

The Great Sheep Exchange II

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History is replete with tales of journeys lasting months and even decades, distances measured in the thousands of miles, and destinations reached despite seemingly insurmountable odds. This is no such heroic tale. Rather, it is a belated account of a fun and productive day in the lives of several Soay breeders who gathered to exchange sheep and talk about them.

Let me set the stage. It is June 19. The shepherds of Saltmarsh Ranch and Blue Mountain Ranch have just returned from the Great Sheep Exchange I, a day during which Kate Montgomery and Steve and I collectively drove more than 1100 miles in order to exchange 22 sheep among several farms. The planning consisted almost entirely of deciding which sheep to sell and which to buy, but I can't resist sharing the itinerary with you. We left our farm near Jacksonville, Oregon at dawn, bearing two empty dog crates. We met Jen Bailey at the Yoncalla Exit off I-5 (we arrived within 2 minutes of each other) and picked up her trailer with 4 sheep in it for Kate. We met Kate at the Delta Cargo Lot at PDX, arriving within 5 minutes of each other. Whereupon, 9 of the sheep we were getting from Kate were transferred from her truck (see below for description) to the trailer; the 4 sheep going from Jen to Kate left the trailer for the truck; the 4 sheep going from Kate to Jen made the reverse trek; Vega, who we were getting from Carla Marcus via Kate, went from the truck to Kathie Miller's big Berci Box; and the 4 sheep from Kate going to Kathie went in dog crates. Still with me? Kate then returned to Blue Mountain Ranch with her 4 new sheep. We stopped off first at Skylonda to deliver Jen's 4 sheep, thence to Merlin to drop off Kathie's 4 sheep (actually, the sheep were headed to California for Annika Rasmussen but that gets too complicated) and to partake gratefully of pecan pie and hot tea before landing at home with our 10 new sheep. Whew! All of us were so delighted with the resulting modifications to our flocks, and at the same time so dismayed that the pace and scope of the exchange had prevented any socializing beyond a few melodious grunts as sheep were passed here and there, that we determined to modify our approach to produce a somewhat more civilized occasion next time around.

On to the GSE II. With the possibility of up to six farms participating, negotiations rivaling the "what shape table" of Henry Kissinger days began in earnest over the location. Which exit off I-5 was precisely halfway between Port Angeles and Jacksonville? Was Steve entitled to pick the site because we were providing a ride for Kathie and Jen? Did Kate get the edge because she was driving alone? What about the Puyallup contingent, Gevan and Michelle Marrs, who were postponing a vacation trip to the Midwest in order to attend GSE II? Which rest stops were open in these days of tight budgets? Did they have suitable facilities for picnics ... with sheep? Should we bow to nostalgia and meet in the Delta Airlines cargo area at PDX again? In the event, we settled on East Delta Park near the Washington/Oregon border on the recommendation of a helpful Portland Parks Department employee who to this day probably assumes that my request over the phone for a place "where our pets can stretch their legs" referred to poodles or at most a golden retriever.

Let it be said that this group was, if nothing else, punctual. Everyone arrived at the park within 15 minutes of each other having driven a combined total of almost 700 miles. Do let me know if you get tapped to plan one of these get-togethers. I can tell you how much time to allow for getting off the freeway in order to pick someone up at the exit, moving dog crates (empty or with sheep in them) between vehicles, procuring the obligatory McDonald's coffee mid-trip, attending to nature (human and puppy subsets), and how far ahead of time to call those waiting to be picked up so they won't cool their heels at the pickup spot. Not sure how to use this skill on a resume but I'm open to suggestion.

Transportation is, of course, only one facet of a successful, socially-oriented sheep exchange. Food and drink must be carefully considered and in our case, nearly beaten to death in planning. The Social Division of the GSE II consumed much bandwidth but the result was worth it. We feasted on a potluck of garden tomatoes, Michelle's delicious Mediterranean Potato Salad (recipe upon request from Woodland Creek Farm), cheese and crackers, Asian-style Green Beans, and Kate's legendary wild mountain blackberry pie. The author declines to remember what were the beverages of choice.



