

How old does a "heifer" Soay ewe need to be in order to lamb successfully?

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There was a lot of discussion about this issue at GSE III and postings to the SSB listserv also have raised the question of whether to breed very young ewes. Each of us will of course answer the question for our own flocks, but we thought it might be useful to show everyone the data from the OFP showing the 49 ewes who successfully lambed by their first birthday. We do not have data about ewes who *failed* to lamb in their first breeding year so we can't even guess at what age might be too young. All we can do is take a stab at the other side of the coin -- an age that is old enough. We've reprinted below the data for the 49 successful young ewes we know about.

The key date for breeders wishing to use this data is the age of the ewe at conception, calculated by subtracting 148 days – the generally accepted gestation period – from the date of lambing. As you can see from the table, ewes have successfully lambed when they were bred as young as 5 months and a few days (156 days). Once a ewe is up to the age of 190 days or so, there are an increasing number of successful breedings. And there appear to be no discernable differences in success among British, American, or American British ewes.

How do you use this information in formulating your breeding plans? Not at all if you plan to breed your ewes irrespective of their ages. But if you want to hold back ewes you judge to be too young to withstand the rigors of lambing, start with the last day of your breeding window and work your way backwards. In other words, if you want your ewe to be at least a year old on the day she lambs, she will need to be 217 days old on the last day of your breeding window, so that if she conceives on that last day, she'll be a year old 148 days later when she lambs ($365-148=217$). Of course, if she conceives earlier in the breeding window, she will be more than a year old when she lambs. If we assume for the example that the last day of your breeding window is December 1, 2006, then you would not breed any ewes born after April 28, 2006, which is 217 days before December 1. Put another way, if the ewe conceived on the last day of the breeding window, she would be one year old when she lambed 148 days later, on April 28, 2007. If you want your ewes to be at least 11 months old when they lamb, you can breed any ewes born before March 28, 2006, and so on.

We are interested in your reactions to this data and whether it is helpful to you in formulating your breeding plans. It was dog-easy to pull the data out of the OFP, which means it was a fun thing to do on a sunny fall afternoon. As for the title of this article, what's an author to do? One would think that after thousands of years of sheep-raising, there would be a term for a first-time sheep mother, but I sure couldn't find one. I was tempted to call them "hoggetts" or "gimmers," but as far as I can determine, these terms refer only to the time of a ewe's life after she is weaned and before she is shorn and they indicate nothing about the ewe lamb's breeding status. What a pity. Perhaps Soay breeders should simply expropriate the word "gimmer" and use it to refer to our first-time mothers. It has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?

Heritage	Dam	Dam Born	Lamb Born	Lamb	Age (days) at	
					Lambing	Conception
British	USA0001 Ouxy	25-Jun-03	24-Apr-04	Sequoia	304	156
British	USA0001 Christine	26-May-01	3-Apr-02	Dot	312	164
British	USA0001 Nyssa	3-Jun-03	15-Apr-04	Juniper U1	317	169
American	Rimridge Blair	6-Jun-02	19-Apr-03	Sparrow	317	169
American/British	Skylonda Caroline	31-Mar-05	15-Feb-06	Galina	321	173
British	USA0001 Yalo	15-Jun-05	3-May-06	Feltar	322	174
American/British	Rimridge Andrea	23-Jun-02	13-May-03	Jasper UW	324	176
British	Willingford Erica	12-Apr-84	2-Mar-85	Maple	324	176
American/British	Blue_Mountain Agile	2-May-04	24-Mar-05	Eihwaz	326	178
American	Blue_Mountain Heather	6-May-02	8-Apr-03	Madrona	337	189
American/British	Southern_Oregon Victoria	19-May-00	24-Apr-01	Jurby	340	192
American/British	Acorn_Hill Princess Sophie	12-May-01	18-Apr-02	Ainsley	341	193
American/British	Southern_Oregon Miavig	26-Apr-01	2-Apr-02	Legolas SK	341	193
American/British	Blue_Mountain PeeWee	16-May-04	22-Apr-05	Peanut BM	341	193
American/British	Acorn_Hill Princess Sophie	12-May-01	18-Apr-02	Thistle AH	341	193
American/British	Southern_Oregon Ultima	12-May-00	24-Apr-01	Kirk	347	199
British	USA0001 Willow	15-May-04	27-Apr-05	Linnaeus	347	199
American/British	Southern_Oregon Sierra	11-May-00	27-Apr-01	Quinton	351	203
American/British	Saltmarsh Paulina	13-May-05	30-Apr-06	Pingo	352	204
American	Ewe_Pals Peanut	10-May-99	26-Apr-00	Porche	352	204
American/British	Blue_Mountain Amethyst	7-May-03	25-Apr-04	Amber	354	206
British	USA0001 Cuma	12-Apr-01	1-Apr-02	Bit	354	206
British	USA0001 Scara Brae	28-Apr-01	17-Apr-02	Mini	354	206
British	Greener_Pastures Titian	24-Apr-02	13-Apr-03	Shawnee	354	206
American/British	Saltmarsh Portia	30-Apr-05	20-Apr-06	Licorice	355	207
American/British	Southern_Oregon Nessie	26-Apr-01	16-Apr-02	Linux	355	207
British	USA0003 Indiana	25-May-03	15-May-04	Haiti	356	208
British	USA0003 Indiana	25-May-03	15-May-04	Jamaica	356	208
British	USA0001 Galice	16-Apr-03	6-Apr-04	Kalmia	356	208
American/British	Greener_Pastures Pawnee	7-Apr-03	30-Mar-04	Rachel BS	358	210
American/British	Blue_Mountain Gazelle	8-Apr-04	1-Apr-05	Red Deer	358	210
American	Upton_West Willow	14-Apr-03	8-Apr-04	Aspen	360	212
American/British	Saltmarsh Juliet	23-Apr-05	19-Apr-06	Ginger SM	361	213
American/British	Southern_Oregon Jetta	2-Apr-00	29-Mar-01	Mak II	361	213
American	Skylonda Carolina	16-Apr-04	12-Apr-05	SMR 21	361	213
American	Blue_Mountain Fiona	27-Mar-01	24-Mar-02	Fedan	362	214
American/British	Blue_Mountain Melody	15-Apr-05	12-Apr-06	Isetta	362	214
American	Blue_Mountain Daisy	2-Apr-99	29-Mar-00	Ivy	362	214
British	Greener_Pastures Boticelli	13-Mar-02	10-Mar-03	Kiowa	362	214
American	Happy_Valley Millie	22-Apr-00	19-Apr-01	Myra	362	214
American/British	Blue_Mountain Sandpiper	8-Apr-04	6-Apr-05	Avocet	363	215
American	Mica_Half_Mile Cleopatra	29-Apr-01	27-Apr-02	Cairo BM	363	215
American	Soay_Haven Flora	20-Apr-96	18-Apr-97	Geraldo	363	215
British	USA0001 Gleann Mor	16-Apr-01	14-Apr-02	Java	363	215
British	USA0001 Pixel	7-May-02	5-May-03	Kiger	363	215
British	USA0001 Hirta	20-Apr-01	19-Apr-02	Nokia	364	216
American/British	Skylonda Kate	15-Apr-04	15-Apr-05	Jenny	365	217
American/British	Skylonda Simone	12-Apr-04	12-Apr-05	OR74-179	365	217
American/British	Peony_Creek Sagittarius	7-Apr-02	7-Apr-03	Pawnee	365	217