



Sheep handling

from Annette Holmenlund,

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Handling, hoof care, shearing and gathering.

The welfare of the individual sheep can be divided into specific areas and these apply whether you have a large or a small flock. This chapter describes the skills that you must learn to be a shepherd. This requires training and help from an experienced shepherd in order to learn how to exploit the sheep's natural behaviour.

A skilled shepherd can:

- Gather sheep
- Catch sheep
- Restrain and control a sheep while it is standing
- Turn a sheep over
- Restrain a sheep while it is sitting
- Shear with hand shears
- Examine teeth
- Pare feet
- Check health
- Slaughter sheep

Catching sheep

A shepherd's crook is an excellent tool for catching sheep. Every sheep farmer owns his own crook. There are several models; those with a large hook at one end used to catch the sheep around its neck and those with a smaller hook used to catch the sheep by the hind leg.



Berit Kiilerich catching a sheep by the back leg. She has made her shepherd's crook from a hazel branch with the hook mounted on one end.



This ready- made shepherds crook can be used to catch the sheep by the neck or the hind leg. It is not a durable, professional model, but can be used.



*The sheep is restrained by being held under the jaw and if the head is lifted up, it will stand still.
Photo: Matias Albæk Falk*

Controlling

When the sheep has been caught it needs to be restrained in order to be examined. The best way to do this is to turn it over and sit it on its hindquarters, thereby controlling the sheep without using undue force and causing it stress. It requires skilled handling to turn the sheep's head backwards while quickly pressing down on the hindquarters thus turning the animal over. The shepherd then stands with the sheep's shoulders between his knees and with both arms free to examine the hooves, mouth etc. The professional sheep shearer starts shearing in this position.



The sheep is relaxed because it has to accept that it cannot get away whilst in this position. The shepherd has his hands free making it possible to examine the sheep thoroughly including the teeth and hooves. This is also the starting position for shearing.

There are numerous ways to turn sheep over into the "sitting" position. You must aim to be quick, firm and confident in your movements. Ewes in the later stages of pregnancy should only be turned over in an emergency.

One method of turning a sheep over is:

- Stand on the left side of the sheep with your hands under the sheep's chin and the sheep's left side against your right knee.
- Turn the sheep's head back towards the right using your left hand.
- At the same time use your right hand to pull the sheep's hip in towards you so that its centre of gravity will shift towards your knee.
- At the same time pull your knee towards you so that the sheep over balances and sits down.
- Quickly pull the front of the animal up towards you so that it is sitting up against you.
- Hold it balanced between your knees. Your knees hold the sheep's shoulders. Its head hangs either in front of or behind your legs.
- Adjust the sheep's balance whilst you are working with it and be calm and confident.
- The sheep will relax while you are working.

Examining the sheep



The sheep may need to be partially sheared if it has a dirty tail. If it is grazing out in a field this can be done using hand shears. Sometimes you can pluck the wool from Güte and Spælsau sheep, but sometimes clumps attach themselves to the new wool. It can be necessary to shear the sheep or lamb around the tail if the wool is clumped together because of scouring.

Examining the teeth

It is important to check the teeth regularly. They can become loose and worn down by grazing coarse vegetation or because of illness. It is often a problem with teeth that can be a contributing factor when culling sheep.



Teeth are examined carefully during a check of the sheep's health.

Examining the eyes

The sheep's eyes can indicate if they have anaemia, copper or vitamin B12 deficiency, or under attack by *Haemonchus Contortus*. A healthy sheep has slightly red nictitating membranes. White membranes are a sign of anaemia.



A low eye score means red colour and no anaemia, high eye score means white colour and the risk of anaemia.

Examining for parasites

Lice are easy to see if you have good lighting and a magnifying glass. When checking the sheep it is a good idea to look for ticks and lice and to treat for these if there are signs of infestation. If you have trouble seeing the lice, then you may be able to see the eggs by holding a strand of wool up to the light. The lice eggs sit like small droplets on the fibres a few millimetres from the hair roots. See the chapter on Health and Disease.

