

Tips for Lambing Season

Lambing season in the Central West is well under way, as the small woolly bundles on the hillsides attest. While most ewes deliver their lambs without assistance, complications can arise which threaten the lives of both ewes and lambs. The key to successfully managing these problems lies in early recognition and appropriate intervention.

In order to identify ewes which are experiencing difficulties, it helps to be aware of the sequence of events typically observed during a routine lambing. The early signs of labour can be subtle. Ewes in the initial stages of lambing may choose to separate themselves from the rest of the flock, lose interest in eating and show signs of restlessness, such as frequent lying down and standing up. They may also begin to strain, though without the force exhibited closer to delivery. This stage lasts between two to six hours on average, but can last up to fourteen hours.

As labour progresses, the strength of the contractions increases and the ewe can readily be observed straining. This leads to expulsion of the ewe's chorioallantois or "water bag" – the fluid-filled membrane which cushions the lamb inside the uterus. The water bag can either be passed intact or rupture inside the ewe, in which case you may only notice fluid being expelled. From the point at which the water bag is passed, delivery of the lamb should follow within the next thirty minutes or so. Once the lamb is delivered, the placenta should be passed within five to eight hours.

Determining which ewes require assistance can be difficult, particularly for those new to sheep husbandry. There are, however, some general guidelines which help to identify when a lambing is not progressing as it ought to. During a normal delivery, the lamb should be upright and positioned so that the forelimbs exit the vulva first, closely followed by the head. Variations to this position can make it difficult or impossible for the ewe to deliver the lamb without intervention.

The most common malpresentation occurs when the lamb's head has passed through the vulva but one or both forelimbs are turned back and cannot enter the birth canal. In this situation, the forelimbs need to be manoeuvred into the correct position before the lamb can be delivered. Various other malpresentations can also occur, particularly if the ewe is carrying twins or triplets, and may not be so easy to diagnose. If the ewe has passed her water bag and the lambing has not progressed at all within 30 minutes, this is a good indication that the lamb may be malpositioned or that the ewe is suffering from another complication preventing delivery.

The degree to which you should attempt to correct any problems associated with a lambing yourself depends largely upon your level of experience. If you do choose to intervene, it is important to pay particular attention to hygiene, lubrication and gentleness. Inadequate hygiene during a lambing predisposes the ewe to uterine infection, which is a potentially fatal condition. Inadequate lubrication and rough, forceful manipulation may harm the lamb and cause damage to the ewe's birth canal, leading to infertility or death. As such, if you haven't made any progress within five to ten minutes, or have any doubts about your ability to correct the problem, it is best to seek veterinary assistance.