

Lambing Out Ewe Lambs Without Losing Your Mind

Part 3 of the series, Breeding Ewe Lambs

by Barbara Webb

Lambing season is almost upon you and you are gathering your supplies and arranging the barn. After waiting for months over the winter for lambing season to begin, suddenly the season is approaching all too rapidly and you are starting to worry. Will you be ready in time? Do you have every thing you need? And what about all of those ewe lambs, was it *really* such a good idea to breed so many? What if they give you trouble? Do you need anything special on hand? Maybe you've heard scary stories about lambing out yearlings, or maybe you've had troubles in the past, but if you're wondering if it was really such a good plan to breed all those little girls, then here are some tips to help.

When I first started breeding ewe lambs, I was both too young to know any better and too inexperienced to be afraid. By now I have blundered through enough lambing seasons with yearlings that I feel relatively confident that I can sort out almost any situation these young ewes might get in to. I've come to realize that with patience and a calm demeanor, as well as some preparation and a philosophical view about the results, that a shepherd *can* lamb out yearling ewes and still stay sane.

The first question to address is how to prepare for lambing, and the very first aspect of that preparation is to have made good and informed choices during the breeding and gestational seasons. As covered in parts one and two of this series, by not breeding the smallest ewe lambs, and by carefully managing the nutrition during fall and winter, many potential lambing difficulties will be avoided entirely.

Even now, it is not too late to review the yearling nutrition. How do they look? Are they growing out well this winter? One clue is to look for new horn growth in the horned gals, and if they were fall sheared, then whether the fleece is growing in well. If you don't like your answers to any of these questions, it is not too late to up the nutritional intake. Offer either more or better hay, and if you have not been feeding grain, then start on up to a quarter to a third of a pound of 16%

sheep feed. If you suspect that any of them have really been undernourished during the past months, separate out the skinny ones and get them some top quality hay; second or third cut, alfalfa or clover hay if you can get it. If they really need bulking up, try free choice hay and even switch to 18% grain. My grain store carries 18% for milking goats, and I have fed it to pregnant ewes that have been ill, to older ewes that are looking peaky, or pregnant ewe lambs if I have cause to worry about their condition.

Likewise, this is a good time to consider if perhaps the yearlings are over conditioned. Are they excited about feeding time when you come out, or are they leaving good hay in the feeder? Is anyone starting to look a little rollpoly? (Remember that you are considering fat as opposed to pregnancy) If so, it would be wise to back off on the feed a little bit. Cut down from 18% to 16% grain, or decrease the amount of 16% grain that they are getting. A quarter pound per ewe does not look like much when it is in the feeder, and especially when they have scarfed it all down and are desperately sniffing around for more. It is very important that you measure the grain accurately every day to avoid overfeeding. By eye, you are much more likely to toss in just a little more, and a little more, until you have fat yearlings with difficult births.

Another important factor to review right now is the level of selenium in your yearlings' diet. Selenium is critical to growth, both maternal and fetal, and is necessary for strong, healthy muscle contractions during lambing, so you need to consider the supply of selenium you are offering your Moms-to-be. Remember that the yearlings are trying to pass along selenium to the lamb(s) at the same time that they still need selenium for their own growth. In the same way that human teenage moms need extra, extra calcium in their diets during pregnancy, Icelandic yearling moms need some extra, extra selenium in their diet during pregnancy. Being so young, a yearling may not have yet built up a reserve sufficient either for her own use, or for that of her pregnancy, so it is very important that you take steps to supply that extra

selenium before lambing. Whether you choose BoSe shots, selenium and E powder mixed into the mineral feeder, livestock E/Selenium gel, or even some combination of the above, it is critical to strong labor and to strong lambs that you boost the level of Selenium for your yearling ewes. It is important to note here that selenium is potentially toxic, and that any selenium supplementation program should be designed under the supervision of your farm vet.

My approach to this issue is to add extra Selenium/E powder into the ewe lambs' mineral feeder above what I would normally use in my mineral mix. If you don't house your ewe lambs separately from your adult ewes, a dose or two of the booster gel to each yearling can accomplish the same goal. ***The importance of an adequate selenium supply for bred Icelandic yearlings cannot be overemphasized.*** Selenium deficiency will lead to small, weak lambs, slow, ineffectual labor due to weak uterine contractions, as well as a high rate of retained placentas. Extreme deficiency leads to Moms too weak or uncomfortable to stand at the hay feeder long enough to adequately feed herself, to support her pregnancy, or to develop her udder.

