

Raising American Blackbelly Sheep in the Nevada High Desert

By Cathy Mayton
Leap'N Lambs

About 25 years ago, I raised American Blackbelly sheep in Arizona, the state in which I was raised. In the spring of 2006, I got a wild hair (no pun intended) to raise these sheep again. My husband J.C. and I made 2 trips to California to purchase my stock sheep from 4 different breeders. The first trip was made the last weekend in April when we traveled from Winnemucca, Nevada to Auburn, California where we picked up 3 ewe lambs from Rick Krach. Then it was on to Petaluma where we bought an adult ram that I named Jake from one breeder; and just down the road we picked up an adult ewe, a ram lamb and 2 wethers from Ed Christiansen. The following weekend, we drove from Winnemucca to Klamath River, California and purchased 3 adult ewes and a scrawny two month-old ewe lamb. So in two weekends, we had driven about 2,000 miles to purchase my starter flock.

All of our sheep that came from Auburn and Petaluma were being raised on grass and both Rick and Ed were also giving the sheep some grain as well. The sheep from Klamath River did not seem to have the ability to graze, so I am not sure just how this breeder managed her flock. However, in the high desert of Nevada, my sheep do not have the luxury of grazing on the grass. They are totally dependent on me for all of their food. When we moved to our property 10 years ago, there was nothing on the property but sage brush, tumbleweeds and cheat grass. Within a year, with the help of a drip system that J.C installed, trees and grass were planted and flourishing in our young yard. We get very little rainfall here. So if you want greenery around your home, you need a drip system which efficiently waters all the trees and shrubs. We also have a sprinkler system to water the lawn in our front yard.



This summer I culled heavily for wool. Now I have a total of 10 ewes, 3 that were born this spring. I have 3 rams. My oldest ram Zeke will be 2 years old in January; his son Indy was born March 2007; and Gambler was born May 2007. I acquired Gambler in August, when J.C. and I met Ed Christiansen on the Nevada/California border and we traded ram lambs. I also have 2 ram butcher lambs. I keep all my rams separate from my ewes unless they are being bred. Since most critters (including humans) really like a routine, I feed my critters twice a day. Feeding times are about 7:00 a.m. and at 4:00 p.m. now that it gets dark by 5 p.m. I feed routinely 7 days a week. So about 7 a.m. each morning, I grain them. The girls get about 4.5 lbs. of grain split between the 10 ewes. Once a day I put garlic powder in their grain that I purchase from Allivet. We have used wheat, barley, triticale, sometimes rolled corn, and at one time, a dairy feed that even the steers really enjoyed. After the sheep finish their grain - which does not take very long - they are ready for their alfalfa hay.

Normally the ewes and rams are fed the same, but recently the rams have been switched to a wheat pellet with a bit of whole barley because I believe that my littlest ram, Gambler, is allergic to dust. J.C. has ground the wheat and barley and it is fairly dusty. Gambler was coughing during feeding time, but has since improved with the change in feed.



I don't name my ewes. However, the adult ewe I bought from Ed is called 507 to match her ear tag. Although she does not enjoy being petted, 507 is pretty friendly and will eat grain and nuts out of my hand. I also give the sheep goodies from the kitchen such as fruits, vegetables, tortillas, and chips that have become out of date. When 507 sees me with a bowl in my hand, she comes running to the feeder that she knows the goodies will be put in. She loves onions, lemons, tortilla chips, bananas, and rind from watermelon and cantaloupe. They also get potato, eggplant, lettuce, artichoke leaves, tomato, squash, cilantro and mushrooms. They

also like the pistachio shell or whatever else is being trimmed in the kitchen or has gone past its peak for us to eat. Watching 507 always brings a smile to my face whenever she runs to see what goodies she is going to get.



I used to free feed them a sheep mineral. But earlier this year, I read an article on using kelp. Once I started free-feeding the Thorvin Icelandic kelp, they no longer ate the other sheep mineral. At first, I could hardly keep the kelp in the feeder - especially with the ewes. Now they seem to require less, even though seven of them are pregnant. They also have a white salt block that is full of sheep lick dimples.



I open the gate periodically to the ewe pen to let them out to graze on the weeds and grass in our front yard and other fenced-in areas. We learned however, that we couldn't do this in the spring, because they eat all of the new growth on the trees and shrubs. They are like ping pong balls running from one plant to the next, especially if they think another has something better. They even eat the new growth on the pine trees! We also found they like to strip the bark of the smaller trees, so when they won't graze and just want to destroy plants, they get put back up. The rams of course use the trees to rub their horns on, so they don't get out in the front yard too often.



If we trim shrubs or trees, we throw that in their pen and let them strip everything until they are satisfied all the good stuff has been removed. Even our neighbor gave them a tree branch that was broken by the wind this summer. At the end of summer, we pull up the dying sunflowers and they eat just about the entire plant. So the end of summer brings a plethora of goodies for them: expired tomato plants, sunflowers, and other vegetable plants killed by the frost. When the girls do get to come out for awhile, they love the fallen leaves. They especially enjoy the willow leaves.

As you can see in the pictures, the country is pretty desolate without a water source. It is hard to believe that the cattle ranchers raise their cattle on this land. The area the ewes are in did have quite a few weeds and a lot of cheat grass. But as you can see, their field is now barren.



I have looked at several web sites of BBSAI members like Barb Lee and Mary Swindell whom I have been in contact with, and think how wonderful it would be to have all that green grass. It is so pretty in the pictures and the sheep seem so content. They also get to rest in the cool shade of large trees. How dreamy.....however, my sheep have adapted well to this climate and their arid conditions.
