 80 days in lamb very few mistakes (in our experience none) should be made with identifying ewes expecting singles.

As we plan that virtually all the mule ewes expecting singles end up rearing twins, they are fed concentrates as well before lambing at the same rate as ewes carrying twins. Triplet carriers and lean, usually older ewes are grouped together for preferential treatment for the last 8 weeks before lambing.

The result is that ewes expecting singles are fairly fit, have lots of milk at lambing and the birth weight of their lambs is above average. The triplet bearing ewes have three strong and healthy lambs and one of them is usually slightly bigger and an ideal candidate to be fostered onto a single.

95 to 98% of our ewes lamb in the first cycle due to exposing the ewes to the rams pheromones 9 to 11 days before tupping and the mule flock is scanned at around 200%. No flushing takes place. Singles and triplets are all housed for lambing. As the lambs born as singles are fairly big, they are not born very quickly, so one has a bit of warning that the lambing process has started. The single bearing ewe is then put into a pen where she is going to lamb. We call this our half-way house, which is about twice the size of a normal lambing pen.

The ewe is inspected, to make sure both teats are working and she is fit enough and has plenty of milk to rear two lambs. A hungry lamb to be fostered is then selected, if a triplet is just lambing a wet lamb is taken from her as this is very successful.

The ewe receiving the lamb is laid on the floor, the foster lamb is then placed near the rear end and some birth fluid from the ewe is rubbed over the lambs back and rear end. Her own lamb at this stage is still inside her with possibly the front feet just starting to show. Pushing her own lamb back slightly and extracting some fluid to rub on to the foster lamb gives the ewe a flush of oxytocin and makes the lamb smell like her own, yet to be born.

The ewe is then encouraged to get up, turn round and inspect 'her newly born'. The lamb is vigorously licked by the ewe, stands up and is encouraged to suckle. In time the ewe will produce her own lamb and she will now rear them as twins.

If the foster lamb does not take to the ewe instantly decrease the size of the pen and make sure the lamb suckles the ewe.

Even quite old lambs can be fostered this way and the foster ewes own lamb can be matched up with another subsequently lambing ewe.

This method of adopting lambs has only been possible since the introduction of accurate pregnancy diagnosis. If you try this technique you will find that the yoke system currently used will become less and less in use.

There are many other ways of fostering, one of the best methods is skinning a lamb. Unfortunately for that method a dead lamb is required, which is something we are trying to avoid in the first place.