

Smarter Than a Fifth Grader

Oreo, DRK 05F, came to our farm from Solidago Farm in 2003. We already had her half sister Nuska, a Nora line that was fast becoming our best ewe in every respect, even in parasite resistance.

Oreo is not out of a leader line, but do not tell her that! Time after time she surprised us with her intelligence. Our flock is allowed to roam free in the woods on our days off. They love wild raspberry, blackberry, blueberry, brush, and young pine shoots. For the most part the moms train their lambs, as they were trained by theirs, not to go near the road, and to stay with them. But sometimes a first-time mother will not notice her lamb lagging behind. That is when Oreo shines. As soon as she hears a lamb cry in the woods, she starts calling and running to them. She takes her lambs on this mission, making sure they follow her into the woods. Soon after, Oreo comes back with her own lambs and the lost little one, looking triumphant, and makes sure that we know about it. The lamb is brought to us, and Oreo hopes for a reward.

Last spring on Memorial Day we had a flood that made national news, and a terrible tragedy happened on our land. A woman and her 4-year-old granddaughter lost their lives to hypothermia. Water was coming in fast, flooding our land including sheep pens. George was already in the water trying to get to the woman, and I had to move our

pregnant ewes out of the water by myself. The adult pen was easy to move to the high ground (I just opened the gate and called them) but the yearling pen was already in deep water, sitting on lower elevation. The only high area was a shed, with 11-year-old Oreo and all of the bred yearlings crowded inside it. With all the sirens, people screaming, rescue motor boats, and rushing water I could not get the young ones to come out. So I started to call Oreo, and, to my amazement, she jumped in the ice cold water that was past her shoulders, and made it to the dry land. Then, standing next to me, she started to call the others, and did not stop until the last girl was out.

At lambing time two weeks later she went into labor, and being a good daughter that was taught to do what mom does, Oreo's girl Joy started her first labor 5 days before she was due. It was a comedy show, watching Oreo and Joy cleaning each other's lambs, feeding them together, until Joy wanted to keep Oreo's ram plus her own twins! I had to put Oreo and her lamb in a pen, and Joy was heartbroken for days, trying to break in and take the lamb.

Oreo is also the one to find all the good "feeding grounds" in the woods. Others watch and follow her. Of course sometimes she gets them all moving one way and then waits and goes to her private stock with just her lambs.

Oreo has worn down her

teeth and has been on grain, grass, and beet pulp, and last fall we did not want to breed her anymore. She had different plans, and insisted on being bred. She was the first to lamb, had a beautiful ewe lamb this year that seems to be more intelligent than the other lambs (a blessing and a curse), as are the other Oreo daughters. This clan always knows when we plan to do shots or hoof trimming and need to get the flock in the catch pen, and promptly alarm others of upcoming "danger".

The biggest challenge that comes to any of us is how to say goodbye to treasured sheep like Oreo. We are now at the point of decision of whether to be practical and not keep some of our older ewes, or keep them and setup a geriatric pen.

Last year after lambing, Oreo was in terrible condition, but this year we seem to have hit the right balance of vitamins, minerals, herbal supplements, and nutrition. We also had to move her to a ewe lamb pen for the winter. She is young again, with the energy of a yearling, and not a tired old sheep. I can no longer say that putting her down is an act of mercy, given her newfound youthfulness.

But this is summer, and winters are harsh and unforgiving in Maine. Will she be in pain, or too cold, will we regret allowing her to suffer another winter? We kept our Nadine one winter too many, and it broke my heart to see her

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in pain and unable to get up from arthritis. How sad it is to know that this day is coming. I do not have a problem in the world to send a cull to the butcher - that is the cost of progress and a responsibility to our breed. But having a vet put down a ewe that has



given many excellent lambs that go on to do likewise, that is hard. Will it ever get easier? I hope so!

~ Olga Eliason, Still Waters Farm, ME

Oreo the Geriatric Sheep

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