

Family Relationships in Icelandic Sheep?

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When we were visiting with Jimmy Londagin and Harry Kelley of True North Farm early in our adventure with Icelandic Sheep, I remember Jimmy standing next to his field and telling us that he noticed some interesting things about his sheep. Family groupings, he said, would tend to eat together, rest together and just generally enjoy being with each other. He said that whenever he'd go out to be with the sheep, he'd notice little groups of sheep in various areas of the field. He noticed that these little groups were usually comprised of a mother, her daughters and their daughters. If a mother wasn't there, it was sisters and their daughters. His conclusion was that Icelandics really had a sense of "family" relationships. We agreed that this seemed interesting, but in the rush of day to day things, it got pushed to the back of our minds.

Then one day, we were out enjoying some time in the field with the sheep, and we noticed that two young adult ewes, Jonquil and another we can't name offhand, were facing each other off, backing up and coming together in increasingly forceful ways. They weren't really trying to hurt each other (yet), but they did seem to be having a bit of an argument, and it was escalating. As we stood watching, curious to see how this would play out, we saw Jonquil's mother Mouflee, STS267E, calmly walk over to the two, look at them both, and walk between them with a very pointed look at Jonquil's adversary. At this point, both young teenagers stood still, looked at Mouflee, and eventually moved apart. Mouflee calmly resumed dining on the grass. At a short distance, the two young ones re-engaged and took up their spat. We could almost hear Mouf sigh as she walked over to them, firmly planted her broad, substantial body between them, and this time give Jonquil's opponent a harder look, adding a quick side slap of her head, as if to say, "I **said** to knock it off!" The unfortunate youngster stepped back, thought a moment, and walked off. That was the end of that.

This woke us up and gave us the impetus to watch our girls a little more closely. As we did, we noticed that sure enough, most of our families did indeed congregate in intimate groups, and at night they liked to be somewhere near each other. This may be enhanced in our flock because the youngsters and oldies are always together, so they may maintain their maternal or sibling bonds more than in other flocks. We always wean our ram lambs, but we've come to the point that we let moms wean their own ewe lambs if the ewe lambs are staying here. It's worked out quite well. They are often separated into different breeding groups, but they go back together after that, so they lamb together and moms seem to watch over their daughters when it's time to give birth. It's almost like they're being birth coaches.

Wondering if others had noticed these relationships, we asked a few other breeders for their input for this article. Peggy Nelson had this to say. "I have noticed a family bond between sisters. I will frequently see them along side of one another whether they are standing munching hay at the feeder, resting chewing their cud in the shade, jumping and kicking up their heels as they play, or looking on with a curious or concerned expression just outside the catch pen as if they are watching over their sister while I trim her feet."

In the same vein, Jan Jenkins had this experience: "I have two solid moorit ewes, Dancer and Eos, who we bought from Jager Farms 10 years ago. They are mother and daughter and are always together. Last year they were in different winter groups, but in fields right next to each other. They spent most of their time wandering the fenceline, as near as they could be to each other. Then Dancer developed a bad infection in her foot which resulted in the vet amputating one toe on that foot. She was confined to the barn for a long time while we tried to keep the bandaged foot clean and dry. Eos still hugged the fenceline, on the opposite side of the field from where her group usually stayed. Then she started to lose weight and look droopy. We wormed her and used Probios, but she continued to eat less and less. Finally, really worried about her, we put her in the barn, in the

"hospital" stall which also happened to contain Dancer. Eos immediately started eating again & acting normally. Our conclusion was that she just missed Dancer."

And Barbara Webb related the following:

"I often find that Mothers and Daughters will stay together long after weaning if they are given the opportunity to do so. Yearling mothers in particular have a hard time letting go of their lambs, and I have found them jumping over fences or even walking through the live electric fence to reclaim their weaned lambs.

But one old girl that we called Old Auntie, has an interesting story. In her last year with us, Auntie came up barren and did not lamb. As an Old Ewe, she had spent the winter with the ewe lambs to benefit from their better feed, and had spent the winter bedding down with her daughter from the previous year. I expected that they would part ways as these pairs always do, when their own lambs came and their attention was pulled away.

But old age had crept up on Auntie and she did not breed that year. When her daughter lambed, Old Auntie was still lambless, and was still closely bonded to her. She helped clean off her daughter's lamb and get him started, although she was making no attempt to steal the lamb in the way some ewes will. She kept her daughter close company, and I would find the three of them bedded down together when I came out in the evenings or early morning to check for lambs.

When I found Old Auntie dead one early morning a few weeks after the daughter had lambed, her daughter and grandson were still peacefully curled up against her large, and still warm body. I lured the yearling mother away with some grain, and only then was able to move Auntie's body out of the barn for burial. The yearling mother continued on to be a great mother to her lamb that summer.

Another, rather spooky family story is the story of twins that had to be separated for fostering when their mother died shortly after lambing. The ewe suffered a perforated uterus during lambing, although both lambs were successfully pulled and were born live. The ewe was incredibly brave and mothered her twins, even though she had suffered a terrible injury and was probably in shock. She washed them as best she could and pushed them up to the udder for that all important first meal. When the vet came a few hours later, he diagnosed the damaged uterus and we decided to euthanize the ewe. At this point the lambs were not even 12 hours old.

We were able to foster the lambs on to separate mothers, and they spent the summer apart, as foster twins to other lambs. They both grew well and were indistinguishable from their foster siblings.

That year, we needed to wean a bit earlier than usual due to family travel plans, so the lambs and mothers were more upset than in previous years. The first night was noisy with the cries of lambs and mothers calling to each other across the pasture that separated them for weaning.

When I came out early the next morning to check on my weanling lambs, I found them all quietly bedded down with their littermates for company and warmth. My two orphan lambs who had been separated at the death of their mother and spent the summer apart, had somehow found each other, recognized each other and were bedded down close together for comfort. How did they know? They were together for not even 12 hours at birth, had been raised in different families, and still found each that first lonely night, to bed down together for company."

I'll bet this only scratches the surface of the wealth of stories that we Icelandic shepherds could share about family groups in our flocks! (In fact, Bonnie has agreed to have a regular Family Groups column in the newsletter, starting with the next issue. If you'd send me a few of *your* stories, we'll begin to run them one at a time in the next issue—this should be fun! Frances at icelandicsheep@earthlink.net)