

Get to root of problem

WITH the critical period of preparation of ewes and rams for the mating season past, we must now watch and see if all happens as planned.

The aim for the past couple of months is to reach scanning with the correct number of foetuses in the ewes for the farm and system. This obviously varies – a hard, high hill flock may only want to scan at 110 per cent, whereas an intensive lowland March-lambing flock of Mules may want a scan of 210 per cent.

It's important to keep a check on progress and the first indicator is the raddle marks on the ewes.

Ideally the ewes should have been tupped quickly with all ewes covered in the first 17-day cycle. Only eight per cent of ewes want to have returned and been covered in the next 17 days, with only two per cent barren at this point. This can all be assessed if the rams have been well raddled and the crayons or keel changed at appropriate points.

Raddle marks are used to ease management at lambing, often to batch ewes into when they are due to lamb with colours changing every week, and it's fairly common practice not to raddle for the first week or even ten days. This does not allow for early indication of trouble.

You can't tell if all ewes are covered in the first cycle and you can't tell if a group is returning at a high rate in the second cycle. The colours should be applied from the start and a change should occur on day 18. It's still possible to split into batches, but change every six days, not every seven.

Poor mating results can be split into three categories:

CONCEPTION FAILURES

Another successful breeding cycle is well under way – or is it? **Andrew Sawyer**, of Alnthumbria Vets, examines the problems

ewes not cycling, fertilization failure and failure to conceive or maintain early pregnancy.

One reason for ewes not cycling, which we see most years, is that they are already in lamb to a chaser lamb or the neighbour's tup. Breed can have an effect – don't expect Blackies to be cycling in August, but Suffolks or Dorsets should be no problem. Ewe lambs and gimmers are normally slow to start. Using a teaser in these groups may help if it is a problem.

Prolonged stress caused by very poor weather may delay activity, and if the ewes are in very poor condition, they will not come to the tup as readily. High levels of red clover in the pasture may contain oestrogens that prevent ewes cycling normally.

Fertilisation failure occurs if you have used unsound rams. Are they infertile? Can they walk properly? Can they mate the ewes?

Hopefully, you and your vet have checked this all before use but they can, and often do, go wrong during the breeding season. Inappropriate ewe-to-ram ratios can also lead to ewes not being covered.

A fit but not fat and completely sound ram will serve a lot of ewes, but an overfed ram fresh from the sales and unable to walk far will manage a lot less.

Too extensive an area for mating may lead to ewes being missed, but they are pretty good at searching out a ram if in heat.

Failure to conceive or maintain pregnancy is the

area of most concern from now until scanning. The causes are many and varied and all are worth investigating. So if the ewes look to have been covered well from

the keel marks but don't live up to expectations on scanning, call the vet in to investigate before the empty ewes are sent to the mart. Those ewes may give us important information into why you have a problem.

Severe under-nutrition, due to heavy snow or shortage of grass or other feed, is one reason for ewes to reabsorb foetuses. Low protein status due to a high parasite

challenge, particularly with fluke, John's Disease or a poor diet, also leads to reabsorbing foetuses.

Persistent stress – poor weather or excessive handling of sheep – is an issue. Mineral deficiencies of selenium and iodine can lead to low scan rates.

The infections most likely to be involved are Toxoplasmosis and Border Disease.

It's very important to have the barren ewes to sample to check for many of the above.

So remember, if more than two per cent of your ewes are empty at scanning or your scanning percentage is lower than expected, get in touch with your vet to discuss the problem before you cash in the barren ewes.

More information at alnthumbriavets.co.uk.

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