

It seems as if every month has a theme of sorts. Here on Coe Creek, April is lambing month. We will also have new calves in the next few weeks, but it is the rush of lambing that defines this season for us.

It has just begun. We don't have thousands of ewes, but our flock of 140 is enough to keep us busy during this month of uncertain weather and fluctuating temperatures.

Most of our ewes have their lambs in the two-function building we call the "hay barn." And, indeed, it is used most of the year for hay storage. Crammed with the big round bales, it keeps our sheep and cattle feed from exposure to the elements--something that can rob a bale of 20 to 25 percent of its feed value. That translates to the loss of a hay crop every four or five years. That was unacceptable to us, and we have found that the hay barn is also a very handy place to have baby lambs.

We start the procedure about a month before lambing season. By early March, we have used enough hay to open up a large part of the 144X38 square feet of the building. Sometimes, Runo must move some hay bales to outside wagons or to temporary storage on the ground in order to have room for the sheep flock.

As soon as the building has enough empty space, he begins to bring in the equipment we use for this season of the year. We have double-sided feeders made from welded wire panels we purchased from Premier, a sheep-equipment company. Along with hog panels, some steel fence posts, and the wooden gates that make up our lambing "jugs" where the newborns can enjoy a day or two of bonding time with their dams, these feeders make the basic plan of the lambing barn work efficiently.

Using all of these elements, we have ten pens that each hold about 12 ewes, an alleyway along one side of them, and snuggled up against the west wall of the long building, 24 lambing jugs for the babies and their mothers.

In March, before we have any use for these lambing jugs, we shear the flock. Since 2000, we have done this job with hand blades. Before that time, Runo sheared the ewes with a motor-driven shearing rig, but after having a chance to participate in a workshop given by America's

prizewinning hand blade shearer, Kevin Ford, he became impressed with this traditional shearing method, and our shearing rig has never been used since. A year or two later, I also learned to shear, so now we share this interesting, but labor intensive, job.

When a ewe lambs, we take her from the large pen where she has been since before shearing, move her and her lambs to a four foot square jug, and let her have privacy with her offspring for one to four days. As the big pens lose occupants to the lambing jugs, we move sheep to fill the spaces again, making empty pens available for "mixing areas." As the lambing jugs fill, we mark the older lambs and move them and their mothers into the mixing pens to free up jugs and also to teach the youngsters to find their mothers even when they are in a congested area.

We mark our lambs in two ways. A paint mark--from special spray paint that will wash out of the wool after a few weeks--identifies a ewe and her lambs with the same mark. A numbered ear tag gives a permanent identity to the lamb, and that number is recorded. These tags are also required when one sells sheep or lambs so that the animal can be traced back to its original home if it is necessary.

For a select few lambs we use a third identification. For the ewe lambs we decide to keep as replacement ewes, we tag the other ear as well, this time with a colored tag that will tell us in what year the ewe was born. This spring, for example, we have blue ear tags for our prospective ewes, and the first one will read "15-1." We can look at the ewe flock and know that 2009 ewes have red tags, 2010 green, 2011 yellow, 2012 pink, 2013 orange, 2014 white, and now--2015 will have blue tags. We actually have blue-tagged ewes already, but they were born in 2008, and there is no difficulty telling an old ewe from a young yearling.

So, with our little kit of supplies--disinfectant, wound spray, tagger, "lamb-saver" supplement liquid--and the clipboard with our records for the year, we try to keep up with this interesting season.

And, in the sheep shed attached to the old barn, we have our yearling ewes--born in 2014--also lambing, along with some Icelandic ewes and some older sheep we brought inside early because they had some problem or were thin.

Now, on Easter Sunday morning, we are just getting started. There are 16 new lambs in the barn, and we are ready for the flood of new arrivals during the next two weeks.