

Hosting Farm Visits during Lambing

By Anna Cairns

Open Farm Days is a very worthwhile provincial endeavour to offer the public-at-large a glimpse into how livestock and crops are raised so they can be confident in the food they purchase and consume. The late August weekend that is widely promoted, however, is not the best time of year from my perspective. I think more people could find or make time during lambing to provide a pleasurable learning experience regarding animal husbandry. As tired as I may be then anyway, it increases my happiness quotient to watch the pleasure on the faces of visitors to our small acreage as they hold or merely touch small lambs, realize that they 'say' maa rather than baa, play 'tug-or war' with ewes hungry for offered small branches with tasty buds, watch sheep in general, and learn more about them. In my view, producers need to create positive experiences with their animals for visitors, whether or not there is an existing or potential buyer/consumer relationship with those people.

I do not advertise but some who come have heard from friends about the opportunity I provide people to interact with sheep when the lambs are at the cuddly stage. I keep a contact list from year to year of people we know who might be interested, especially those with children who like animals and have no farm connection, at least not in this area. It takes a huge lot of time to contact potential visitors and schedule visits; probably half of the households I do reach by telephone or e-mail do not make it here any given spring, but I have had more than 100 visitors come (from as far away as Edmonton and Raymond; granted, those long distance drivers once lived in this area. [I live in Zone 7 near the north end of the M.D. of Willow Creek.]) The window of opportunity for hosting lambing-time visits begins no earlier than 24 hours after the birth of the oldest lambs and ends when the youngest are several weeks old and no longer very catchable or content to be held and not struggle. I do establish a date and arrival time for each visit, usually allowing 1 1/2 hours between groups, though some stay as little as a half hour and others have stayed close to two hours. I generally limit the number present at any one time to 4 children and 4 adults, depending on the size of a family (or two small families who really want to come together) so that everyone can have a quality experience. In 2017 the age range was 5 months to 85 years and both those individuals were first time visitors.

Some adults ask me to keep them on my notification list long after the children or grandchildren they started bringing become teenagers and then adults too. The children in one family who live some distance away said they wanted to have some lambs (which is not an unusual statement from children who visit here); I was surprised to find, upon contacting them the following year, that they actually had acquired sheep themselves, first just a 4-H lamb and a spare for the older two children and subsequently a small family flock.

When making arrangements/ scheduling visits, I do keep biosecurity in mind, particularly in regards to footwear contamination and dogs. Though few come from farms, I do ask that

footwear be clean upon arrival and offer overboots into which they can step here if they do not come with suitable footwear as well as providing means of removing any lumps from their own footwear prior to their leaving. If people want to bring a dog (or let out of their vehicle a dog they have brought), I explain that I do not permit that due to possible spread of disease to the sheep, the likelihood of a strange dog making the sheep nervous even if the dog does not chase them, and the possibility of negative interactions with our blue heeler X dog.

Safety is also a concern so there generally is a barrier between children and adult sheep they may be petting or feeding. Visitors are warned about signs of an upset ewe, the possible dangers of a ram despite how friendly he may seem, and the unlikelihood of being bitten. A few people who have really liked their experience here have suggested I should charge visitors, but, aside from tax implications, I feel that would constrain some from coming, give me less control over who comes and when, and likely necessitate added liability insurance and release or other forms to be signed by visitors, i.e., a lot more hassle than I care to have.

Some visitors want to hold a lamb right away, but I request a period of quiet observation in the barn first. Rather than my explaining things directly, I frequently encourage visitors to pay attention and figure out some things themselves by asking them questions such as 'What is the sheep/ lamb saying?' Often with a lamb not in a claiming pen with its mother, the response is 'I want my mommy', which gives me the opportunity to explain the purpose of a claiming pen: how lambs get to recognize their mothers and ewes to recognize their own offspring by smell and sound as well as by visual appearance. (I may also give the example of a ewe that only bonded with one of her triplets, born loose in the barn through the night, with us not having seen any need of a further check there after 11:30 p.m.) To emphasize the importance of listening, I get visitors to imitate the sound heard, and, more often than not, am given the nursery rhyme answer (b-a-a) rather than the predominant actual lamb vocalization (m-a-a).

Lambs are several days old before I allow anyone to hold them and I demonstrate first, getting children to sit so they can better hold a lamb with its legs folded under it so the lamb is more likely to feel comfortable being held. I ask visitors to tell me what the different body parts are and whether the lamb being held is male or female (before any elastics have been applied. I do not discuss castration or docking unless asked, which doesn't often happen). If people do not recognize body parts on the underside of a lamb right away, I have them think about the position of nipples, belly button, and penis on people and dogs relative to sheep. I point out that the comparatively long legs of newborn lambs enable them to stand shortly after birth and potentially able to run to escape a predator when just a few days old. (With older children and adults I may, instead, ask what they notice about the legs and get them to think why they might be long and sturdy compared to those of a human baby.) I sometimes get older visitors to press on the bottom of a lamb's hoof and to think what would happen if it were fully hardened when still inside the mother.

An unopened bale is a good place for visitors to sit and have a picture taken with a lamb. With very young children, that can usually be arranged with a seated parent holding the child with one arm and a lamb with the other. If the parent wants a photo of just the child and a

lamb, that can sometimes be accomplished by putting a large tub of clean straw in an empty claiming pen (or elsewhere out of the range of other sheep), setting the child in it and then setting a lamb there too. One twin for whom that was tried nibbled on a piece of straw and tried the lamb's ear too, but his twin could not handle the feeling of straw underneath him and cried, so no further attempt of getting a picture of him was made that year. If a number of pictures are wanted and different poses, I get the family a different lamb one or more times so any given lamb is not away from its mother very long. I do not disturb a lamb that is nursing or sleeping and usually pick a twin or triplet lamb so the mother still has one or more lambs with her. The people generally take their own pictures on their own devices with me merely helping them arrange what to include as well as suggesting other picture possibilities that do not involve holding a lamb.

