

It is raining a bit this early morning. Still black as night, especially without any snow to brighten the before-dawn day, it feels like spring. There are other signs, too: the cheery song of the robin; the raucous geese and the ancient call of the sandhill crane; the dripping of maple sap from the spiles into the pails hanging on the trees; and the spring ritual that defines the season for us--the arrival of lambs.

There is a concept that many people endorse to bring more diversity and vitality to their flocks. "Hybrid vigor" is the introduction of new, different genetics into a population of sheep or other livestock. Since we raise crossbred sheep these days, we sometimes bring in a ram of a different breed to add that infusion of new blood into the ewe flock. So, last fall, we purchased a young Clun Forest ram.

We have had only white-faced sheep for years. Most of the "mother breeds" that we prefer are all pure white, but the Clun Forest, a medium-sized sheep that still has the traits of the breeds known for ease of lambing, parental expertise, and hardiness, has a dark brown face. More striking yet is the upright position of the ears.

When white-faced sheep are crossed with a breed with dark faces, the results are often lambs with speckled noses or with dark gray visages. This trait also has the advantage of showing obviously the mixed parentage. So, this year, we have crossed some of our white-faced sheep with this young Clun Forest ram.

The lambs are beginning to arrive now, and we are pleased with the results. If the ewe lambs grow up to be as strong and vigorous as they are now as newborns, the cross will be a success. So far, we are pleased with the looks of these babies.

Still, as always, the lambing season is both the same and new each spring. There are always the unusual markers of each particular season—the spring that my early-morning treks to the barn were lit by the brilliant Hale-Bopp comet in the 1990s; the year we heard the first "maaa" of a tiny lamb the day we finished shearing; the morning we came to the barn and found the coal black lamb, the first we had had in a long time. And, we won't forget those years we trudged through deep snow to check for new lambs.

So, this year, what is new about the season is the varied appearance of the lambs after years of pure white. It is interesting to see the varied results of crossing the mainly Polypay ewes with this young Clun Forest ram. The majority of the ewes, bred to Dorset and Romney rams, will still have pure white lambs. But, every speckled nose or upright ears or shades-of-gray face will tell us without looking at records that the young gentleman with the brown face was doing his job.

There is one more sign of spring that has always been very significant to us in our location. We have wetlands on all sides of the knoll where our cabin stands, and I wait each year to hear the first frog. There are several species we listen for each year, but the spring peepers bring us the real evidence that spring is really on its way. That first little trill is only a prelude to the deafening music of spring peepers at their height. The old saying that the

frogs must “freeze in three times” (or some people say seven times) before it is truly spring may not be factual in regard to numbers, but it surely is something we notice. For now, though, we will depend on the tiny “baas” of baby lambs to assure us that spring is coming. We will probably hear that first spring peeper while we are wearily stumbling from cabin to barn some early morning.