

The Last Word

With Ted Brown

THE CYCLE OF LIFE CONTINUES



I'm writing this column in a fairly unique situation.

Seated at the computer in my barn office, I'm looking at the computer screen, while occasionally glancing at the two closed circuit televisions to my left.

You see, I'm keeping an eye on the sheep in two pens, more specifically, I'm watching one ewe in the early stages of labour.

As early spring comes upon us, the ewes, which became pregnant last fall, start delivering their lambs, signaling one of the sure-fire signs of spring.

From my vantage point in the barn office, I'm not only watching the ewe without disturbing her, but I'm also seated in the only warm room in the barn, with the ceiling-mounted electric heater kicking out the heat whenever the room needs a little warming up.

With the in-barn stereo system playing some good tunes, while in the warm room with a comfortable armchair, it's a pretty cozy setup. It makes caring for a flock of sheep during lambing season a much more enjoyable event than some shepherds endure.

Typically, when the ewes start lambing, most shepherds trudge out to the barn to check the progress, usually every two or three hours.

Shepherds, as a rule, aren't as fanatical as me, utilizing a closed-circuit TV system. Being a bit of a techno-geek, setting up the system was a natural for me. I only wish I could connect into my computer network at the house. Unfortunately, it's a bit too far to connect wirelessly, and the barn's thick stone foundation makes utilizing a signal booster a waste of time, too.

My only other option is to hard-wire the barn computer to the house network. If I were to do that, I could not only check the ewes' progress without coming to the barn, but also via the internet, giving me the ability to look in on their progress from the office, or on a smart phone. Maybe next year.

Right now, the ewe in question is pawing the ground and bleating a bit- an activity called nesting. She's been circling in a corner of the pen away from the rest of the sheep, as they feed on their hay, obvious to her and the impending birth.



When she starts nesting, it's a good bet she's close to lying down. She looks uncomfortable, and really wants to get on with it- if only she could decide exactly which corner of the pen she'll adopt as her 'delivery room.'

After selecting her 'spot' the hard labour begins. At that point, I'm stepping out of the office, to take a look at what's happening, just in case she needs assistance.

She has started some really hard pushing, it's time to take a peek.

Ten minutes later, and I'm back- she has given birth to a fine ram lamb. After the lamb was born and she started licking it clean, I moved her and her newborn son to a lambing pen.

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We have a total of eight 4 by 6 foot pens, that are temporarily set up in the barn for the lambing season. The lambing pen gives the ewe and her new offspring privacy and allows them the opportunity to bond, so they will later be able to find each other in a flock of dozens of sheep.

Placing her in the lambing pen also achieves another purpose. It prevents the other ewes from interfering (usually by be simply curious) but most importantly, it gives her the chance to give birth to another lamb, or in some cases, a third, in quiet solitude.

Along with her lambs, she will stay in that pen for the next 36-48 hours, then be transferred back to her pen with all the other ewes and their lambs.

I just checked on her again, and she is happily licking her new son, which is standing up now (a scant 10 minutes old) and instinctively trying to find her udder to nurse on her teat and consume some of that very important first milk, called colostrum, which is loaded with antibodies, giving the newborn lamb a jump-start on life.

Managing a flock of sheep is a bit time consuming at this time of the year, but most rewarding. I don't think there is anything more rewarding than raising that lamb up into a full grown sheep, and see her give

birth to her own lambs.

And being able to utilize technology to make the job easier is a definite plus.

But having said that, some aspects of lambing will never change.

The Sidekick and I recently found ourselves in the barn in the wee hours of the morning, assisting a ewe trying to give birth to twins, one in breech position, with the other's head and legs intertwined. Being intertwined, the two lambs were trying to emerge together, instead of separately. Without our help, I'm pretty sure that ewe and her lambs would not have survived until morning.

Luckily, we pulled it off- two live ewe lambs and a very tired mother rested in the clean straw of the lambing pen as we collapsed into bed at 2 a.m.

Okay, just back from another check- the lamb, now 30 minutes old, is nursing his mother, as the sound of his sucking can be heard. I just peeked through the openings in the pen, so I don't disturb them.

I must have just spent a lot more time writing just now, as I took another look to find she has just given birth to another lamb- this one an ewe lamb. It was lying on the bedding, shaking its little head as its floppy little wet ears smacked against her head, Mom is now giving this newest arrival a hearty cleaning with her tongue, not only cleaning off the fluid she has 'floated in' during the past five months, but also getting the little lamb's circulation going, so it will be able to keep itself warm.

One more check and the ewe lamb is trying to stand, and her mom is still cleaning her up. Judging from the size of the mom, I don't expect there'll be a third lamb from this one.

But as I'm thinking how happy I am to have two strong lambs instead of three possibly weak ones, I took one more look. You guessed it, a third lamb- another ewe lamb.

Okay, I was fooled again. It happens in this business.

Now that lambing is finished for this animal, I'll do another check of the three pens in the barn, just in case another is thinking about lambing.

After recording the birth on the computer, I have the most important part of the lambing process- that's text-messaging The Sidekick at work to report on yet another birth.

She gets quite excited when the lambs start coming, and wants to be informed the minute the newest lamb draws its first breath.

Another glance at the closed circuit TV- looks like another ewe is circling her pen.

And the cycle of life continues.