

The results of the lambing season here on Coe Creek are easily ascertained by one stroll down the 144 foot long hay barn that doubles as our lambing facility. The audible and visible proof is here. Ten large mixing pens, plus four “auxiliary” pens at the south end of the building house the ewes with lambs. On the north end of the hay barn are two pens filled with ewes that have not yet lambed. The twenty-five “jugs” that hold the ewes with new lambs are sparsely occupied now.

Among the nearly 250 lambs are two solid black lambs—though one, the son of a black Icelandic ewe—has a perfect white X on his face. There are three more lambs with various combination of black markings. The rest of the lambs are white. Rarely, a black spot is visible on a leg or belly, but these are the exceptions.

We have had an unusual—for our sheep—number of triplets this spring. Some shepherds welcome multiple births. We do not. We prefer twins and single lambs with mothers that can completely support them. Feeding milk replacer to baby lambs is both time consuming and expensive. We have enough to do without mixing milk for bottles and feeding triplets four times a day.

However, that is what we are doing now. Twenty per cent of our total number of ewes have had triplets so far. And, there are still between twelve and fifteen ewes left to lamb. So, there will probably be more.

Some people take one lamb from a triplet mother and either “graft” it to another ewe that had a single or they bottle feed it completely from the beginning. We have had good luck leaving all of the triplets with their mothers and supplementing their nursing with bottles of milk replacer. Some shepherds also use “lamb bars,” pails that have several nipples attached so that lambs can eat cold milk replacer on demand. If the liquid is cold, they are not as liable to overeat.

We do try to put a triplet up for adoption when the occasion arises. This year, we have a couple of successful adoptions. The problem often is that a triplet lamb is considerably smaller than the giant single that becomes its new sibling, and the big lamb will often take more than his share of the milk. And, many ewes are difficult to convince of motherhood involving a lamb they did not birth themselves.

We identify all of our lambs a few days after birth with white numbered ear tags. These tags are required by Department of Agriculture regulations. If a lamb or sheep is sold, it can be traced by its recorded tag to the place it originated. We also add a colored tag in the other ear of lambs we will keep for replacement breeding stock.

To keep a permanent record of our ewes and lambs is not required, but we do it for our own use. We can look at a ewe’s record and see how many lambings she has had, whether she had twins, singles, or triplets, whether we have any of her daughters in the flock, and so on. So, we begin by hanging a clipboard with a pencil attached on the wall in the lambing barn. Each time a ewe gives birth, we note the day and sex of the lambs. Later, when we tag their ears, we add that information to the record.

We also paint-mark our lambs and ewes with a temporary marking system to help match ewes and lambs if they are separated. Once in a while a lamb escapes from a mixing pen, and the paint mark helps in reuniting it with its mother. We start with one color of spray marking paint and go through the alphabet. The first ewe to lamb will be marked with a large A. Her lambs will have the same mark. After Z, we use digits 2 through 9. Then, we start with another color of paint.

The exceptions are the triplets. They get special marks denoting their status. Three dots, perhaps, or three stripes, or three dots in another area of the sheep—the choices are numerous.

Our barn chores take several hours a day. We have been fortunate this year to have the help of our niece—a woman of competence, strength, and love of lambing. She has come for evening chore time and helped with feeding, watering, bedding, and—sometimes, delivery.

And today, my sister and brother-in-law drove up loaded down with food for us—chili, apple crisp, cookies, and fruit. And, a week or so ago, our beekeeper/friend came with Chinese takeout food that lasted us for several meals. So, what could be hard about lambing when we have this kind of help?

Not much, actually. But, Runo had the bad luck to have a severe cold or, perhaps, the flu, though we have had our flu shots. But, I have read that there is an influenza virus going around that the vaccine does not cover. He is better now and didn't really miss many barn sessions, but we did restrict what he could do for a few days.

The lambing season is also visible here in the cabin. Perhaps, it is not quite so clear what the cause of the disorder is, but a closer look at the hay chaff on the chairs where I have rested my feet, the pile of laundry in the basement that should have been taken care of a few days ago, the tomato plants that were transplanted a week later than would have been best—and the layer of dust on the furniture and dog hair and sand on the floors are all evidence of where our attention has been.

The best evidence, though, is a look at my clothes. I don't change my barn clothes during lambing season. By now, the knees are out of my jeans, my black leggings underneath protecting my legs. In addition to the normal residue of barn work, I have smears of various colors of marking paint on my legs, as well. And, my barn jacket is falling apart. This is obviously its last year of use, but I am determined to wear it until spring, and it is now more tatters than cloth. For some reason, though he does much more work than I do, Runo looks better.

So, the time spent birthing, moving, marking, and feeding lambs is rapidly changing to time spent docking, castrating, and vaccinating. And, after that, if the snow we are getting today doesn't stay too long, it will be time for turning out the flock onto pastures of new, green, spring grass. It is always an intense time, but the pens of indoor lambs and ewes will soon be a flock of baaing and maaing as the fields and meadows become their world for the next several months.