

Today, April 18th, I can say that this year's lambing season is over. We waited six days for that final lamb, but when we checked the ewes last evening, we saw that the big two year old was preparing to give birth. She was in a large pen with several ewes that had their lambs with them. In previous days, she had shown no interest in the lambs. But, hormones have a curious effect, and the nearness of maternity triggers something that makes lambs suddenly fascinating. She clucked and nuzzled, sure that one of those babies must be hers. We moved her to a private pen and then came into the house for supper. After a couple of hours, Runo went back to the barn to check on her. She had an unusually large, lovely ewe lamb. This morning, I went to the milkhouse to get one more ear tag. 4410 is now in her left ear—the designated ewe ear, and even without a fancy name, she has an identity. And, without looking at her physical characteristics, we will know that she is a ewe. The wether lambs have their ear tags in their right ears. On rare occasions, though, we have made mistakes while hurrying to get the tags in the ears of a long line of lambs. So, it can happen that a wether is mistagged as a ewe, or the other way around.

This accounted for the first sheep I sheared all by myself. It was in 2003, and I had practiced shearing bellies and perhaps through the next shearing position, but I had not completely sheared a sheep. Since I thought it a bad idea to have witnesses to this first attempt, I waited until Runo was in the bee yard with the beekeeper.

I looked over the yearling ewes and decided that my first all-by-myself shearing experience would be the curly black ewe. None of these replacement ewe lambs were bred. So, I caught the sheep and turned her up into the sitting position that is Position 1 in the shearing pattern. I sheared the brisket and started down the side of the belly. Then, I remembered something.

When Runo had taken a shearing class years before, the teacher had told the students to never believe the shepherd who assured the shearer that all the sheep were ewes. He reminded them to check for themselves. For some reason, this had imprinted itself on my mind. So, I checked. The black "ewe" was really a wether. We had missed in our tagging and later kept the sheep to have a black fleece in the flock.

So, I sheared the wether slowly but effectively, and that fall, we butchered him and had the hide tanned. A black sheepskin covers a chair here now and reminds me every day of the first sheep I ever sheared all by myself.