Sheep farming and the BHPA 19 March 2026

Senior Coach Christina Richards explains sheep farming for a free flying audience

As free flight pilots we spend a lot of time in the countryside, and in Britain that often means sheep farming country with its rolling hills and helpfully smooth close-cropped grass. Unfortunately, there's long been tension between farmers who work hard over long hours to ring an increasingly meagre income from the land on the one hand, and passionate free flight pilots who only want to enjoy our beautiful countryside in a harmless way on the other. This need not be so, for with a little thought on both sides we can coexist more easily.

As I work on a sheep farm some of the time, I spend a good deal of time educating farmers away from misconceptions about free flight and giving tips on how farmers can better enjoy our wonderful sport. This brief guide is my modest attempt to do the same for free flight pilots regarding farming. I hope it is of some help in assisting pilots to make choices which are inconsequential for us - such as picking one of two equally viable fields to land in - but which for farmers may make the difference between profit and loss for the year.

Firstly, do remember that farms are by and large private land and even where they are on access land that does not apply to using them as flying sites. With that said, we fly unpowered aircraft and must sometimes make landings on private land when no other opportunity is available. Very often the best landing fields in such circumstances are on sheep farms so it is important to know a little of what goes on there.

Tupping

The farming year starts with tupping which is traditionally held on bonfire night. This is where the tup (ram or male sheep) is finally let in with the ewes (female sheep) to make baby sheep (lambs). He has been really *very* keen for some weeks by this point and will be both vigorous and remarkably quick with his attentions. He will have had his chest painted with raddle (an oily paint) or had a block of paint strapped to him so that when he covers (mounts) the ewe he will leave a mark and we will know which ewes he has covered and which he has not. After a week or so we will switch colours so we know which ewes will lamb (we say 'lamb' to mean give birth as well as for the baby sheep themselves) earlier and which will have lambs later on. Any which are not covered are separated as they may be unwell, and the

pregnant ones will get extra feed. A single tup may cover fifty ewes and so gets absolutely knackered - as you might imagine. He will lose condition (weight and muscle) which he will need to put on again over the year ready for next year's tupping. Once he has done covering all the ewes he will be separated to live with castrated male sheep until next year.

Once the ewes are done they will be left to eat grass, or hay and 'cake' (cake is sheep feed a bit like Special K) if it is cold, while the lambs develop. After about 80 days the ewes will be scanned with an ultrasound to see how many lambs they have. Lowland ewes - such as those you will find on the grass of the Peak District - usually have twins or less commonly a large single lamb. There can be triplets or, rarely, quads, however. The ewes on the moors are different breeds from the lowland ewes and usually have a single lamb as there is less to eat and the living is harder up there. Hopefully there are no barren ewes, although there are always one or two. When we know how many lambs each ewe has we mark them with a different colour spray and then split them so we can feed them extra depending on the number. The reason we put the ewes to the tup around bonfire night is because 147 days later they will lamb onto the spring grass in the sunshine and so will not need extra care or shelter.

For our purposes as pilots there is little to be aware of during tupping. However there are a couple of things to note. First, the tups are 120 kilogrammes of four-wheel-drive testosterone-fuelled libidinous rage. While sheep are mostly docile, at this time of year the tups are not. Being rammed by charging tup (they are also called rams, recall) can break bones - avoid them! If you do find yourself in a field with a tup give him an extremely wide berth and do not approach either him or the ewes in the field.

The other important thing to be aware of is that it takes some time for the pregnancy to 'take'. Ewes will abort if they are shocked; for example if a paraglider lands among them. Please do not do it if it can in anyway be avoided. When sheep abort they tend to find a quiet spot away from the rest of the flock to do so. This means that they may appear to be 'fine' to the paraglider who lands and then packs up, but they are not. This is different to making an approach to an established launch or leaving an established landing field, of course. If you are approaching a flock on a footpath they may well be used to people passing by and be quite happy.

