

Although it is November, we could say “Happy New Year,” because, in a way, it is the beginning of a new year for us here on Coe Creek Farm. A couple of days ago, we gave our ewes each a dose of medicine to help them fight parasites, and then divided them into groups. Now, each bunch of forty to fifty ewes is in a separate pasture with a ram. About one hundred and forty-five days from now, we should hear the small “maaa” of the first lamb of the spring. There will be a few early lambs, and then, they will come in a steady stream, filling lambing jugs and mixing pens and providing us with our main occupation for the month of April.

When we push the ewes through the sorting chute, sending this past April’s ewe lambs-- they will not be bred this fall—in one direction and the ewes that will have a buck with them in another, we count as we go and write down the ear tag numbers. When we have forty or a few more ewes in a group, we rope a ram and take him to his new job. We herd them to a fenced pasture. Then, we begin again, sorting and writing until we have enough ewes for another group.

It is interesting to note which ewes are in which group. Our one old ewe that was a bottle lamb years ago—we call her Petty—is always in the first bunch. She is so willing to go through the chute and take her medicine, so, she is a good “leader.”

At the other end of the spectrum are many of the Icelandic ewes. They are very independent, and often hang back until they have no choice but to go into the chute. They have retained much more of their native wildness than the other breeds. The Icelandic ewes we have come from a strain called “leader sheep.” They are particularly single-minded, are usually pasturing away from the rest of the flock, and can find feed where other sheep might go hungry. We don’t have many of them, but they are the most interesting animals in the flock.

One of the oldest of the Icelandic ewes is Helga. She is small, is polled, and in color is a light beige with a brown belly. She is more friendly than the other Icelandic ewes, and we can depend on her to also help lead the flock. But, we know that she will be in the farthest corner of the pasture when it is time to move the sheep. Somewhere in the same vicinity will be Fina, Herdis, Stina, Malin, Joyce, and twins Agda and Åsa. They are a miniature flock in their own right,

We cull ewes for three reasons. If a sheep is a poor milker or inattentive mother, she is not liable to be in the flock many years. Other ewes may develop health issues—usually mastitis—that ends their productive years. And, in time, most sheep lose teeth, making it difficult for them to get the nutrition they need.

So, every fall, there are a few ewes that have to be sacrificed for the good of the flock. But, there are exceptions to our culling, and Helga and Petty are two ewes that will be on the farm as long as they live. There is always a discussion as we sort sheep this time of year. Will an older ewe that looks good now still be in the same sheep after another Michigan

winter? Is that big fat ewe in such good shape because she really didn't milk very much? Shall we breed the ewe lambs this year or give them a year to mature?

Such questions are answered the best we can while sorting sheep in the fall. And, so, anticipating the winter and spring ahead, it is, in a way, a new year.

