How to identify twin-born lambs

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IN the past few years it has become widely accepted that the ability to produce twin or multiple lambs is a heritable characteristic. This means that breeding from sheep born as twins should give more multiple births and higher lambing percentages than breeding from sheep born as single lambs.

This has aroused considerable interest among scientists as well as Merino breeders who are striving to lift their average lambing percentages above the nationally-accepted 70 to 80 per cent. level.

In investigations of sheep fertility many trials throughout Australia now require the identification of twin-born lambs. Some farmers are also keen to identify twins for future breeding.

While it has been relatively simple to identify, by side-branding and visual observation, the ewe which produces twins, it is not easy to identify the twin-born lambs, especially when one of the pair dies. This becomes increasingly difficult when dealing with large flocks in field conditions, where it is impossible to attend each birth and tag or otherwise identify the lambs before they become active.

A technique which can be used to identify these lambs at any stage up to weaning was suggested by Lake Grace farmer Mr. F. Thomson, on whose property the writers are conducting a breeding investigation involving a flock of 114 ewes. Experience with this method has shown that it is simple, relatively quick and accurate, and that it may have application in many cases where identification of lamb(s) to individual ewe is required.

The technique is:

1. All ewes must be side-branded so that visual observation during lambing can identify the ewes which produce twins.

2. At a suitable time before weaning the flock is yarded, ewes and lambs drafted apart, and those ewes recorded as having twins are separated. The udders and insides of the back legs of these ewes are then well raddled with coloured crayons.

Ewes and lambs are kept apart for four to five hours, and then re-joined. Within a few minutes the lambs seek out their mothers and nuzzle the udders. Thus, after only a short time, it is possible to re-draft the flock, and the lambs which have marked heads — those born as twins — are easily identified and tagged.

One difficulty is that occasionally a lamb may nuzzle a ewe which is not its mother, particularly under yard conditions, and so it is possible to select an occasional lamb which was not twin-born. This problem did not prove a very real one, however, and the method proved quite adequate and simple when used during last season.

To identify lambs to individual mothers requires more time, because each twin-bearing ewe must be released individually, and her lambs identified and tagged before the next is released. Should the method prove generally worthwhile, however, it should be possible to obtain many different coloured crayons, so that several ewes could be released at the same time.
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