



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Volume 7 No.4 Fall 2003
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Pasture Lambing in Extreme Weather - An Early April Journal

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Because I am a farmer I look at the dirt and the sky. All the time. Lambing was almost upon us - and it was nice below and nice above. It was cold, but a manageable cold, what I would call brisk, about 25 to 40 degrees. But no rain or snow, and best of all, not too windy.

I have been weaving this week. My last winter project. I have a goal to have it finished before the first lambs are born. Something to mark the end of one year and the beginning of the next, and to keep my mind and hands busy while I wait.

I'm not calm right before lambing starts. I have friends who tell me they are. Okay, more power to them. For me it feels - well - like two things at once: trying to go to sleep on Christmas Eve when you're six years old and also sitting in your boss's office with him staring at you, and you know you're going to be fired, but it just hasn't started happening quite yet. I wouldn't call it serene. Or the weather.

Lambs should start dropping about - hmmm, yeah that would be Saturday. "Don't listen to the weather report because what are you going to do about it?" So I turn it on immediately and the man says: ICE - SLEET - SNOW - COLDER and WINDY!

So what? They're always wrong? I mean, if they tell you you're going to have nice dry weather for shearing day, they're always wrong, it is bound to rain. So shouldn't they be wrong when they talk about bad weather for lambing?

Okay, you remember all those people telling you, when you first thought about Icelandic sheep, that they're good pasture lambers - you know, no jugs and cozy barns for these tough gals? I took that seriously, and our system is entirely pasture lambing. There is no barn or shelter for me to run the ewes into. There is a small stand of pines and cedars in the lambing field, and a heavy tree line to the east and to the west to act as a windbreak.

Yep, we took those folks seriously who said you didn't need a barn.

Friday Afternoon, 28 degrees

I've just finished my last winter project. It is off of the loom, washed and blocked. I am ready for the lambs. Well, at least symbolically.

In the afternoon we have our first lambs. Nice! A set of 7-pound Horvi triplets. The lambs do well. (Here, farmer sighs.)

It's like a fever breaking when the lambs start coming, like a great pressure inside my head suddenly

disappearing. I get crazy beforehand. I make everyone around me crazy. Then the first lambs come. Then I'm okay. I can begin the years work. I slept good that night.

Saturday 5 am, 19 degrees

Oh, what a beautiful morning! See, the inch thick ice on absolutely everything! Ordinarily I would revel in the beauty of this late winter spectacle. Instead, I've got butterflies in my stomach and a sense of doom. The ice is still coming down pretty heavily. Tree branches are breaking, making sounds like bombs going off. I try to stay calm - make my coffee and eat a bowl of oatmeal.

I go out to the field and at 6 am discover Gherka (TNY-42K) just finishing up an easy delivery of a handsome Bessi daughter. The lamb is on her feet in about 5 minutes, steam rising from her little body as ice falls on her.

The rush begins. Three other ewes are in active labor with delivery imminent. I can see several more in an early stage of labor.

An hour later 7 more lambs are on the ground. The mothers ARE NOT UP UNDER THE TREES WITH THE OTHER EWES! They are in the middle of the field opting for privacy rather than shelter. I haven't mentioned that this field is on a hill, and that the hill is covered in ice so that the ewes are slipping and sliding all over the place.

I fight off a sense of helplessness and decide to drop a big round bale in the field and unroll it. At least the lambs might be able to find a dry spot to snuggle down into.

The ice stops. I am thankful. Then the wind picks up.

My farm family comes out to string up some tarps under the trees to try and create some dry spots, and the more frenzied they seem to be the more I display my calm Buddha-nature and Mother Earth Peace Centered Heart Love Being to them. They are not fooled.

I put up some snow fencing from tree to tree to try and make a bit of a wind break. I tag and weigh the lambs and record their births. Some of the lambs are covered in little icicles. I decide to check temps. None are chilled - yet. I go in to thaw out and have lunch.

I go out again in the evening. Several ewes are in active labor. I wander about and check the lambs that were already born. All seem well despite the cold and the wind. About an hour after dark another set of twins are born followed quickly by 6 more lambs. It has gotten quite windy and the temperature has dropped. By 10 pm I have them all tagged and am pretty sure that they are all nursing and that they are relatively dry. I call it a night. 19 lambs, no losses, I am slightly encouraged.

