



## Preparing for Breeding Season

As breeding season approaches for most flocks across the country there are several practical management procedures and techniques that can be used in addition to making sure you have enough “ram power” to ensure the season ahead is a success.

### Routine pre-mating tasks - Check Your 5 Ts:

<b>Toes</b>	Trim/inspect toes, locomotion/and signs of arthritis
<b>Teeth</b>	Check for gaps/loss of teeth, bony lumps/tooth abscesses, under/overshot jaw
<b>Testicles/Teats</b>	Testicles - Measure and check firmness (should feel like a human flexed bicep with no lumps or bumps) Teats - Check no mastitis, no lumps/bumps
<b>Tone</b>	Body Condition Score - aim for a body condition of 3-4 out of 5 (spine well covered) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ewe body condition score at mating is 3.5 for lowland ewes or 3 for hill ewes. Each unit in condition is equivalent to about 12 to 15% of body weight</li> </ul> Ram target body condition score at mating is 3.5-4
<b>Treat</b>	Vaccinate (clostridial diseases and Pasteurella), lameness issues and internal/external parasites

### Rams

Make sure your ewes AND rams are fit for purpose at the start of your breeding season. Ram MOTs should be done ten weeks prior to tupping (to ensure you have enough time to get a replacement or treat any underlying problems). It takes about seven weeks for sperm to mature (after a problem has been treated). A thorough physical examination can identify 90% of problems that can cause infertility/poor performance. Semen testing can be done, but with caution. A negative semen test does not necessarily indicate infertility and re-testing may be needed.

### Raddling the ram

It is essential to raddle the rams so that you can keep an eye on how mating is proceeding. Do not skip this very important task even if running rams in groups as opposed to single sire mating. Start with lighter colours which can be overmarked by a darker colour e.g. (yellow → orange → green → red → blue → black) and change the colour at least every 14 days which will show repeats. If a lot of ewes start repeating, suspect that there is a problem with a ram. There is still time to do something about it, much better than finding a lot of empty ewes at scanning.

Benefits of raddling include:

- Rams that are raddled provide a clear indication of the number of ewes mated and give farmers an indication of a lambing date.
- Infertile rams can be identified early and removed straight away from the flock.
- Changing the raddle colour regularly will allow you to identify ewes that return to service. If too many ewes repeat, a faulty ram should be suspected and replaced.
- Changing raddle colour frequently – every 7 to 10 days – enables ewes to be grouped together at housing by expected lambing date.
- Grouping ewes by expected lambing date and scanned litter size enables farmers to supplement optimum levels of feed that the ewe requires.

### **Options for raddling**

Many people mix raddle powder with oil to make a paste and apply liberally to the area of wool just above the brisket of the ram. It's important to work the raddle paste well into wool and reapply every few days especially during the first few weeks when rams are busy. Some rub on raddle crayon to this area and again it needs to be applied regularly.

The other option is fitting a harness to the ram to which the colour crayon can be attached – the crayon block can be replaced when changing colours. It is important to check that the harness stays in place as they tend to stretch and can bed into the wool – needs to be checked and adjusted as necessary. Avoid having it slipping back on ram as it can potentially impede him from mating ewes.

### **Ewes**

Ewes should be vaccinated (Toxoplasmosis and Enzootic Abortion) four to six weeks BEFORE tupping. Replacement and retained ewes will need Clostridial/Pasteurella vaccines pre-lambing (two doses four to six weeks apart OR a booster four to six weeks pre-lambing). This gives the lambs immunity (via colostrum) for up to five weeks.

Worming and fluking? Discuss with a vet if that is appropriate to do before tupping. Consider a Faecal Worm Egg Count in your decision making and monitoring technique. Younger replacement ewes may need worming, but your more mature ewes may not.

As a large, relatively slow-maturing breed, Valais Blacknose ewes in Switzerland are usually not bred until they are over 12 months of age, normally lambing for the first time at 18-24 months old at which point the animal is mature enough to cope with both pregnancy and labour. As ewes also need time to recondition post lambing its vital to condition score at weaning, or at the very latest eight weeks before tupping. They are also nonseasonal breeders, with a reproduction rate of 1.6 lambs per year, however it is recommended to breed naturally once a year.

### **Ewe:Ram ratio**

To optimize pregnancy rates, allow:

1 mature ram to 45 ewes (up to 70 ewes more active ram breeds)

1 ram lamb 1 to 25 (up to 40 for more active ram breeds)

Once the breeding season has begun – remain vigilant to ensure ewes and rams are in good health and maintain a good level of nutrition throughout the breeding season.