

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

Introduction

This document is designed as a guide to sheep management procedures throughout the year and should be used in conjunction with appropriate reference books, agricultural publications, veterinary advice and training courses/support provided by your local Smallholders Association.

It is not intended that this document details all veterinary aspects of sheep husbandry and does not include detail of all vaccines available, for example to protect against the causes of abortion. Professional guidance must be sought.

A comprehensive set of publications covering all aspects of sheep husbandry can be ordered free from Better Returns Programme, EBLEX, AHDB, Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth, Warks CV8 2TL. Tel: 0870 241 8829, Email: brp@eblex.ahdb.org.uk or visit www.eblex.org.uk/betterreturns to view on-line or to download.

It is assumed that the shepherd is registered with DEFRA to keep sheep and is familiar with current regulations for both transport, movement of sheep, medicine records and electronic identification.

Index to Sections

Page

1. Preparing Ewes and Rams for Mating	2
Condition scoring and Ram MOT	2
Ram buying, ram hire and taking ewes to a ram	2
Flushing	2
Mineral drench, Foot care, Vaccination, Synchronisation of oestrus	3
Raddle for service detection	4
2. Care of the In-lamb Ewe	5
Feeding in early pregnancy	5
Pregnancy scanning	5
Vitamin/mineral supplement, Booster vaccinations and Feeding regime in late pregnancy	5
Eartags	6
Preparation of lambing accomodation	6
3. Care of Ewes and Lambs	7
Worming	7
Vaccinations	7
Protection against Coccidiosis	7
Weaning – management of lambs and ewes	7
4. General Stock Management (May – September)	8
Foot care	8
Shearing	8
Crutching	8
Blowfly protection	8
Worming	8

Date/month

Boxes have been included for you to enter the date or month of each activity as it fits into your own timetable.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

Preparing Ewes and Rams for Mating

Condition Scoring and Ram MOT, Ram Buying, Arrangements for Ram Hire or taking Ewes to a Ram, Flushing, Mineral drench, Foot care, Vaccination, Synchronisation of Oestrus, Raddle for service detection.

Date/month

12 weeks before mating

- **Condition Scoring and Ram MOT.**

The number and quality of lambs is influenced by the body condition of both ewes and rams at tupping time. Ewes should therefore be managed to achieve a body condition score of 3.5 at mating, slightly more for rams. Graze according to requirements ie lean ewes onto better keep or help with a little supplementary feeding and fat ewes onto a more bare pasture. Grazing should therefore be appropriate to requirement.

In addition the ram should have a full health check with regard for the condition of the testicles, teeth and feet. Be alert to any brisket sores and check that the sheath is free from infection or damage.

8 weeks (or earlier) before mating

Under natural breeding conditions the usual ratio is one ram to about 50 ewes or one ram lamb to 30 ewes. If oestrus is synchronised then more rams may be required – see **Synchronisation of Oestrus** below.

- **Ram Buying**

If you need to buy a ram then now is the time as ram sales start in June for the early lambing flock and continue into late autumn. Sales are stressful times for rams and semen production and quality can be adversely affected, particularly when the weather is hot. Semen takes up to 7 weeks to mature therefore it is wise to buy your ram well in advance of tupping time. Buying privately can reduce any stress to the ram and rearing and management conditions can be assessed. Some rams may be unvaccinated therefore check their status and be prepared to vaccinate your purchase at home. With reference to the guidelines produced by the Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep (SCOPS) group consider worming and isolation before turning him out.

- **Arrangements for Ram Hire or taking Ewes to a Ram**

Make your arrangements early and if taking your ewes to another holding it might be prudent to ascertain the insurance cover available for your stock.

Animal movements can be made relatively near to the planned time for mating.

See section 'Approx. 2 weeks before mating' below.

6 – 4 weeks before mating

- **Flushing**

Semen production takes 6 -7 weeks therefore the condition of rams and semen quality will benefit from good grazing and, if required, supplementary feed.

Ewes should be moved on to good grazing which will help to maximise the ovulation rate.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

- **Vitamin/Mineral drench**

The ground in your area may be deficient in certain nutritional elements eg selenium and Vit E needed for optimum fertility. This can be counteracted by giving a mineral and vitamin supplement as a drench 4 weeks (check label) before tugging, or by administering a bolus. Your neighbours and vets will know if there is a problem in your area.

- **Foot care**

With reference to current guidelines for the treatment of lame sheep, trim feet only if absolutely necessary and utilise antibiotics where indicated. If possible run your sheep through a footbath containing a proprietary product to keep the feet in good order. It is important that this is attended to now as handling of ewes in the very early stages of pregnancy can adversely affect implantation.