The next thing to do will not affect the success of lambing, but will help ensure a healthy lamb and mother during the grazing season. And that is to give your yearlings an extra C,D & T booster this spring. Every pregnant mom needs her spring booster between 2 and 4 weeks prior to the beginning of lambing, to ensure enough time for her body to respond to the vaccine and produce antibodies. It is these antibodies that will be dumped into the colostrum to provide protection for the otherwise defenseless newborn. But remember that a yearling ewe is still young herself and may not have built up an adequate immune response either for herself or her lambs. A mature ewe has had her spring shots for a number of years, building up a good background level of protection, whereas a yearling has only had her two lamb shots the prior summer. If one of those lamb shots was ineffective for any reason, then she has been relying on only one shot for protection. At the advice of my vet, I now give my yearling ewes two spring boosters, two weeks apart, to compensate for any deficiency in the prior year and to give them and their lambs some extra protection. In order for the shots to have time to be effective,

plan the two boosters to start no later than 4 weeks prior to the start of lambing. Even if find yourself already inside that window, still go ahead and give that extra shot. An individual ewe may be lambing a little later in the season, and in any case, Mom can still use the extra protection. In a year that is particularly wet and rainy, that second shot may well save your yearling ewes and their lambs from succumbing to enterotoxemia.

Another important preparation for lambing is to be sure that you have sheep colostrum in the freezer. Hopefully, you put some aside during last year's lambing season, and have successfully prevented your spouse from throwing it out. But if you don't have any, don't despair. Get right to a livestock supply catalogue and order some of the prepared colostrums that are commercially available; Colostrix is one brand name that comes to mind. It is not as effective as the real thing, but in a jam it is still a whole lot better than nothing. Then get on the phone to see if you can beg, borrow, or swap some real sheep colostrum from a sheep friend. Two things to keep in mind though: one is that most shepherds do not have enough colostrum for their own uses, so don't be offended if the answer is no. And the other is that some diseases can cross through into the udder and will show up in the colostrum, thus infecting the lambs. OPP for example is a real danger in borrowed colostrum, so be familiar with the health and the biosecurity practices of the farm from which you get any colostrum. And the last resort available is that you can snatch some colostrum from the mature ewes that lamb in the very beginning of the season. One very wise shepherd I know, will breed her most milky ewes to lamb first, so she will have a plentiful supply of colostrum in the beginning of each lambing season. It is important to know that even though a lamb can only absorb antibodies within the first 16 hours of it's life, the ewe will continue to produce colostrum for the first two or three days of her lactation.

Your last bit of preparation is to check through your lambing supplies. The following is a partial list of supplies that you should probably have on hand anyway, but are particularly important for lambing out yearling ewes: Headgate, either cobbed up or commercial, lamb tubing kit, milk replacer with measuring cup, whisk and plastic juice pitcher, bottles and lamb nipples, hairdryer,

a cardboard box, Nutri-drench, a digital thermometer and plenty of lambing towels.

This brings us up to the actual lambing season. Your ewe lambs are in the perfect condition, their selenium levels are good, they've each had two spring boosters and you have some colostrum in the freezer and lambing supplies in the barn. Is there anything else to do?

I have found that one important factor in a successful lambing season is to house my yearlings in an enclosure that opens onto the barn and is not too large. That way I can easily bring a ewe into the barn if I need to help with a delivery. I know that some shepherds do not find it necessary to do this, but I am more comfortable knowing that I won't have to chase them around an open field if there is trouble. Ever since the time when a yearling got into lambing trouble in the midst of our largest pasture and I was reduced to trying to creep up on the ewe, unseen, like a commando on my belly, I have decided that keeping the yearlings in a smaller enclosure, was a much better plan. Now I keep my yearlings in one of our winter paddocks with plenty of legroom, both inside the barn and out, and where they are next to our warm room should I need electricity, warm water or any other supplies.

Let's jump ahead to the actual labor and some possible lambing scenarios. Since the yearlings are not as roomy inside as a mature ewe, they can be more likely to have a mal-presentation of the lamb. We will look at some of the most common lambing difficulties and I would also refer you to more detailed texts on lambing for further reference.