Trimming the feet

The claws should be checked at least once a year but preferably more often. Turn the sheep over and look at the feet individually. Soft ground does not wear down the horn at the side of the hoof and this can grow over the softer tissue and needs to be cut away. If the claws are long and turn inwards they will need to be trimmed with a claw knife or a claw shears. When sheep graze on rough terrain the claws will wear down naturally. If this is not done it will cause the sheep problems by trapping dirt and causing it to become lame. Check each foot and remove grass and dirt and examine for excessive horn growth and for cracks and infections. The foot can feel warm if it is infected.



Trim with claw shears to remove excessive horn
←

A crack full of dirt must be cut away. →

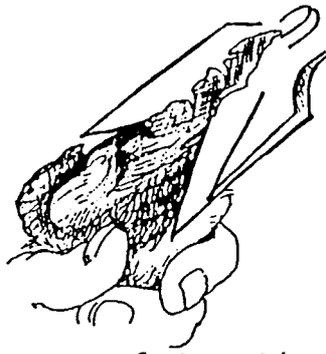


Good claw shears. →

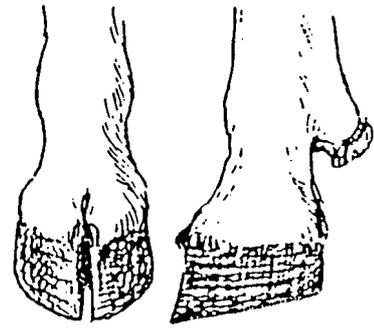
Some tips on hoof care:

- Cut excess horn growing over the sole
- Trim and clear cracks and pockets in the hoof
- Recreate a flat surface under the hoof for the sheep to walk on.
- Trim a little at a time, do not cut too much at one time.
- Practice first on sheep that have no problems
- Trim in good time before the feet have become overgrown
- Isolate animals that have signs of hoof infection.





Overgrown feet must be trimmed



Cut outer horn away from heel to toe. Unless the foot is infected do not cut too deeply and draw blood.



This sheep has recently had it's hooves well trimmed.

Shearing

It is a general misunderstanding that sheep suffer if they are not sheared. In the summertime people ask if it is cruel that the sheep are not shorn. The fact is that the fleece insulates against both heat and cold. Newly shorn sheep should stay in the shade as they are no longer insulated by wool and their skin can burn. Sheep with long wool are seldom evidence of cruelty. If the race does not shed it's wool naturally, then it will need to be shorn at least once a year. Dagging is used as a supplement to shearing. Dagging is the removal of dirty clumps of wool that collect mainly around the groin, udder and tail.

When is the best time to shear?

When deciding when to shear it is a good idea to consider when lambing is planned and the use of the wool. It is normal to shear once a year. Sheep due to lamb indoors can be shorn seven weeks before lambing. Sheep can be housed and shorn to stimulate their appetites. If the sheep are not shorn they will require more space and there will be an increased risk of infection due to condensation forming on the wool. Shearing improves the animals' welfare. Sheep that are outside all the year round and lamb outside, are normally sheared after lambing. Shearing in the summer helps to get rid of lice and ticks as these dry out in the sunshine.

Shearing with hand shears

Sheep that are used in nature conservation are usually breeds that shed their wool naturally once a year. The old wool loosens and falls off as the new wool starts to grow. There are numerous reasons for the shepherd to learn to shear with hand shears. A shearing machine leaves very short wool and this can be bad for the sheep if the weather is very cold or very hot just after shearing. Therefore use of old fashioned hand shears is still a good solution. If sheep are grazing where there is no electricity and a generator is needed, then it can be necessary. Hand shearing takes longer than machine shearing.



The skilful Scottish shepherd Graham Allan uses double the amount of time to hand shear a sheep compared to machine shearing.



An experienced shepherd can restrain a sheep using only their feet.

Professional machine shearing

A professional shearer has to shear dry sheep. Wet sheep are slippery and difficult to shear if the flock has not been kept dry well before the shearer arrives. The sheep should also not have eaten for twelve hours before shearing. There needs to be a worker to gather the sheep for the shearer and hurdles set up to make a pen to keep the sheep quiet and relaxed ready to come to the shearer one at a time. Do not expect the professional shearer to treat for lice or trim hooves, this should be done afterwards by a helper.



- 1) A helper holds the sheep ready for shearing. (up right)
- 2) The shearer keeps the fleece in one piece which allow easier sorting.(up left)
- 3) The wool is sorted, packed in bags and then sent to be spun.