- **Vaccination**

There are a number of diseases, particularly those that cause abortion, which can be effectively vaccinated against and your vets will be able to advise the best course of action. You can find much information in farming press. Chlostridial vaccines can be purchased from your local farm suppliers but vaccines against the abortion agents have to be supplied by your vets. Some of these vaccines eg Toxovax to protect against Toxoplasmosis abortion are usually administered pre-tugging. Discuss timings with your vet.

Note: Last year's retained ewe lambs will be due their 12 month booster to provide continued protection until they receive their pre-lambing dose.



16 days before mating

- **Synchronisation of Oestrus**

The use of hormone impregnated vaginal sponges will synchronise ovulation and can be an effective management tool for the planning of lambing time. They can be used in conjunction with a hormone injection of PMSG (Pregnant Mares Serum Gonadotrophin) to maximise ovulation. Your vet will advise and supply the sponges and PMSG for this 16 day programme.

NB The number of rams to ewe ratio will have to be re-assessed to cope with the number of ewes coming into season at the same time. Allow one ram to 10/12 ewes.



Approx. 2 weeks before mating

- **Hiring a Ram**

Hired/borrowed rams suffer little stress if not being moved long distances and delivery can be taken when needed.

- **Taking Ewes to a Ram**

This suits the small flock holder well and is a convenient way to get the ewes in lamb without the inconvenience of keeping rams.

Note

Be aware that in-coming animals (returning ewes or hired rams) could contaminate your ground, and subsequently your sheep, if from a flock carrying worms resistant to some anthelmintics. Consider worming and isolation before turning out onto your own holding.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year



Mating

- **Raddle for service detection**

Raddle applied to the brisket as coloured grease (raddle powder mixed to a paste with vegetable oil or general purpose machine grease) or as a crayon block on a ram harness is a useful indicator of service and enables the planning of lambing dates and vaccinations later in pregnancy. The colour is changed for each service cycle.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

Care of the In-lamb Ewe

Pregnancy scanning, Vitamin/mineral supplement, Booster vaccinations, Feeding regime, Eartags, Preparation for lambing

Early and mid pregnancy

- **Feeding**

Avoid any sudden dietary changes for the ewes and maintain a level plane of nutrition for at least a month after service. Maintain good grazing conditions mid pregnancy.

Mid pregnancy

- **Pregnancy scanning**

Scanning can identify both barren ewes and the number of lambs being carried by each ewe. This aids future management of the flock when the feeding of concentrates is required.

It will be possible to detect a pregnancy from about 35 days of gestation but the ewe needs to be about 70 – 75 days pregnant for the determination of the number of lambs being carried.

Late pregnancy. 8 - 4 weeks prior to lambing

- **Vitamin/mineral supplement**

If deficiencies have been confirmed, a dose is usually administered one month prior to lambing to help maintain the health of the ewe and her lambs. The instructions of your chosen supplement will advise.

- **Booster vaccination**

Annual booster vaccinations for continued protection of the ewe against Clostridial diseases and Pasteurellosis are usually given 2 – 6 weeks prior to lambing. Importantly this vaccination also provides lambs with protection for the first few weeks of life. It is good practice to vaccinate the rams at the same time. Your vet will advise.

- **Feeding regime**

Many factors influence a feeding regime eg body condition of the ewe, breed of ewe, forage availability and quality, number of lambs carried, lambing date and weather conditions. In the last eight weeks of pregnancy 70% of foetal growth takes place and pressure on the rumen from the developing lambs reduces the ewe's capacity for forage. Concentrate feeding at this time will help to maintain a balanced ration and can be given as step rate feeding or flat rate feeding. Feed blocks can also be a useful and convenient way to provide extra nutrition.

If the ewes have been scanned group according to the results and feed concentrate accordingly. Those having a large amount of concentrate should have the feed split into two feeds/day.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

- **Eartags**

In addition to the legally required tag information you may also need to include other information as required by pedigree sheep societies. Discuss your exact requirements with the tag manufacturers – not all can provide the additional information you may require. It is wise to place your order early since manufacturers become very busy at certain times of the year.



Pre-lambing

- **Preparation of lambing accomodation**

Plan to make everything as easy for yourself as possible.

Consider pre-lambing accomodation for your ewes and set up a lambing area with individual lambing/mothering up pens and a separate pen in which you could give individual attention to a ewe, hand rear or nurse lambs should any of these be necessary.

A reliable light source is essential as is the ability to provide supplementary heat for hypothermic/sickly lambs.