Lambing

lambing traditionally happens in March, although the date will, of course, depend on when the farmer decided to put the tup in with the ewes. Lambing is both the best and hardest time of year for sheep farmers. It is the time when all of your hard work feeding the sheep every day there is not enough grass, driving your quad through rain and dark and sleet and snow, checking feet and treating with medicine as necessary, moving sheep to the best field (which may, in the depths of winter, still be a mud and frost choked quagmire), and generally caring for your flock no matter how tired or unwell you are - finally pays off.

It can be a magical time in the lambing shed bringing new life into the world with little bouncing lambs smelling of wool and milk. With that said, when you have multiple births one after the other, or even at the same time, after 15 or 20 hours in the icy cold and damp it can be utterly exhausting. For those people who are lambing on the moors without even the benefit of a lambing shed it is extraordinarily hard work. Farmers at this time are understandably absolutely frazzled. Think of your very hardest day at work and then imagine someone on their holiday interrupting you; even with a perfectly reasonable request. This can be why farmers are not always approachable at this time - do try to cut them some slack if you can as they may not be behaving in the way they normally would during the rest of the year down the pub, say. Even the very best of us can get properly grumpy when we've been up for 20 hours, and especially if things have not been going well.

Very pregnant ewes should not be made to run. When we bring them in to check them, or bring them into the lambing shed to lamb, we do so extremely gently. Imagine asking a large group of women who are just about to give birth to move from one building to another. We try to give the ewes a similar level of gentle attention. Now imagine if you landed your paraglider, quite unexpectedly, among that group of very pregnant women - and the response you would get. Pregnant ewes feel much the same way, so it is really important that we do not startle them.

As noted above, pregnant ewes who are startled can abort; and when pregnant ewes are just about to give birth they are at a high risk of doing so. The particular issue with sheep farming is that if a number of ewes abort there is no option to start again. When my work requires me to write on my computer, if I make a mistake I can just start again with relatively little loss. In sheep farming you have one single opportunity for the whole year. If that is lost because lambs die either before being born or afterwards all your work since

October is lost, and there is no opportunity to start again. Because margins are so tight in sheep farming even a small loss of lambs can mean the profit for a whole year is gone. Imagine you had worked on a project at work for a whole year and someone on their holiday came along and deleted it entirely such that you couldn't retrieve it. That is how farmers feel about it when we lose their lambs.

For this reason, farmers we have good relationships with, and who allow us to launch and land on their property at all other times of the year, will often close fields they need for pregnant ewes and new lambs during the lambing period. Do check your club website and social media feeds at this time to check for closures. If we break those agreements for the sake of an afternoon's flying, even for a really good XC day, farmers may well (and totally understandably) have to have a total ban on flying from their land because we may have destroyed their income for the year. Again these shocked sheep may look 'fine' to us because as paragliders we do not see the little bodies under the hedges or in the barns where the farmers find them.

I mention baby lambs as well as pregnant ewes because baby lambs are extremely cute and very very stupid for the first week or so after being born. While they can walk after an hour (it's extraordinary to see), they really don't have much of an idea of what's going on; and some ewes are not great mums and will wander off.

Baby lambs can also get drunk on milk and will just collapse on their side in the sunshine after a big feed. It's really important to avoid them at these times. Quite often very pregnant ewes and very new lambs will be 'in by' (close to the farmhouse or farm buildings) so the farmer can keep an eye on them. For this reason, when we are landing, fields empty of stock (animals) are, of course, best; but if they are not available try to pick one away from buildings.

Lastly, do go and see a lambing if you have the opportunity. It is the most wonderful part of the farming cycle and a joyous thing to behold.

Hay making.

The next part of the farming year is haymaking. This is where grass has been left to grow and is cut to make feed for the autumn and winter when grass no longer grows (the temperature needs to be consistently above about 11°C for grass to grow). Opening a hay bale in the dark and wet of midwinter is wonderful, as in the centre it still smells of warm summer days. Once the grass has grown long enough to make hay the weather needs to be dry for about five days in order for the hay to be cut and laid out in rows which are 'tedded' (turned over) once or twice a day to dry properly. After three or four days the hay will be dry and can be gathered and tied into bales which are stored in a barn. This is why you suddenly see all the farmers out during a dry spell in summer, working late into the night with tractor lights on so they can get the hay in while it is dry.

