

I stood by the gate, watching as Runo drove the tractor with a round hay bale toward the Maple Tree Field. The sheep, flock animals as they are, followed in a long stream. Two ewes, uncharacteristically, did not. They were occupied with a situation that was so consuming that they did not even seem to see that the other sheep had left the night pasture. They were having an altercation. It is not uncommon to see two sheep posturing or even engaging in a head-banging battle. But, it is usually rams that are going at each other.

It is not as often that ewes fight, but they are not always peaceable and maternal, either. Now and then, two ewes will be so engrossed in their own disagreement that they don't even remember to follow the flock.

This kind of controversy is somewhat different from that carried out by rams. For one thing, ewes rarely back up several meters before rushing at each other, front quarters off the ground, before a resounding head bang results.

Ram battles can result in injury or even death. That is not usually the case with ewes' physical altercations. I have never seen a ewe battle that was carried on with anything near that intensity.

Still, it cannot be pleasant to be butted in the head or side repeatedly. I have always wondered what provokes these ewes, why usually compatible animals become so annoyed with each other.

Researchers say they believe this is a struggle for status. In other words, sheep have a "pecking order," and for some reason, one ewe tries to challenge the status of another. There is a "wrinkle" in this, though, that I have never heard explained. Sometimes, a third ewe will interfere with the physical altercation, butting one ewe or the other on the side. Usually, the two main combatants seem to ignore her. But, she may persist. Might she be a sister or daughter of one of the fighters? Or is she trying to moderate the altercation? Or, is she just looking for trouble and trying to involve herself?

The two ewes I watched a few mornings ago had no interference from a third sheep. The rest of the flock had nothing but hay on their minds. They were far up on the top of the hill in the Maple Tree Field, waiting for the hay to begin to unroll in a long string, providing breakfast for all of them.

Finally, the two arguing ewes gave it up, realizing that the rest of the flock were already beginning to eat. Both of them took off at

a dead run, hurrying to reach breakfast before all the choice portions were eaten.

Although we don't really understand the reasons for the occasional ewe battles, we do notice other relationships in the flock. Sheep can, researchers say, recognize as many as fifty other sheep, and they definitely react to a new ewe in their midst. We see, too, that mothers and daughters retain a relationship even after lambs are grown. Sisters do the same, and often, when lambing season arrives, related ewes will give birth to their lambs on the same day.

We see our livestock every day. And yet, there is so much we do not understand and do not know. If we think we do, we are deluding ourselves. Probably, the sheep know more about us than we know about them.