Gather together all the lambing requirements you will/might need.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

Care of Ewes and Lambs

Worming, Vaccinations, Weaning

March

Before turnout

- **Worm ewes**

In the period after lambing ewes begin to shed worm eggs in great numbers which will contaminate grazing and subsequently infect lambs. Worm ewes before turnout to keep contamination to a minimum.

April/May

After turnout

- **Worming**

Consider protecting your lambs from the effects of worms and also consider the risk of Nematodirus as temperatures increase. The worming regime against Nematodirus is different to that for other worm types and requires a specific anthelmintic. Note: Recent observations of temperature rise and Nematodirus activity suggests that the period of risk is extending beyond the months shown above.

- **Vaccination**

June

At about 8 weeks of age the first dose (challenge) of vaccine is administered to protect against clostridial diseases, followed by a booster dose a few weeks later. The instructions of your chosen vaccine will indicate the exact timings.

- **Protection against Coccidiosis**

Coccidiosis is very common and adversely affects the growth rate and wellbeing of lambs. Lambs generally, but not always, develop diarrhoea which can result in coccidiosis being mistaken for worms. There are several ways to provide protection for lambs, the most accurate being an oral dose of Veccoxan at 4 weeks of age, for example. Your vet will advise.

July

Weaning

- **Management of lambs**

At weaning, if possible, initially keep lambs on familiar pasture until settled ie remove ewes from lambs. Thereafter keep lambs on good grazing. Regular weighing and handling will help to assess growth rates and identify finished lambs for slaughter. It also provides the opportunity for selection of lambs as replacements, for exhibition or for selling as breeding animals. Ram lambs can mature very quickly therefore beware of keeping ram and ewe lambs together or with their mothers/other ewes for too long or unplanned pregnancies will occur.

- **Management of ewes**

At weaning identify ewes for culling – check udders, mouths, feet and note which ewes have not reared their lambs well enough. Ewes should be kept on tight grazing or kept inside on straw and water for 1 -2 weeks to help them dry off.

After about a month condition score the ewes and place on appropriate grazing.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

General Stock Management

May – September

Foot care, Shearing, Crutching, Blowfly protection

May/June

Foot Care and Shearing

Treat feet as necessary and run sheep through a footbath if available.

Book a shearer early but don't be in too much of a hurry to shear. Wait for dry, settled weather, especially if ewes are still lactating or in the early drying off period. A cold, wet snap immediately after shearing can cause mastitis and pneumonia. If young lambs are still on ewes at shearing time beware of mis-mothering and check that all are happily reunited afterwards.

May – Sept

Crutching, Blowfly Protection and Worming

- **Crutching**

Long lush grass and woolly sheep make for dirty backends which are attractive to blowflies (greenbottles). Remove the wool around the tail and from the back legs adjacent to the tail.

- **Blowfly Protection**

Humid weather with damp nights and warm moist days provides the ideal conditions for blowfly (greenbottle) activity. Beware damp sheep lying under hedges or individuals lying down isolated from the rest of the flock, especially those with dirty backends. Strike is not confined to the rear of a sheep. For example infected feet attract blowflies and the maggots hatching between the cleats can be transferred to the body when the sheep is lying down and travel to the area at the base of the neck/shoulder.

Once hatched, maggots feed on the skin and flesh of the sheep and in the early stages the 'struck' area may be seen as a damp, brown stained area of wool which the sheep will be trying to 'nibble' or rub constantly.

Recently shorn sheep are generally regarded as not being at risk of blowfly strike.

Pour on treatments and preventatives are readily available on the market but be aware that some products are developed to *only prevent* blowfly strike while others have the added benefit of killing maggots. In order to achieve maximum protection it is important that the chosen product is applied with the correct equipment and to the manufacturers instructions.

- **Worming**

Fit adult ewes need not be drenched against worms pre-tupping. Limit drenching to young or lean ewes and ewe lambs. Please refer to the guidelines produced by the Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep (SCOPS) group.

The reported incidence of liver fluke disease in sheep is increasing and the seasons of risk are becoming extended possibly due to milder, wetter winters and summers. If livers are condemned at the abattoir from lambs slaughtered for home consumption ascertain why as this may be a result of liver fluke damage. Your vet will advise if you suspect liver fluke infection.

A Diary Guide to the Shepherd's Year

Version 1 Dec 2010

Revision due:

Dec 2011

Version 2 Mar 2015 (issued Aug 2015)

Revision due:

Mar 2016

Page 1: Contact details for Better Returns Programme, EBLEX.

Page 3: To reflect current foot trimming advice.

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December 2010

for the

Cheshire Smallholders Association

and the

Shropshire Sheep Breeders Association and Flock Book Society