

Sheep and Goat Newsletter – July 2011

From the Extension Learning Farm, Canton, NY

By Betsy Hodge

The sheep are sheared and vaccinated. We had about 30 more that still needed shearing and got them done in mid June. Since it is a challenge to get the sheep in the barn for handling we went ahead and vaccinated them while they were inside. Keeping in mind that we are grazing the sheep and beef in the same pasture, separating them could be tricky. However, the challenge is more one of timing it so that the flock can get to a barn at the right time. Since the group moves around the pasture rotation at a different rate depending on the pasture growth it is always a guess as to exactly where they will be when.

Fortunately, the actual separating turns out to be relatively easy. The objective was to get the sheep into the loafing barn without the cows. I waited until it was mid morning and quite warm – a time when the sheep might like to come into the barn anyways – and took a grain bucket out to the pasture. I learned quickly, not to shake the bucket too much or the giant cows will run you down. Instead I called the sheep and was very patient. Gradually they all worked their way over to the barn and went in. My trusty interns manned the gates and hustled the last few stragglers in the door. A few minutes later one more ewe and a couple lambs appeared at the door... apparently she missed the call but realized she was missing something important and came in willingly when we opened the gates for her.

We held the sheep off feed overnight for the shearer and the ewes nursing lambs looked very thin. They are nursing twins and triplets on pasture with no grain. The day after we let them out they were all filled out again so they look like working ewes but not exceedingly thin. I am very pleased with the growth in the lambs so far. I am anxious for them to get back on the sheep side of the farm so I can separate a few and weigh them. We will also have to separate the bigger ram lambs soon so they don't breed back the ewes. The batch that was born the last week of March will be four months old at the end of July.

The sheep look very happy in the pasture most of the time. The insects seem to be pestering the cows more than the sheep. I did see some kind of blackbirds riding along on the rumps of the sheep. The swallows also spend a lot of time zooming over their heads eating insects. The sheep are eating some of the weeds, like burdocks, that the cows don't care for and hopefully the cows are providing predator protection for the sheep. I know I would not walk around out in the pasture with those big black cows – especially the ones with new calves (see the Beef News). The guard dogs will be tested in the system when the mixed flock/herd get over on the sheep pastures.

I wanted to mention something I tried at my home flock. I bred the yearling ewes to lamb a month later than the older ewes to give them one more month to grow. From the ewe lambs' perspective this worked great. None of them had trouble lambing and most were successful at raising a single. One ewe lamb even had twins. The one problem I have encountered is that the lambs are a very small compared to the older batch of lambs. They are small to begin with because they are out of small ewe lambs and then the four to five week age difference is huge. The older lambs are tall and strong and the little guys get trampled and worst

of all they have had some sickness I have never had in the flock. I believe it is because they are exposed to and possibly born in a contaminated area. I had lambs with scours (not coccidia). Something I have never had before.

I also believe that these smaller lambs will be very susceptible to internal parasites. They are hitting the pasture after it has built up a load of parasites and they have not built up any resistance yet. That is the original reason I moved my main lambing back into April from May. Docking and castrating is a little trickier, too, because of the fly population and the potential for maggots. I have had a few calls about sheep with maggots around their back end in areas dirty from diarrhea. Any sheep or goat with a small injury should be checked for maggots. Any late lambing or kidding ewes or does that might have birthing fluids on them should be checked every day. Any work done with an elastrator such as tail docking or castrating needs to be checked as well.

Keep in mind that wet weather followed by hot weather can really encourage internal parasites in your sheep and goats. Get some fecal samples tested at the vet. Watch for signs like anemia, diarrhea, unthrifty appearance, bottle jaw (fluid under the jaw), or any sheep or goat that doesn't go along with the crowd. Really young, really old or animals that are working hard are the most susceptible. Don't wait to treat them, get help quickly. Talk to your vet or call if you need ideas.

Several people mentioned that they had cases of Grass Tetany, Grass Staggers or Magnesium Tetany this spring. Grass tetany can affect lactating ewes in the spring when ewes are allowed to graze rapidly growing or lush pasture. The disorder can occur any time there is an abrupt change to lush, rapidly growing forage, especially in a wet spring and heavy nitrogen fertilization. Grass tetany is characterized by too little magnesium in the blood, but a low blood calcium level also may be present. Low magnesium concentration in the feed is usually a factor in the development of grass tetany, but the disease can occur even if the feed is not deficient in magnesium.

Affected sheep become separated from the flock and show muscular tremors, nervous excitement, and a staggered or stiff gait. Finally, they go into convulsions. The animal may appear intoxicated. Death usually occurs within a few hours. Attacks can be brought about by the excitement associated with moving or working sheep. Lactating and older ewes are most often affected. If you see these signs, contact a vet immediately. Sometimes something as simple as Epsom Salts in solution can help save the ewe or nanny. Keeping minerals in front of your animals at all times is also an important preventive step.

Just a reminder that Ramadan starts August 1 and ends about August 31. Last year we cooperatively shipped in October after the end of Ramadan. The strategy worked out well because we hit a sale that was not overloaded with lambs. The Festival of the Sacrifice is November 6th, when larger animals are sought out.

Stockdog Club is up and running most Thursdays. Get on the email list if you want reminders and info related to the weather or last minute cancellations. Send me an email at bmf9@cornell.edu.

Evy Bernat has some llamas looking for homes. She is in Lewis County and would like to place her friendly llamas with other animal lovers. Contact her at 315-376-2221 or evybernat@yahoo.com.