When I or a visitor is holding a lamb, I get the visitors to feel the ears, legs, and body and describe what they feel, then I explain hair vs. wool and that the wool will all turn white in several months' time, whereas the hair will remain black, white, or patchy as they see it. (Our lambs are Hampshire X.) Older children and adults may notice the ewes have been shorn, though they may not know that word, so I explain why that is generally done prior to lambing and how wool serves both as insulation and as a raincoat. Lanolin transfers to the hands of anyone who has handled or petted sheep very much. Another interesting anatomical fact I may have visitors consider is why sheep have two teats and frequently twins whereas cattle have four, but generally just one calf. Adults usually know the words calf, bull, and cow, and some know ram as well as lamb but do not know the word ewe: I ask first to see who knows or remembers from a previous year's visit before explaining those words: that is a way to engage children who have visited previously and feel they know everything. I use the same strategy for hay vs straw and what adult sheep eat or drink vs what lambs consume. If the people and sheep are quiet enough and a lamb is nursing, they can hear the sound that makes. How rich the milk is and thus how quickly lambs grow surprises most people. That topic also arises from noticing the big wrinkles on skin on the bodies of some very young lambs and my making the analogy of a parent buying clothing for a child sometimes in a bigger size, resulting in its being loose, with extra folds of cloth at the wrists and ankles, until the child grows into the garment.

When things are relatively quiet, I may also ask children if they are ever told to chew their food properly and use that as an introduction to a discussion of cud chewing (and get them to watch a cud being swallowed & another coming into a sheep's mouth), of sheep having four stomachs, and of how that enables them to eat a lot in a hurry and resume chewing later. Folks find this fascinating. With the sheep relaxed and visitors all quiet, they may be intrigued to notice a lamb standing on a ewe that is lying down or a lamb running as if on pogo sticks, both of which are good photo opportunities for visitors who are quick with pressing a shutter button. Someone too may notice and comment on a young lamb nibbling straw, hay, twine, their boots, or a pant leg, which is my opportunity to explain that is part of how a young lamb explores its world and learns what is edible, just like human toddlers put a variety of things in their mouths, so one must be careful there is nothing where they are that might result in choking or other trouble.

Some visitors are concerned about getting hurt by sheep. I mention their lack of upper front teeth, as is the case with cattle (with which few of my visitors are very familiar either) in contrast to horses, dogs, and other animals that may intentionally bite a person/ use biting as a defense mechanism. When running away is not possible, as in the barn, a sheep wanting a person to back off will stomp her feet and sometimes head butt. Most of our ewes get to recognize that visitors mean they'll get offered grain or peas from outstretched hands on the other side of the claiming pen (or other barricade) and anticipate that 'treat' when they hear unfamiliar voices outside the barn - hence the ewe in the picture with her feet up on the barricade and the other ewe nuzzling grain from the child's hand while looking at his mother's camera. The big, natural grin results from the nice tickly feeling that gives him (and not slobber as some anticipate). If we have branches with buds from a recently cut deciduous tree or that the wind has broken, those can also be used for visitors to feed the sheep as a treat with the sheep nipping off the buds & twigs while the people hold the butt end to provide tension, being careful not to let any sheep's mouth get too close to anyone's hand. Lots of visitors do not wish to hand feed sheep, which is fine, but practically everyone very much enjoys this activity and comes to appreciate the strength with which sheep can pull against them. (I only recall one child losing this 'game' of tug-of-war and he did not let any sheep pull a second small branch from his hands.) Once all the buds and finer twigs on any given branch have been eaten, I supply the person with another branch and take away the stub, from which the ewes may later strip the bark, which provides considerable nutritive value too.

I often get asked "Where's the dad sheep?" - He is usually outside with the ewes that are still pregnant; I promise to show him to visitors once they are outside the barn before they leave and point out his scrotum as being close to the size of a ewe's udder but with no nipples on it. That information gets processed seriously with rarely ever a giggle amongst my visitors though they might giggle if I also say that some folks do confuse the sexes due to the similarity in size of those organs. (They have already seen where the nipples are on a male lamb.)

Another common question relates to ear tags which I explain as a government requirement for traceability but also enabling us to keep track for sure of which lamb belongs to which ewe once they are commingling after the claiming pen time and, no, it doesn't hurt any more than getting one's ears pierced.

Visitors, often dependent on age, may also be interested in learning about browsing, salt & minerals, vaccinations, use of dogs, rams, gestation period, marketing, . . . For older children, especially in years when I have no branches to offer, I may point out various devices such as hand shears, hoof trimmers, the weigh scale, and a crook, asking what they think is the purpose of each; demonstrating the latter two items with willing visitors often elicits laughter.

Before people leave, I ask them if they have any further questions and if they'd like to be contacted again the following spring when there are more new lambs. If parents who have come any distance do not have hand wipes or antiseptic handwash (which is seldom the case) and/or children need the bathroom before they leave, I let them use our facilities. I offer children a tuft of wool to take home and possibly use in a show and tell situation.

Many people raising sheep, especially those with large flocks, will doubtless not have the time or inclination to invite visitors at lambing time, but I think there are probably others with small flocks who could do what I do to enhance lambing time for themselves and bring happiness (& knowledge) to others. Though not everything I do will necessarily work for everyone who may be interested in hosting visitors, this should give producers a good idea of what might be feasible on their operations and how to make visits a worthwhile experience.