A very common problem is a lamb presenting with just one foot and a nose. Moms can often birth the lamb just fine with one leg back, so watch the ewe at first and see if she seems to be in trouble. Usually the most you will need to do is to wobble the lamb back and forth, side to side, until Mom is able to push past that second shoulder. One hand behind the crown of the lamb's head and one hand gripping the hoof, will give you an adequate hold. Pull and wobble sideways at the same time, until you are past the jammed up shoulder. What to do if there is just a head and no feet, or if Mom cannot get the lamb out with one foot back? You will have to reach in and find that foot, two if you

can. But if Mom is struggling and you are worried for the lamb, settle for one foot if you can. When you find the foot, cup the hoof with your hand as unfold the joint, so that you will not inadvertently damage Mom's soft tissues. With the jam-up sorted out, Mom may be able to birth the lamb by herself, but if not, get a good hold on the feet, or on a foot and the crown, and pull.

If the lamb is presenting two hoofs and no head, take a closer look at the hoofs to see if they are front or hind legs. If you can't tell, picture in your mind the way the first joint flexes on both hind and front legs, and then it should be clear. If you are seeing front legs, you will need to go in and find the head. The head may have flexed down on the chest, or be turned sideways and the contractions are just jamming the lamb up against the pelvic bones. You might have to reach in a surprising distance to find the head, and will probably have to push the lamb back into the birth canal in order to get room to pull the head around into the correct position. Remember to hang on to one or both feet as you do this so you won't then find yourself in a different lambing difficulty. Mom will also probably be yelling her head off at this point, but you have to have that head, so persevere. Once you have your hand on that head, glom on as well as you can, turn the head to position it properly and pull. With one hand on the back of the head, and one hand for the hoof or hooves, try to time your effort to coincide with Mom's contractions, and pull.

In the Zen approach; I like to imagine that I have suction cups on my fingers while I am doing any of this pulling or reorganization. Just visualize that your fingers are stuck tight to that little skull and cannot possibly slip off. It is best if you have a helper to hold the ewe during these situations, but I always find that Murphy and his Law take hold and that these births will almost invariably occur when I am home alone. You may be able to curl your offhand around Mom's neck in a secure hold, while your other hand is fishing around for heads and legs. Or consider a halter for Mom so you can tie her off to the fence. I have even straddled the ewe facing backwards, and birthed the lambs upside down, leaning over the ewe's backside.

If you find that you are looking at two back feet, then immediate intervention is necessary. As a

wonderful shepherd coached me once on the phone, "Pull out and down! Pull out and down!" The birth is usually smooth in the breech position but once you have the lamb on the ground, you will need to give it a good swing to clear the lungs and passages of any inhaled birth fluids. Hold on tight to the wet and slippery lamb while you swing, and be sure to be clear of any obstacles! Keep a close eye on a breech lamb for the next few hours to watch for labored breathing. Sometimes a lamb appears to be breathing normally after a breech birth, but will then succumb to fluid in the lungs later in the day.

Once the lamb is on the ground, either through her efforts or yours, what to do next? The one thing NOT to do now is to immediately start fussing around the lamb and mom with navel dips and towels and lambing jugs. If the lamb is breathing steadily, if it is not in the midst of a frigid wind, and if Mom does not look like she is trying to stomp it to death, then the lamb is safe for now. The best thing to do is to step away and let them get acquainted without the distraction of your presence. If you have to so you won't be tempted to jump in, go inside to get another cup of coffee. The yearling has just been through a tense and bewildering ordeal, this strange creature is crying and wobbling at her feet, and she may not be sure of what to do next. You are waiting for her maternal instincts to kick in now and you don't want to distract her from that process. Even if you had just been helping to deliver the lamb, your presence now is unnecessary and unwanted and you need to get out. Once the ewe has clearly accepted her lamb and is licking and nickering those special mother sounds, you can step back in to clip and dip the lamb's navel. If it does not upset the ewe, then you can also help to dry the lamb, although if the weather is not cold, then it is not necessary to do so.

Sometime I do go into the house and grab another coffee, but if you are uncomfortable doing that, then just step out of Mom's line of sight and keep an eye on them. Most of the time, Mom will settle down and respond to the lamb's cries and wobbly attempts to stand. She will be curious and creep closer and closer and sniff at this strange intruder. Then she will try an experimental lick on the lamb's head, and when that seems right, she will lick a bit more and a bit more, and then she is really washing that baby in earnest and

starting to call to her in response. At this point you are more than half way home to a successful birth.