For our purposes as pilots, it is worth being aware that grass meadows which are ready for cutting have high grass which needs to be standing in order to be cut. If we land on them and compress the grass it will not be able to be cut and this can mean that the farmer does not have enough feed for their flock in the winter, or at least a loss of income. Unfortunately from the air one green field looks much like another and so it is not really possible for us to decide not to land in a haymeadow which has not yet been cut until it is too late. If you do find yourself in one ideally bunch your glider and make as little compression of the grass as possible to get out of the field before packing up.

The rows of cut hay are also really vulnerable to us. If the grass is knocked out of the row it has been laid in, then the bailer (the machine which makes the hay bales) will not be able to pick it up and tie it into a bale. This means that there is less hay to feed the animals and cut grass will be left on the field which is - strange I know - actually bad for the field because patches of rotten grass stop the cut grass from regrowing.

With that said, fields which have been bailed will often still have the hay bales in them because the process of moving them to be stored is less important than cutting them while the weather is dry. Fields with hay bales (or plastic-wrapped haylage bales) in can be spotted from very high up and make good landing options because the space in between the bales will have been cut and will not be needed again for some months. This makes it a nice even field without even long grass in it. It's usually fairly flat as it needs to be for the machines to make hay. So it's good for us for landing and it should also be the least problematic for the farmer. Happily such fields are easily spottable even from great height and will usually have some sort of road access as farmers will wish to get farm vehicles in, which means we can easily walk out for the retrieve.

Final Thoughts

Once the hay has been made and stored ready for the winter all that is left for the farming year is for the lambs, which now look like ordinary sheep, to be taken to market in the autumn. The care and attention of the year's work comes down to the one moment when the livestock auctioneer brings the hammer down and you know how much your work has brought you. Where once it was said you could pay the mortgage on your farm from the wool alone, now farmers are struggling to make ends meet from all of their sheep put together - a way of life which predates the coming of the Romans. After that there is a brief 'rest' when you do all of the other jobs needed on a working farm, and then the cycle starts again with tupping just a few weeks later in the autumn.

Hopefully this has been a brief and helpful overview of what all the people around us are doing when we sit on launch waiting for the weather. There are just a few last comments which may help relations further. Firstly, even when not in the middle of lambing, farmers tend to be quite taciturn because they spend a lot of time on their own working hard. Even when they're in a good mood they can seem a bit abrupt and grumpy but don't take this to heart as most of them are really lovely people who care deeply for their families, friends,

and the land they work. If you do land in someone's field do be kind to them, maybe offer them a little something, and you may end up with a cup of tea or even a lift. There will always be some people who think that we shouldn't fly at all and that land is theirs and only theirs, even when there is a footpath or the land has been left for everyone's use. Loud as they can be, these people do not represent farmers any more than the worst of us represent free fight pilots.

To make sure that we don't upset people who would otherwise be our friends it is helpful to have the information above (thank you so much for reading) and also to know the Countryside Code so you do not do things like climbing over a dry stone wall - which seems like such a trivial thing to do but could cause stock to get loose and cause a nightmare for a farmer; and will certainly mean an afternoon lost to patching the wall shortly afterwards which should have been spent moving forwards instead of standing still. Similarly, we are mostly pretty able bodied (and the wonderful free flight community is great at helping people who are not) so it doesn't hurt to park 20 metres from a gate and walk that trivial extra distance rather than saving that inconsequential effort and meaning that a farmer loses an afternoon's work because they cannot turn their farm vehicle and trailer into their field.

If farmers don't see us, or take the time because they are working elsewhere, to say thank you for doing these small actions then please let me say so now. Thank you. Thank you so much. These small things like avoiding working fields where possible, walking to a field gate to exit, or parking a short distance further away from a road gate, make such a difference when you are working on a farm and are tired but still need to look after your animals.

There is much more to sheep farming - it is an endlessly interesting field - and I will be really happy to talk to you about it on the hill if you have any questions. With just a few tweaks to the way we treat the land around us we can make sure that, with very little inconvenience to ourselves, we get on with the people who work the land and, in many cases, have been the guardians of it for generations.

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