Above, from left to right:
Jen Bailey, Skylonda Ranch
Gevan and Michelle Marrs, Woodland Creek Farm
Kathie Miller, Southern Oregon Soay Farms
Steve Weaver, Saltmarsh Ranch
Kate Montgomery, Blue Mountain Soays
Molly Weaver (Soay sheep herder in training)

Left:
Priscilla Weaver (Author and Head of the Social Division)

In the “best laid plans” department, we had thought to engage in a little volleyball or at least a lung-clearing brisk walk around the park, but it was not to be. Once we gathered around the picnic table and started talking Soay, all thoughts of other recreation vanished. From Gevan’s multi-colored chart showing some of his breeding dreams to an exchange of experience and lore about mineral supplements and copper and seaweed salt, to a comparison of horn pictures looking for the elusive “St. Ana” look, to the issue of eagle control, it was non-stop talking about sheep. I’m sure we were the only group picnicking that day at East Delta Park who spread out labels from feed bags on the picnic table and huddled over them in intense discussion while baseballs whizzed around us and our totally unruly border collie puppy raised an unholy fuss at being ignored in favor of those smelly Soay creatures who give her too little respect – in her opinion.



Steve, Gevan and Kate, our three scientists, organize the logistics of sheep shuffling...

...while Jen is entrusted with hanging on to a ewe in transition. Thank goodness for horns!

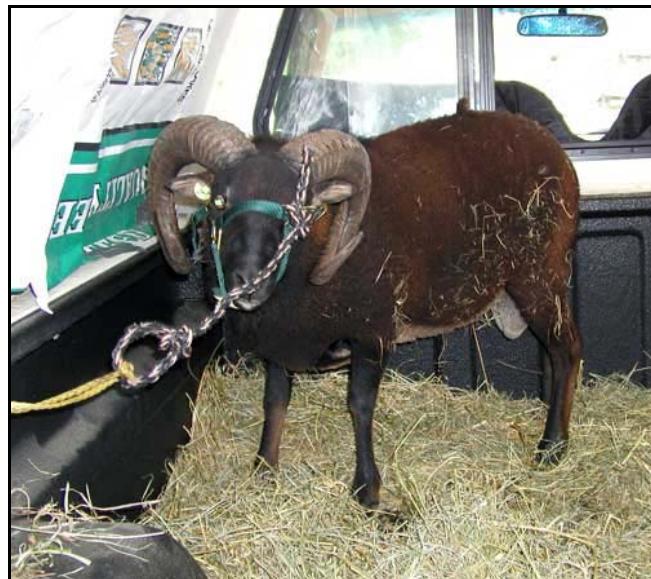
Atlas in the infamous Berci Box (on left) and four more sheep in "dog" crates await their turn.



All too soon it was time to move the sheep from one vehicle to another and return to our farms for the nightly chores. We knew when we counted sheep noses that the real reason for the trip was to share Soay lore. Whereas 22 sheep were exchanged the first time around, GSE II involved swapping a mere 7 animals, accompanied by a number of rude comments about our middle-aged (not you, Jen) bodies' ability to lift even the "little" Soay between vehicles. For those of you who remember Atlas, be assured that he has returned safely to Blue Mountain Ranch, making the journey home cross-tethered in the back of a Neolithic blue pickup with a camper top.



Steve and Kate extract Atlas from the Berci Box...



...and, voila, he's in the back of Kate's pickup, ready for the trip home to Blue Mountain.

Hundreds of miles and e-mails later, we look back on GSE II with fond memories. We were sorry Claudia Pettis was unable to join us, and we hope she'll be able to make it next year. Perhaps we can persuade her to start expanding her flock of Soay again! If anyone reading this article is interested in buying and selling Soay among the other breeders who likely will be reconvening next spring when the 2006 lambs are ready for sale, and you're willing to endure the quizzical looks of "normal" park users, we invite you to join the merry band of pranksters for GSE III. Until then, keep track of your best portable recipes and be thinking about which of your sheep you are willing to part with.