The next step of course is to get the lamb to find the teat and to get that all important first meal. Unfortunately, some yearlings are so enthusiastic about washing up the lamb that she won't stand still for the lamb to find the teat. That hungry lamb will stumble forward, bumping, bumping along the belly looking for the teat, find the teat, start nursing finally and getting some of that warm, wonderful milk into his empty belly, and then Mom will turn around so she can continue to wash her lamb, pulling the teat out his mouth. Sometimes you may need to distract her with some of your very best hay so she will stop washing the lamb. Very rarely, you may need to halter tie or hold the ewe so that she cannot continue to turn around. Once the lamb is really nursing, the udder is stimulated to release a fresh supply of oxytocin, the maternal hormone that will both cause the uterus to contract, and to focus Mom's maternal attentions on her lamb.

As a general approach, avoid direct intervention for as long as you safely can, and intervene as little as you safely can, since the ewe can find it confusing to have you to deal with as well as this strange, wet creature. Watchful, non-intervention can be your best approach at this point, as long as you are ready to help should it be necessary to do so.

Occasionally a ewe will be so overwrought by the birthing experience that she cannot calm down in time to feed her lamb in that critical first hour or half hour before the lamb gets too chilled to nurse. This is when you will need that headgate listed above as a lambing supply. Just twice in 12 years of lambing out yearlings, I have had to resort to confining the ewe in the headgate, but on both occasions, an overnight stay gave the ewe time to settle down, and the lamb the chance to nurse vigorously. The massage of the udder inherent in the nursing process stimulates the release of oxytocin, which in turn stimulates maternal behavior in the ewe, solving your mothering problem.

Also occasionally, the lamb will be too cold or too weak to nurse on her own, even with assistance from the ewe. Perhaps too much time has passed

without a meal for the lamb, or perhaps she is small and chilled by the weather, but sometimes you will find a lamb that is too weak to nurse. Immediate intervention is required in this situation in order to save the lamb.

There are wonderful publications on care of the newborn and I would refer you in particular to the book "Managing Your Ewe and her Newborn Lambs" by Laura Lawson, published by LDF Publications of Culpeper, Virginia. Lawson has some great flow charts at the back of the book that walk you through the decision making process of deciding how and when to intervene with a difficult birth or a weak newborn. This article is not an effort to duplicate the detailed information offered there, but to give you a quick overview of assistance methods.

You have several choices when you are presented with a cold, weak lamb. Your first job is to get some milk into the lamb's belly. External warming can only help so much; the lamb really needs nutrition. If the lamb has a sucking response, then either defrost some of that colostrum in the freezer or milk out either Mom or another newly delivered ewe and bottle feed the lamb. (Remember when you are defrosting colostrum to use warm water; the microwave will kill the antibodies).

If the lamb is too weak to suck, then rinse your lamb tube set in hot water both to clean it and to soften up the tube. Using the instructions you had previously printed out, insert the tube, and gently pour one or two ounces of colostrum into the open syringe. DO NOT FORCE the colostrum down the tube, but rather let gravity draw it down. Knowing that the lamb has some hot milk working in her belly, you now have some time to solve your other problems.

After a successful tubing or bottle feeding, all that may be required then may be to warm the lamb. Use your digital thermometer to see if the lamb is chilled. Anything less than 102 is too cold. Either a soak in some body temperature water, (being sure to wrap the lamb's body in a plastic bag first to preserve the smell of the birthing fluid), or some time in a hot box with a running hair dryer, will get that lamb up to a healthy body temperature. Once during a very busy lambing day, I put a mildly chilled lamb inside

my coat to stay warm until I could set up the hot box.

If you use a hot box, be careful not to overheat the lamb. Use the lower speed on the dryer and if necessary, keep the lamb's head out of the box. I keep a lamb-sized cardboard box and a towel at hand as an impromptu hotbox. The lamb goes in the box on a lambing towel, I hold the dryer pointing in, and cover the whole thing with another towel. The towel keeps the warm air in, giving the lamb time to warm up. In a pinch, I've held the lamb in my lap, holding the dryer in one arm, and tenting the towel up over the both with the other. Sometimes very small or very weak lambs cannot yet regulate their body temps and will readily overheat so be careful to check the lamb's temperature; you are aiming for between 102 and 104 degrees.

If a lamb is very small, or was very chilled, then you may still need to tube feed the lamb for the next meal or meals. If at all possible, keep the lamb with the ewe and only enter the jug for feeding. As long as the ewe is continuing to care for the lamb, it is very likely that the lamb will quickly strengthen enough to nurse unassisted. You may need to show the lamb where to find the teat, or you may come out to the barn to find that the lamb has already learned to nurse. At this point, you have done your job and just need to watch the family for another day or two to watch for any backsliding in condition.

