



Graeme examines each pregnant ewe carefully to ensure they receive adequate feed for their lambs

# Preparing for lambing

Graeme Bethune explains how he cares for his ewes to make sure they give birth to healthy lambs



**SOMETIME IN** the middle of February, I scan my ewes to see how many lambs they are brewing. That day marks the change in my mindset from maintaining the ewes through winter, to

supporting them in the charge towards giving birth. Because, thankfully, the days are lengthening, the grass shows a bit of green, and the birds are nesting. Spring is coming - and so are the lambies!

Scanning the ewes is vital to discover how many lambs each is pregnant with. The different requirements of ewes having one lamb and those having three is huge, and treating all sheep the same is just not consistent with good welfare. The purpose of scanning is therefore not the vanity exercise of a proud shepherd, but rather to provide information to enable good management of my ewes.

You see, it's all about food. The last six weeks of pregnancy sees 75% of lamb growth, and the demands on the body of the ewe rockets up accordingly. My job is to get both ewes and lambs through that period to lambing in a good healthy condition, with lambs neither too big or too small. I have to balance an estimation of how much food value the ewe is getting from the land from the rising spring grass,

with the number of lambs she has, by assessing her body condition. This is an estimate of her physical status measured by how much flesh and fat is along her spine. You squeeze her back (gently) and feel how bony she is. I get three goes at this during pre-lambing: at scanning in early February; in early March when they get a pour-on to prevent flies and ticks; and lastly when they get their annual vaccination against clostridial diseases in late March. Each occasion lets me have a wee grope to see how the sheep is doing, and allows me to adjust her feeding if I have to.

I cannot stress enough the importance of prenatal feeding for the lamb. The lifelong benefits include good bone foundations, proper brain development, fully formed lungs (lungs are the last major organ to mature, and most likely to be a problem in poor or premature lambs), and so on.

Prenatal then flips into neonatal. Birth is just the start for the ewe; she needs to be in top condition to provide full colostrum at the moment of birthing. Lambs need the colostrum to start their immune system, and any delay in the boob tap (even an hour) can be fatal. At no other time is it so crystal clear that the lives of your sheep are in your hands, and that the decisions you make have huge consequences.

The application of the pour-on is timed so that I can shear in June and meet the

requirements of the Natural Fibre Company who spin my fleece. They need that interval, so that they can wash the fleece, and pass on the effluent to be spread on to fields as a light fertiliser without it being full of the insect-killing active element of the pour-on. I instinctively dislike insecticide, but ticks are a severe problem in spring here, and fleas and mites would drive my sheep to scratch off their fleece before shearing. I am convinced that its use is needed here - it's not a universal environmental application of insecticide, it is only on the sheep's back, and without it the sheep would suffer, and their fleece would be damaged or lost.

The clostridial vaccination is a veterinary miracle, saving the lives of tens of thousands of lambs every year. The protection serves the ewe for a year, but also protects the lambs through the immune system that any newborn mammal shares with its mother while dependent upon her milk. The lambs will get their own jabs come high summer. I absolutely maintain that vaccination is the only option consistent with good sheep care. If I buy fleece in, I only do so if it comes from animals vaccinated in this way. The jabs not cheap, but I pay the price willingly and happily to protect my girls and their lambies. ☺

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*Next Month: Graeme explores the amazing diversity of British native sheep breeds*