When finding a good place for shearing, you need to take into account the amount of space needed to shear without any hindrance. The shearer's proximity to the sheep in the pen and the need for level ground must be taken into account. Generally speaking the machine has to hang properly and there needs to be enough electricity. Most shearers prefer to work on a wooden board wearing shearing moccasins, so that they have a better balance and contact with the ground and the sheep. The wooden board also prevents damage to the machine in case of accident and provides a good surface for sorting the fleece. The helpers must be prepared to pack the wool immediately, giving the shearer time to concentrate on shearing.

Well sorted wool that is not contaminated by straw, dirt or twigs is valuable for spinning. Hjelholt Uldspineri on Fyn is one of the last mills in Denmark.



Teasing wool.



Spinning wool.



Twisting wool.

Shearing yourself

If you have fewer than fifty sheep, then you might be able to manage to shear your sheep yourself. You can use a Nordic Shearing Bench (like a trimming stand) that restrains the sheep and keeps them in position. However it can be difficult to get the sheep on to the bench, but on the other hand your working position will be easier when you shear the back and sides of the sheep.



In professional hands shearing knives should be able to shear upwards of twenty-five sheep before needing to be sharpened.



You can use a shearing bench to restrain the sheep.

Equipment used in handling sheep

Use of hurdles and specialised equipment is essential when handling larger flocks and should always be put away after use.



Weighing sheep and lambs using hurdles and scales.





The lamb has an electronic ear tag in it's right ear which registers it's weight.



A practical trailer with hurdles and equipment.

A sheepdog is an indispensable helper



A sheepdog is the shepherd's best assistant and is indispensable in many situations. The picture above illustrates how a corner of the field, in conjunction with the dog, gives a similar effect to a small pen, enabling you to catch or treat a sheep. The dog is not visible in this picture, but can be found behind the sheep, keeping them in the corner.

It is practical to use the dog when you wish to come close to the sheep and see if they have any problems that need attending to.

Situations where a dog is practical:

- When the udder needs to be checked at lambing or weaning
- When thorns or foreign matter need to be taken out of the wool
- When the feet need to be checked
- When the sheep needs shearing
- When the sheep have to be kept away from the troughs whilst you fill them up
- When sheep need to be kept away from the gate, while you drive through
- When the flock needs to be divided
- When the flock needs to be moved

The sheepdog can also learn to:

- Guard the sheep to bring out it's motherly instincts and accept the lamb
- Bite on command
- Bark on command

It takes many years of training for the sheepdog to learn all this.

In Denmark Border Collies (which come originally from the Border region between Scotland and England) are used to drive, gather and move the sheep.

Sheep are responsive to the presence of the dog within a distance of ten metres. The dog must learn to run around the flock and stand on the opposite side of the flock to the shepherd. This is how the sheep are driven.

When the dog is very close to the sheep it cannot drive them, but can use it's "eye" to hold them in position.



The dog's "eye" holds the lamb in position.

The dog works by gathering the sheep that try to break away from the flock. When the sheep are used to the dog, gathering becomes easy and painless. Sheepdogs have different temperaments. Some dogs are gentle and do not stress the sheep. Others are more aggressive and therefore good with stubborn sheep, but the disadvantage is, that they can split up the flock with their enthusiasm. Therefore good training and good communication between the shepherd and his dog is all important.



Shepherding on horseback can be a good way to gather and drive sheep in large areas and where the flock is difficult to manage. The horse can support the dogs in their work. In this picture you can see how the rider gives the sheepdog commands from the horse. The horse and the dogs can get used to each other and can become good collaborators.(photo: Mogens Dehli)



The sheepdogs have turned the sheep that were on their way away from the fold



Here are three dogs sending lambs into the fold. The shepherd, Frank Hansen from Vallø-Lam gives clear signals to his dogs.

This is how the shepherd works with his dogs:

- Gathers the flock by whistling
- Sends the dog around the flock
- Lets the dog drive the flock forwards and keep them moving while standing some distance away.
- Gets the dog to stop the flock by using "eye" when standing in front of the flock
- Lets the dog run around the flock keeping the sheep close together while the shepherd catches a sheep that needs treatment.

It is possible to buy a trained sheepdog from a shepherd or a professional dog trainer. It takes a lot of time to train a sheepdog and therefore they can cost about 10,000dk plus the cost of having it. However a good sheepdog is still a good investment and a good companion