

After a spring with enough rain to give us a good hay crop and ample early pasture, the summer has turned dry and warm. We began to question whether we had enough feed for the sheep until our usual lamb selling date a month from now. So, we decided to sell our wether lambs in August this year. This would lessen pressure on our pasture paddocks.

Today, then, was "sorting day." I don't particularly like the process, necessary though it is. We do help ourselves to a certain extent, though, when the lambs are small. While the baby lambs are still in the lambing "jugs," the small pens where they spend the first two or three days of their lives bonding with their mothers, we give them each an ear tag. We record the number so that we can identify their parentage. But, more important for our convenience in sorting, we also differentiate between ewe lambs and ram lambs.

The girls get numbered USDA tags in their left ears, the boys in the right. So, today, when our goal was to keep the wether lambs by themselves for tomorrow's sale, we sent ewes and lambs with tags in their left ears straight out to pasture again, while the right-ear tagged wethers were kept in a lot. This makes the sorting job a whole lot easier.

We kept four ram lambs for breeding purposes, too, but they had another tag in the left ear to show us that we should take them from the flock--we don't want any early breeding--but that they should not be with the group that will be sold. We haltered them as they appeared in the chute and led (dragged) them to the sheep shed where the big bucks are in residence.

Occasionally, but not so very often, we make a mistake when we are tagging in the spring. Usually, we catch it in time to remove a tag and put one in the correct ear, but it has happened that a wether has received a tag in the left ear and has gone unnoticed until time for shearing the next year. Since our yearlings don't always have lambs, there is no reason to suspect that we have a wether in their midst until it is time to tip them up on the shearing board.

That brings us to a related story. In 2003, I began to learn to shear sheep with hand blades. Runo had shorn our flock for years with a

shearing machine, but after having the opportunity in 2000 to learn the old craft of hand shearing from master blade shearer, Kevin Ford, he liked it so well that the shearing outfit has never been used since. Soon, I decided that I might be able to shear, too, though I had not wanted to learn with the machine.

I started by shearing bellies, the first position in the process. As I learned to feel more comfortable with the hand blades, I sheared a little more. But, I had never shorn a complete sheep until 2004 or 05. That spring, I decided I would tackle the complete job.

I didn't say anything to Runo, and I waited until he was away in the bee yard with our friend and beekeeper, Don Byrne. Then, I headed for the sheep shed.

For some reason, I decided to try my very elementary skill on the black yearling. I caught the sheep and turned it up on the shearing board. But, before I made the first blow with the blades, I remembered that Runo had said that in the class, Kevin Ford had advised the students to always make sure that the ewes were really ewes. There could be a wether or ram in their midst. When I recalled this, I felt the belly of the pretty, curly, black "ewe" and discovered that the "ewe" was a wether.

The first sheep I sheared all by myself was one of our tagging mistakes. But, it all turned out well, because we butchered that wether and had its skin tanned, and that pretty black sheepskin lies on the floor here in the cabin, a reminder of the day I decided to shear a sheep.

There are no black wethers in the flock this year. All the lambs that are going to the lamb pool auction tomorrow are white. And, hopefully, all the white "ewe" lambs we keep this year really will be ewes. The tagging system we have only fails with human error. And, I guess there will always be a chance of that.