

Kid's Korner

Lambing Season and Slumber Parties

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SUNBURY, Pa. — The flyer from Owens Farm in Sunbury, Pa., said, "Never a dull moment at Owens Farm!" Really? Never? How exciting can a slumber party on a farm be? Read on.

The lambing-time slumber party began on a Friday night at 4 p.m. with a welcome from farm owners Caroline and Dave Owens, a meet-and-greet with 85 or so sheep, and some evening chores for all of the animals — pigs, chickens, horses and even the two dogs.

The timing of the evening was just right because one of the ewes delivered a baby lamb 15 minutes before the guests arrived, so there was lots of excitement from the kids and adults alike. It looked like the ewe was about to deliver a second lamb, so the group continued to keep a close eye on her throughout the night. Though Caroline emphasized that too much attention makes the ewes nervous, they are fully capable of "holding their own."

"Like birds, lambs imprint on their moms," she said. "That's why you shouldn't pull them away from the mom right away, when they are born. They need time to bond."

The Owens' three farm slumber parties, hosted during the height of lambing season, draw all types of people, not just kids. But this group of 15 people included 8 kids and their parents, and two Japanese foreign exchange students from Susquehanna University along with a chaperone.

After holding the soft lambs and oohing and aahing over the cuteness of the baby lambs, the group assembled in the barn on hay bales for a short "class" and equipment-guessing game with Caroline. The group learned how lambs are born (they take a flying leap or dive out of the womb, according to Caroline), and what to do if there are issues like breaching, if the babies won't feed, or if the mother rejects a lamb (which

doesn't happen often, thankfully).

Caroline also described the protocol for newborn lambs — iodine dipping on the umbilical cord area for sterilization, weighing, ear tagging, vaccinations, record-keeping, and then the lamb is given back to the mother for feeding and bonding.

The most important thing is that the new lamb feeds by drinking milk from the ewe, so that they gain weight and stay healthy. Each lamb's weight is tracked carefully over the months, continuing on when the lambs graze on grass in the summer, with the ideal goal of gaining 100 pounds by autumn. Two charts are kept on the wall that shows the farm's "prize ewes."

Caroline definitely knows the ins-and-outs of lambing time. After all, this lambing season she will assist in or keep a watchful eye over some 80 births, since 50 of the ewes are expecting, and they often deliver multiple lambs.

After a dinner of spaghetti and bread, the group set up their sleeping bags and relaxed for a few hours with games and conversation. Then, at midnight, the group did a midnight check of the pregnant ewes. At 6 a.m. the next morning, the group made another check of the sheep, while still in pajamas, and then enjoyed a breakfast of pancakes followed by morning animal chores.

When asked where she came up with the slumber party idea, Caroline said, "The (ideas) just come to me. But I only keep doing the ones that work for us."

She continued, "I do these (kinds of events) because they're really fun. It's a thrill to see the kids' eyes light up, because it's all new to them. Me? I've been doing this for 20 years."

For the Owens', it's also about passing on what works, and what doesn't.

"I was a teacher, so I love to impart knowledge to the next generation. It adds more meaning to farming," Caroline said, smiling.



Photos by Lisa Z. Leighton

The slumber party group learns about the process of caring for baby lambs from farm owner Caroline Owens.



A sling helps in weighing the new lamb. The average weight of new lambs is between 8-12 pounds.



A fuzzy lamb born a few days prior to the lambing slumber party curls up in a small pen while its mother watches over it.



One of the young participants carries a new lamb to the weighing area.



Above right: Caroline Owens illustrates how a lamb is birthed — the ideal position is a flying leap.



Right: Caroline shows the group a newborn lamb's umbilical cord dipped in iodine for sterilization and points out how to identify a male or female lamb.

Never a Dull Moment!

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For me, a newcomer to sheep farming, the most exciting things that happened at the Owens' barn slumber party were not on the schedule.

While dinner was being prepared by farm owner Dave Owen, his wife Caroline said, "Lisa, let's go check on that ewe and see if she delivered her second one yet." (Remember that ewe that delivered a lamb 15 minutes before the guests arrived?)

"Sure," I said. "Sounds like fun."

So we put our muck boots on, and headed out.

As we left the house, we heard an awful lot of baaing from the flock of sheep outside the barn. Caroline looked a little worried.

As we approached the barn, a baby lamb came across the road. "No wonder they're making a commotion. A baby got out," she said.

We quickly herded the baby lamb into the pasture.

"That was easy," I thought.

A moment later, we looked to our left at the pasture up on the hill, and wouldn't you know it? Half of the flock had escaped through the fence, too. Obviously, someone had left one of the three gates open.

"Oh boy," I thought, worried.

Caroline quickly said, "Lisa, can you work the gate if I send the dog after the sheep?"

"Um, sure!" I said (as if I had experience herding sheep into a pasture).

I quickly moved the gate, pushed as hard as I could to get it open through the mud and hay on the ground, and waited for Caroline's signal. After all, if you open the gate too soon, the rest of the flock might escape. (Sheep are faster than you might think!)

A short time later, a flock of 30-some sheep came running down the hill, the sheepdog on their tracks, in a nearly perfect line.

"Amazing!" I thought.

I made some kissy noises to get the sheep to come towards the gate, and in they went — 10, then 20, then 30. I closed and latched the gate, and we were done. What an accomplishment! Maybe the "Never a dull moment" phrase on their flyer really is accurate.

After that adventure, Caroline gave me a big smile and I'm pretty sure I heard a sigh of relief, and we hurried into the barn.

After checking the ewe, Caroline seemed worried that she hadn't delivered yet, so she proceeded to get some elbow-high examination gloves and make sure that all was well in the ewe's birth canal. Again, Caroline said, "Lisa, can you hold her with this harness while I examine her?"

"Well, sure!" I said (again, this was a first).

Caroline proceeded to check the birth canal for a lamb. There wasn't one. Realizing that maybe the ewe would only deliver one, Caroline felt a little more at ease.

As we walked back into the house to share our tale, and sit down to our meal, I realized that there was never a dull moment at the Owens' farm.