

Sheep Comfort

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

Hoping that I will not be seen as self-righteous, I wish to address animal comfort in this article, something I feel is the responsibility of each person who has domestic animals in his or her care. While I do not at all wish to anthropomorphize, I do think that here and there a little bit more of an effort could be made to think of our animals and how they might experience weather conditions that we don't like very well either.

Summer has gone and with it the scorching heat of 90- and 100-degree days. During these hot days I always make sure that my flock has shade available. Rule of thumb for me is that if it is 80 degrees or more with somewhat high humidity, my sheep must have shade available for the noon hours to rest and stay cool. In general, the lower the humidity, the higher the temperature can be without causing discomfort and vice versa. It is certainly true that sheep can take some heat without actually needing shade. However, for me that isn't the issue at hand. It is about animal comfort. It is about creating conditions that allow for good animal production. I said at the beginning that I don't want to anthropomorphize, but would like to make this comparison: We too can take the heat our animals endure, but aren't we far more productive if we can wear a straw hat or take a break in the shade when we

have lunch? Nevertheless, when the temperatures approach 90 degrees, I definitely make sure shade is available for my flock.

"I have no shade," is a fairly common reply that I get when I mention this to a sheep farmer. The solution, however, is sometimes a simple one. Shade can be provided. Hay wagons are one of the simplest solutions. Shade can be made accessible for at least the hottest hours of the day, even if it is not in the pasture but somewhere else. Maybe a pathway back to the barn that has some shade can be kept open.

"Wild animals have to endure all weather conditions too." This is another rather common argument I hear when discussing unfavorable weather conditions. That is true. However, I was not given nor have I sought the care of wild animals. I am in care of my sheep, just as many of you are caring for your own domestic animals. Aside from that, wild animals are free to roam and seek the necessary shelter, be it from the hot sun or the icy rain or the cold wind. Domestic animals are limited by fences in what they can seek.

Now we are approaching late fall and winter with cold rain, ice, snow, and wind. Snow in itself poses no problem. While an animal always needs to have time to adjust to cold weather, snow does not take away body heat. In fact, it insulates. A flock that gets snowed in overnight by a few inches



This hedgerow suits well for shade on hot days. Please note the water trough being out in the sun.



This shed with the opening to the east protects parts of my flock in the winter when the wind blows from the north or west.

of snow always looks very cozy when I check in the morning and the flock is lying spread out in the snow with the animals chewing their cud. Cold animals huddle together. This situation changes when the wind picks up. In fact, wind makes all the difference. Allow me to use two extreme examples to illustrate what I mean. Temperatures in the single digits or below without any wind are very bearable for sheep in full wool or coat. I have had lambs born in the barn with temperatures like these without any problems. On the other hand, 15 degrees on a windy day causes strong discomfort in sheep. They just want to get out of the wind. On occasion I get a call or an e-mail asking me if my hair sheep can take zero-degree winters without having any shelter. I have stopped responding to these inquiries because my response tends to offend those who asked. I don't think any sheep, hair and wool alike, should have to endure that kind of weather without having access to some sort of shelter. Shelter does not mean being locked up in a barn. Shelter might at times not even mean a roof over their heads. It simply means being able to get out of the wind. A thick hedgerow or woods that stop the wind will often do. A run-in shelter with one side open but away from the wind will be most suitable.

The age of sheep matters as well. Weather conditions that may have no impact on an adult sheep may impact lambs. Especially the combination of wet and snow is a tricky one for lambs. Germans say, "Nass und Schnee, das tut weh"—"Wet and snow hurts." The wet conditions draw away body heat while the cold makes it impossible for the lamb to sustain proper body heat due to its lack of body mass. Either condition—wet, but somewhat warm, or snow—would not have the same effect. Again, shelter is needed on those days in early spring when the weather is cold and the wet snow falls. A run-in shed will do, so that the lambs stay somewhat dry and all they have to deal with is the cold itself.

Another situation to consider is the fact that wool sheep

get shorn in the spring. I could at this point start a sales pitch, mentioning that I no longer have to deal with shearing, shorn sheep, the cost and hassle of shearing, and the agony of not getting much for the wool since I have hair sheep...but I won't. So back to shorn sheep instead. A freshly shorn sheep is particularly vulnerable to any kind of precipitation, to wind, and to cold weather. Extra thought has to be given to the well-being of these sheep. Even sunburn is a concern. Once the wool has grown back an inch, sheep are again quite resilient to adverse weather conditions, but until then they might need shelter the same way lambs do.

In comparison to other species, like cattle for instance, sheep need relatively little to drink when the grass is green and moist. In fact, many days they will not drink at all. This changes when the grass gets drier, such as in a drought, when hay is fed, or stockpiled grass in late fall is being grazed. At such times, water consumption increases exponentially. As some of you may know, thirst hurts more than hunger. I always make sure the flock has water and never goes thirsty when I know water is needed. The water should be clean and without animal feces. I keep my water troughs out in the sun and not in the shade. This way I avoid sheep gathering around the water tank and leaving sheep droppings in the water. That the water warms up that way is irrelevant. Warm water has the same ability to serve the sheep's physiological needs as cold water does. Trust me, I know it's true. I drink hot coffee all day long even on the hottest days of the summer. ☕

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