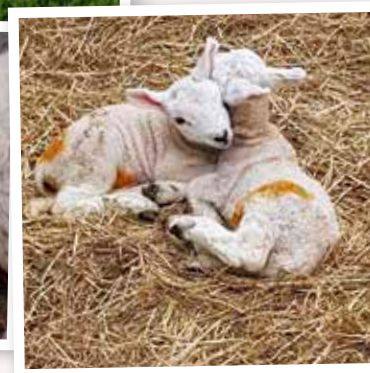




Graeme has welcomed more lambs than ever before to his farm in north-east Scotland



## New arrivals

### Graeme Bethune experiences the emotional and physical highs and lows of lambing time at Ballachly Farm



**LAMBING IS** the most intense, emotional work you can imagine - and I work it alone, just me and me sheepies. (I suppose my parents help a wee bit with meals, cups of tea, emotional support, and

running to get supplies - I have to say this or risk a ding around the ear...)

Every year has a different character, and this year the story has been cold weather and a shortage of grass for the ewes to eat. In the main, I think I have succeeded, but there are always failures; perhaps I feel them more deeply this year because there have been so few, so each one has been a vivid moment of failure.

This has been the most successful lambing ever here at Ballachly. The raw numbers are one way to tell this tale: 124 ewes scanned as pregnant, 62 with twins, 62 with a single, so a potential 186 lambs. I have two ewes with singles left to go and I currently have 175 lambs on the ground, so that is a fantastic success rate. My normal average mortality rate would mean about 25 dead lambs, but this year it's just nine. I am sure the low death rate is a reward for the relentless focus and spending on ewe health which is only possible because of the extra economic value the girls have as providers of great wool for yarn.

Cold weather has dominated this year's lambing. It was bitter with heavy snow the week before the first lambs, and this led to a serious drop in condition for a handful of ewes. I could see them losing weight, but there was not much I could do at this very late point in the pregnancy. If I fed more dry food the ewes would simply use that extra food to grow bigger lambs - then you have weak ewes and oversized lambs, which is disastrous. However, if I did nothing they would possibly get Twin Lamb disease, which is when they run out of reserves of stored energy and collapse.

So I have to walk a fine line. First feeding only a small amount extra before birth, hoping the girl's previous good condition would see her through, and then feeding large amounts after birth to provide support until the weather and grass improves. This seems to have worked: only five ewes needed help from me to deliver big lambs, and no ewes collapsed.

But enough dry figures and abstract management techniques - lambing is about the wee moments, too. A ewe I bought in last year, who all winter has been shy and unfriendly towards me, had her single gorgeous girl in the field. I went and picked up the lamb and 'walked' her into the barn. This is sometimes tricky with first-time mothers, because they don't know what's going on, but she followed with her nose

to the lamb, making that special noise of delight that a happy mother sheep makes. I laid her lamb in a pen of deep hay and squatted to attend the navel, and the ewe rubbed her head on mine and licked my head and hands and the lamb with ecstatic delight. I will treasure that memory.

The flip side of this is that on rare occasions mothers abandon their lambs. One first-timer was having her second when she rolled onto her back and got stuck! She panicked, and when I rolled her back over the second lamb popped out, and the ewe bolted, trying to disembowel me in the process with a kick to the belly. I still have a big bruise. I am feeding her lambs by bottle and they are brilliant.

One last story: the tale of 'Bonus Lamb'. Her mum scanned as having a single, and yet she had a second very tiny extra lamb - it was touch-and-go for the first few hours. She was unable to stand properly and had a poor suck. I put the ewe and both her lambs into the barn with my hoard of bottle lambs to keep feeding the wee one extra. After a few days she could suck her milk like a champion. After eight days she had doubled in weight and was trotting with the hoard. It's good to win one like this. Now I just have to keep everyone alive, happy and healthy through to summer. ☺

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*Next Month: Graeme has his hands full caring for all his new lambs*