If you have had to bring the lamb into the house for any period of time, you may find it difficult to reintroduce the young mother to her lamb. Be watchful that she doesn't try to stomp the "intruder" when you bring the lamb back to the barn. I had a yearling mother once who would recognize her lamb's voice as I carried her back to the jug, and would call out to her, but then not recognize her lamb by sight or smell once I put her in the jug. I tried several times to reintroduce the lamb, even rubbing her up against her twin to equalize the smell, but the ewe had become suspicious at that point and was determined to catch me out in the act of foisting off a stranger. We had to set the ewe up in the headgate and in a few days time she had forgotten her suspicions and accepted both lambs as her own. Sometimes however, the ewe just will not accept the lamb back, even as she may be grieving for her "lost"

lamb, and you will have to bottle raise the lamb or foster him onto another ewe. In either case, be sure that the lamb has gotten enough colostrum. My vet tells me that you should provide 2 oz. of colostrum per pound of the lamb's birth weight. An 8 lb. lamb for example, will need 16 ounces of colostrum within that precious 16-hour window of opportunity.

Very rarely, even tube feeding will not save a lamb as he has chilled so far down that his body cannot digest the milk. The only choice left then is to give the lamb some warmed sugar solution via an inter-peritoneal shot. You are delivering what is essentially predigested nutrition right to the body cavity where the lamb can absorb it directly into the bloodstream. Once the lamb gets some sugar, only then can your warming efforts be useful. If the lamb is starving, no amount of warming will save him. While scary to perform, inter-peritoneal shots can be one of those rare, "miracle saves". It is critical to have the correct equipment and solution on hand, as well as to understand the correct technique, so you will need to prepare ahead of time, and perhaps even to be coached over the phone by your vet or by an experienced shepherd.

A quick note on seemingly scary interventions; whether it is an internal exam, or tube feeding, or the inter-peritoneal shot, if you have never done it before, you may be afraid that you will accidentally kill the lamb through your inexperience. It is important to understand in this situation, ***that without your intervention, the lamb is going to die anyway.*** So go ahead and give it a try; the worst thing that will happen is that the lamb will die, which would certainly have been the end result without your help. In the best case, you will save the lamb, and regardless of the outcome, you will learn a new and valuable technique.

If the worst happens and the lambing results in a dead lamb, still don't despair. It is not a complete waste for the ewe, or for you. The ewe has "primed" her fertility pump and developed her udder, both all to the good for next year. You know that the ewe is fertile, and you have the opportunity to either save her colostrum, or to foster another lamb onto the ewe. If the ewe is clearly pining for a lamb, she may be very willing to accept another newborn with just a minimum attempt on your part to convince her that it is

really her lost lamb.

We have run through some potential interventions, roughly in the order that you might use them, from least invasive to very invasive. Yet in the vast majority of assisted births, you will only have to go as far as one or two steps. It will be rare that you have to progress much further than helping a confused lamb to find the teat, or to prevent an overenthusiastic ewe from licking her lamb too much. The Icelandic ewe is indeed a wonderful mother and your most helpful approach to lambing out Icelandic yearlings will almost always be watchful non-intervention.

That is not to say however that you should ignore the yearling family entirely. Too often because Icelandic ewes are such good mothers, shepherds feel they can ignore a yearling mother in labor and just assume that she will be fine. She may well be fine, but she may well not be fine, and when you return to the barn you may be disappointed to find a lamb dead of cold and starvation. A little bit of vigilance at this point, and potentially a little bit of help, goes a long way towards ensuring that you will have a strong, healthy lamb in the fall, instead of a wasted year for the dam.

If your philosophy is to let nature take care of things, regardless of the cost to the animals involved, you will find no support here. Yearling mothers are both beginners at lambing, and are still immature themselves, and it is no shame to them or to you as the shepherd, or to the breed as a whole, when a mother needs a bit of help her first year. I have no patience with producers who willfully let a lamb born to a yearling mother die for lack of assistance, for the privilege of then saying that they "never" have to help their yearling mothers. Sometimes lambs do die, and sometimes they die because we could not be there to help, but that is a vastly different situation from a lamb dying because the shepherd ***would not*** help.

I strongly believe that when we take domestic animals into our care, that we are obligated to care for them with compassion. Yes, each producer will make his or her own decisions as to what level of intervention they can afford to make, whether it is an issue of available time or money. (continued pg 35)