

Early winter care for the flock ensures healthier sheep at lambing time, and better-quality fleece next year



Winter on the farm

Graeme Bethune explains how he readies his flock for winter, and gets them in the best health for lambing next spring



I LOVE the winter. Here in the north of Scotland, winter is long and dark, often with awful weather; however, it's when I get to spend lots of time looking after my girls. Most of what I do in early winter

is about building on the work of autumn, which focuses on getting the sheep in their best possible condition. The most important part of that is managing their dietary transition from purely grazing in the fields, to grazing plus hay and a little bit of dried food.

It might surprise you to learn the timing of when winter care starts is not prompted by the calendar, or even the weather. Dates are meaningless in this time of climate change. It used to be reliable that it would snow here on the day breeding started in mid-November... but not now. Winter weather has become unpredictable, arriving in Caithness anytime from September to February. It announces its arrival with a week-long gale with rain or snow - one day you're working in your shirt sleeves, and the next it's Scott of the Antarctic time.

Instead, the start of the farming winter system is determined by the timing of breeding, and breeding dates are dictated by when you want to lamb. I want late lambs, starting the 14th of April, therefore

with sheep gestation averaging 147 days breeding starts on the 18th of November, and goes on until Christmas.

I lamb late because I want my sheep to eat as naturally as possible. I want the sheep with new lambs at foot outside eating new grass, with hay there if spring arrives late. The middle of April has a better chance of good weather than earlier, and the grass will be coming up. It's not an exact science - the last two years I was checking sheep in the middle of the night while wearing a T-shirt, the year before I was building emergency lamb shelters in snow.

My change in crop priority from meat to fleece has led me to re-examine how I look after my sheep, and I have decided to differ from modern farming conventions. Much of what I do now is inspired by looking at how things were done in the old days before sheep farming became focused on big, fast-grown lambs. After all, in my Grandad's time, the main economic value of sheep up here was their amazing fleece. I am told that in today's money, a kilo of best Cheviot fleece from 1958 was worth £60, so it's clear that the methods of care they used were successful in cultivating great fleece.

After all the planning and preparation, good early winter care is actually pretty straightforward - the system is designed to be resilient to cope with the unexpected. I start introducing hay to the sheep a couple

of weeks before breeding starts, while there is still a good amount of grass growing. I prefer hay over silage, to avoid listeria and spoilage later in the winter. I buy in hay as well as making my own, from farms up county who specialise in very good quality fodder; it's an expense, but it's worth it long-term for the sheep's health.

I want the sheep to gently integrate the dried element to avoid stomach problems, which is why I start putting it out while there is still green grass for them to eat. As the green gradually disappears, the girls will move to the hay. At the same time I start giving them premium sheep nuts. They are expensive, but they have much more protein, and are based on dark grains (used distillery barley) and not sugar beet. I only give them 50g per day each, as opposed to the 250g-500g a day recommended in some feeding regimes. This treat also makes the sheep love to see me (sheep love to eat!), so further down the track at lambing time, our interactions will be less stressful for the sheep.

And that is it, sort of. There is of course the gate-leaning and sheep counting so necessary to a shepherding life. It's just that in a gale with driving sleet, it might become a very quick count before a run back to a warm fire and a nice cup of tea. ☺

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Next Month: Graeme prepares for the worst of the winter weather