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Observations . . .

on the

Breeding Performance of Merinos at *ABYDOS STATION*

By H. SUIJDENDORP, B.Sc.(Agric.), Regional Adviser, North-West Branch

ABYDOS STATION is situated in the spinifex country some 90 miles inland from Port Hedland and is one of several stations in the area which were abandoned about 15 years ago, following upon a marked decline in their sheep-carrying capacity extending over a number of years. Abydos and the adjoining station, Woodstock, were purchased by the West Australian Government in 1946 as a site for research into local pastoral problems.

Considerable work on encouraging the regeneration of suitable native vegetation by "deferred grazing" has been carried out at Abydos, and some portions of the property are now capable of supporting one sheep to five acres.

During the past two years, these areas have been used to collect further information on the breeding performances of Merino sheep under local conditions.

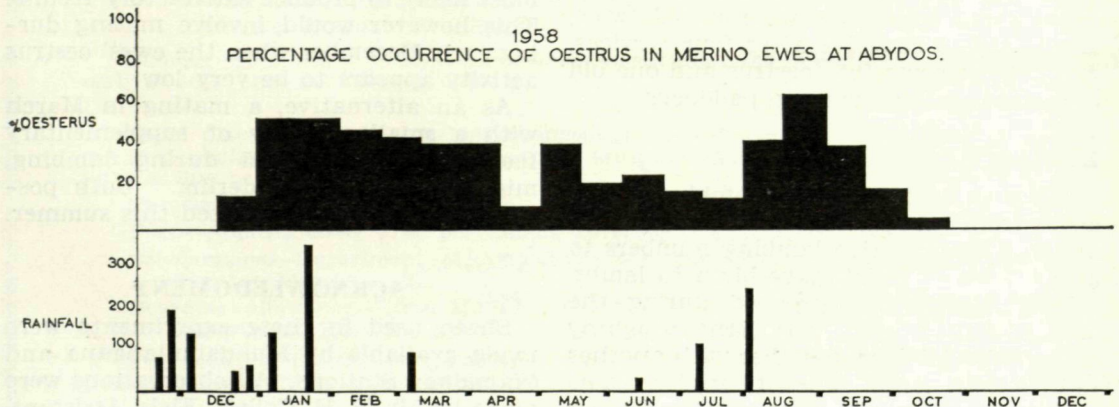
OCCURRENCE OF OESTRUS

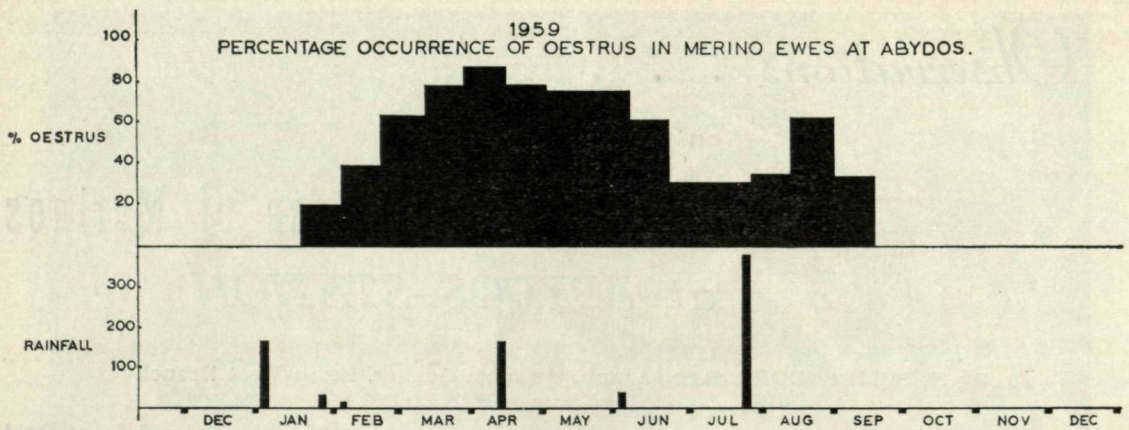
Observation of the oestrus or "heat periods" of ewes carried out in 1958 and 1959 gave the results shown on the accompanying diagrams, which also show the rainfall patterns in the area for those two seasons.

Both years were unusual in that good rains were recorded in the July periods following prolonged dry spells. These rains resulted in a good flush of green feed with a corresponding high level of oestrus in August.

Earlier in the year the high level of oestrus activity did not occur until April although in the 1957-58 season, good rains fell early in December.

These patterns are not markedly different from those observed elsewhere in Australia. It is interesting to note that the level of activity was higher and more prolonged in the light rainfall year of 1959. This again appears to be a common pattern of breeding behaviour in these areas—a light rainfall year appears to lead to





greater breeding activity but this is offset by a lower rate of lamb survival.

LAMBING OBSERVATIONS

Apropos of this, of 50 lambs dropped in June, 1958, under very dry conditions 20 died within 24 hours of birth as the ewes had little or no udder development. The remaining 30 survived to maturity but their weight gains were very low, averaging about $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. per day.

In 1959, 40 ewes were put with the rams on February 25. Conditions were very dry during the mating period as only two inches of rain had fallen during the summer.

Maximum temperatures varied from 108° to 112° F. with minima of 77° 80°. Locally-bred rams were used.

Mating.

Observations showed that 28 of the ewes were served once, nine were served twice, one failed to conceive after four services, one did not come into oestrus and one old ewe died on the mating paddocks.

Lambing.

Three ewes died before lambing, probably from pregnancy toxæmia, which brought the effective lambing numbers to 34 ewes all of which gave birth to lambs.

Four lambs were dropped during the rain and these were very light, weighing under 5 lb. All four, together with another light-weight lamb, failed to survive. The remaining 29 lambs, representing 72 per

cent. of ewes mated, were weaned successfully.

Their birth weights varied from 7 to 9 lb. apart from one exceptionally heavy lamb which weighed 11 lb. Weight gains were good for native pasture and averaged $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. per day for the first 24 days with no marked differences between individuals.

It must be stressed however, that in most years the survival rate would have been very much lower. In general, no rains are expected to fall as late as July-August and the ewes would normally be on dry innutritious feed at a time when they require extra nourishment for lambing and milk production.

COMMENT

To ensure adequate nutrition at the most critical period—during the later pregnancy period and during early lactation—an April-May lamb-drop would be most likely to produce satisfactory results. This however would involve mating during early December when the ewes' oestrus activity appears to be very low.

As an alternative, a mating in March with a small quantity of supplementary feeding, prior to and during lambing, might be worth considering. Both possibilities will be investigated this summer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Sheep used in these experiments were made available by Mundabullangana and Warralong Stations. All observations were made by Mr. R. H. Collett, Field Assistant.

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