Sunday 6 am, 28 degrees

I go out the next morning at 6 am. Sleet is coming down pretty heavily. The ground is covered with about an inch and a half of wet ice crystals. I find no new lambs, but several ewes are in labor. The hay I had rolled out the day before is soaking wet with icy slush and several lambs are curled up in it. After warning Harry that I will be bringing in chilled lambs I go out with my thermometer to save them. I don't find any chilled lambs! So, off I go to do my chores and run some errands. By lunchtime I have six lively lambs tagged and I go in for the afternoon taking with me a tiny bit of loudly squawking lamb. One of the ewes had delivered triplets, two 8 pounders and one 3 pounder. The 3 lb lamb became our first and only bottle baby of the season. She became known as Lil' Bit, and she is now (in early September) 65 lbs of sassy trouble. In the evening I find four new lambs and four ewes in labor. One ewe is in pain, she comes up to me whimpering and she is trembling. She has a lamb whose back is wedged up against the birth canal preventing any progress. I straighten things out pulling both vigorous lambs; the ewe is exhausted. The only good thing about having to do that assist was that my hand had a chance to thaw out. After dinner and dry clothes I find another 6 lambs have been born. Everyone seemed pretty settled in for the night so I do too.

Monday 3 am, 18 degrees



I wake up about 3am to feed Lil' Bit and can't go back to sleep. So I wander out to check on the ewes. Miss Pickles (STS-619F) has a fresh lamb jumping around and is working on the second, the third follows quickly. She doesn't want me around so I take off and check on the rest of the ewes. It is pitch black and a very windy 18 degrees. On the other side of the field I find a ewe with a fresh lamb nursing and a dead one beside her. Our first loss. I warned these gals about delivering before dawn. Another ewe is in labor. I go in for an early breakfast. By noon there are 7 new lambs to tag.

I go out again around 9 pm. The wind has shifted, it is coming from the north. The ewes are in a wind tunnel. It is bearing down at 40 or 50 mph. I am trying not to freak out. It is painful to be out in this icy wind even though I am aptly bundled up. Most of the ewes are sheltering amongst the trees. One ewe is out in the middle of the field by herself straining. She quickly delivers a tiny lamb, but he can't stand up in the wind. I try to dry him off as the ewe goes down for number 2 and then 3. She is pretty quick about it, she has all three lambs on the ground in about half an hour. This is an elderly ewe who has always had big twins. These are small triplets. By the time the last is born the first was severely chilled, so I put him under my sweater, right next to my skin. Then I moved mom and the other two up to a semi-sheltered nook under the trees. I then go in the house and wake up Gretchen to help me warm these lambs. One by one we slowly warm and feed these lambs and return them to their mom and the windy hell where I had found them. In the mean time three other ewes have delivered. I send my friend Dorothy out with a thermometer to find the frozen lambs. She reports after two hours of this that the only one frozen was her.

Sometime in the middle of the night, the wind dies down and the temperature goes up a bit and snow starts to fall.

Tuesday, 6 am, 24 degrees

I go out the next morning around 6 am. There is 4 inches of snow on the ground and it is still coming down. Bobbie has just delivered beautiful Prestur twins. Another ewe is in labor. Some of the lambs have found a warm dry bed on top of their moms; others are nestled under their chins and hot breath. But where are the rest of them? Then I see - and all over the place are little humps in the snow. Now we would find chilled lambs. I hope none are dead. I have a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. I get out my thermometer and start to check. I reach down to pick up the stiff and frozen body from the snow and as my hand reaches around it's belly it jumps and darts away. I jump back as startled as the lamb as if I had just inadvertently grabbed hold of a rattlesnake. I laugh at my reaction, seeing the dead come to life. I can't find any chilled lambs, mostly I can't even catch them.

By Tuesday evening we have 60 live lambs. We have lost only two. I go back to my loom and start a new project. I've got about 5 days until the next rush of lambs begin. Weaving and waiting.

So how have these lambs done in the long run? Of the 60 live lambs we have lost only ONE this summer! We have had plenty of other lamb losses this summer, but not from those early born snow lambs. In the future, I

definitely won't be daunted by a little late winter weather.