

Counting Sheep

Salute to Agriculture

Second in a Series

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March is the time to recognize farmers, ranchers and dairymen and the role they play in putting food on our tables. March 18 is National Ag Day, and as Box Elder County is a leader in the state in agricultural production – field crops, cattle, sheep and dairy cows – this series salutes those who wouldn't trade a tractor seat for a seat on Wall Street and prefer punching steers to punching a time clock.

Ask Marlon Bingham what makes him happy, and he will readily answer, "I love being out with the sheep. I could sit for hours and watch them grazing. It is pure tranquility for me."

That love affair with the woolly creatures has been a long-standing one for this Honeyville sheep rancher, who grew up working with the animals on his father's farm. "My earliest memories growing up were of sheep, cattle and milk cows. I always seemed to have an interest."

While the family, which consisted of his eight brothers and three sisters, as well as cousins from his father's eight brothers, didn't deal only in sheep, Marlon said trips to Bingham-owned property in Chalk Creek above Echo Reservoir cemented their appeal. Although the family was there to spray for thistles and work the ground being leased from them by another sheep farmer, Marlon said watching that man's animals developed a desire in him to have his own flock. "That's what I'm going to do," he told himself back then.

Marriage just after high school to his wife, Ronda, put his priorities elsewhere for a moment – although not for long. It only took a year before the urge to raise sheep stirred inside him again and he bought 50 head. The couple worked together during the lambing season to increase those numbers. Along the way he also bought out an uncle, adding to his flock.

"Since then, I've never not had sheep," he stated.

Counting those sheep takes a little longer now than it did back then, however. Marlon estimates his totals today exceed 3,300, both pure-bred Columbia with their white faces, and a few of his own preferred black-faced breed.

Keeping them healthy, happy and out of harm's way is a full-time responsibility, Marlon admits, although he has always worked a couple of side jobs in order to supplement the family income when times get difficult and the bottom falls out of the lamb industry.

With sheep, the money used to be in wool production. "Years ago the government had a tariff on wool products brought into the country," Marlon said, that money was returned to sheep producers in the United States to help them stay in business. That meant additional operation funds to go along with the nice check from selling bags of wool after the annual spring shearing.

Now the lamb crop is the biggest source of revenue. But keeping those lambs safe has also become one of the biggest expenses. Why?

Marlon can tell you in one word - Predators.

Dealing with hungry coyotes, cougars, wolves, bobcats, bears, eagles and even ravens and crows on a daily basis, all animals that find a young, wobbly lamb fairly easy picking for dinner is difficult, he said. "You know, you work so hard to get them here and then they end up as feed for the predators. It's hard to take."

On a bad year, he has even hired a helicopter to control those outside scavengers. Large guard dogs raised with the sheep are an added protection, as are his watchful herders. But keeping track of so large a number can be difficult, especially as they tend to range out over a long distance.

In the winter, the Bingham's sheep graze on about 80,000 acres west of Delta, in Millard County. Spring puts them closer to home, out in the Little Pocatello Valley, on 8,000 acres, 7,000 of which is permitted through the Bureau of Land Management. Summer finds them split into two herds, part on another 8,000 acres in the Ant Flat area by Monte Cristo and the other, on 10,000 acres Marlon leases from his family in Chalk Creek, the very ground he worked on as a child.

Marlon said it is no easy task to figure their lamb losses each year but he does have a system in place that gives him a fairly good idea. Lambing from the black-faced breed begins in January, while the Columbia flock starts dropping their babies around May.

As the newborn lambs (annually about 2,700) are docked (the standard practice of removing tails), the tails are saved and counted. As the lambs are shipped later in the year, those numbers are compared.

"When we count 200 less than what we docked, it's a bad year," he said. "And that doesn't even take into account how many are killed before we dock."

A lamb can bring in an average of \$200 at the sale, he continued, so losing that many means a \$40,000 deficit in operating funds. And if predators weren't bad enough to deal

with, Mother Nature can also add to that shortfall.

"A bad storm can be a terrible thing," Marlon said. "When it's wet and there's wind, baby lambs don't handle it at all." He said he can drive through a herd of mother sheep following such a storm and find every lamb born during the night dead.

Multiple births are common in sheep and sometimes a mother will refuse to care for one or both of her charges. Marlon has set up a nursery, complete with nannies (literally) to help raise his orphaned babies. He keeps a herd of up to a dozen goats on the farm and can successfully raise 20 or more "bum lambs" using the surrogate mothers.

Watching those young ones frolic and jump around, playing "King of the Hill" with their contemporaries, is worth the added effort it takes, he said, but this sheep lover will also admit that his woolly charges don't come with even dispositions, like other stock.

"You have to understand sheep," he said. "They are ignorant. I guess contrary is a better word. If you push them they push back. They will try every bit of patience the good Lord blessed you with." As the Box Elder County Fair Board director over sheep, he tries to teach the young 4-H and FFA exhibitors the importance of working with, not against that mentality.

He has tried to teach his own four children those same lessons, and hopes someday at least one of them will follow in his footsteps, taking over the flock he has worked so hard to grow.

Predators, pestilence, tempests and temperament – this rancher deals with it all on a regular basis. So why does he do it?

For Marlon, it's the reward of hearing a mother ewe bawling for its baby, the smell of the flock after they have bedded down for the night, listening to the ring from the bellwethers mixed in with the group or watching a newborn lamb stand on unsteady feet for the first time. It's his life and his love, he admits.

His wife, Ronda, puts it more simply. "It's definitely in his blood."

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