

When we bring the ewes in prior to shearing in March, we divide them into groups of from 10 to 12. Long two-sided feeders divide the pens on one side and wire hog panels make the other boundary. More hog panels separate the whole line of pens from an alleyway and the little “jugs” where each ewe will have a private place with her new lambs for a day or two. As the jugs fill with baby lambs and their mothers, the pens’ population decrease, and we shuffle ewes from one area to another to fill the pens and to leave others completely empty to become “mixing pens” for the ewes and lambs that are a few days old. The length of time a ewe and her lambs stay in a little private jug depends on their health and vigor, the ewe’s mothering skills, and how many jugs are occupied. We have twenty-four jugs, and when they are filled, someone must move to a mixing pen. The biggest, strongest, and oldest move first.

But, right now, we are in the early stages of the lambing month, and most of the ewes are still in their original groups. When we go for our barn checks, it is always our hope that a ewe with lambs will have isolated herself in a corner, keeping a little space for herself. And, they often do this, driving the other sheep from a corner where they can lamb in relative privacy.

But, sometimes, things work out in a little different way. This morning, when I went for four a.m. barn duty, I found a nice, big pair of lambs with their mother in one of the pens. But, farther down the line, I saw a pen with lambs scattered all over and three ewes that had obviously lambled.

This is sometimes okay, because a ewe will usually keep to herself, and if her first lamb stays with her while she is giving birth to the sibling, three ewes can co-exist during lambing without causing a problem. But, it isn’t what we like to see when we enter the barn.

This morning, the situation was complicated by the fact that two of the three ewes were first time lambers. Even the young ewes are usually immediately aware of their change in situation. Other first time mothers, though, are more likely to be operating without a clue as to what has taken place. That seemed to be the case this morning. Six lambs were in the pen, but I hadn’t any idea which babies belonged to each of the ewes.

The older ewe wasn’t a big problem. She may have been the genesis of the dilemma, though, as she may have been engaged in lambnapping one of the earliest arrivals before her own lambs were

born. We will never know. But, she was willing to accept any or all of the new arrivals, so she went into a jug with two lambs that looked as if they could be hers. She was satisfied.

The two young ewes that had lambed for the first time were frantic, but, at the same time, they had no interest in any particular lamb, and their mothering skills were obviously undeveloped at this time. I finally got them into jugs, divided up the lambs, and began to scratch my head. Had I sorted out the lambs in some way that would meet the approval of the ewes once they settled down? Or, would they sniff the babies and decide that they were not theirs? Did they not want any of the lambs?

One young ewe was particularly upset, but she did not seem to have any interest in the lambs I had paired with her. She did not seem to have any interest in the others, either.

Finally, I came into the house and asked Runo if he thought we would have an easier time of sorting it all out if we both went down to the barn to take a look. He'd come back from his lambing shift three hours earlier, and no ewe had shown any sign of imminent motherhood. That is not unusual, but it is not common that within those few hours when the sheep were on their own three ewes of the nine left in that pen would simultaneously give birth and have their lambs all mixed up.

All was quiet in the barn when we left. Neither of the young ewes seemed particularly interested in the lambs they had, but they allowed them to nurse, and they will probably "mother up" in short order. We will never know if they have their own lambs, but it does not matter as long as they come to that belief themselves.

In the meantime, another ewe had a single lamb in another pen. So much easier that way—no ewes fighting over lambs, no ewes completely disinterested in the situation, no shepherds standing there scratching their heads, wondering how to best resolve the dilemma. But, it is all part of the season. And we came back to the cabin knowing that nine new lambs, all healthy and full of milk, had, in the space of a couple of hours, been added to the flock.