

# Identifying flies should be a hot topic

Know your blackbottles from your greenbottles, says sheep vet **Richard Knight**



**Richard Knight**  
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As the weather warms up, we will be exposed to the usual plague of flies. How many folk know their head-flies from their blackbottles? This may sound a bit basic to many of you, but when clients come in for “fly treatments” that’s exactly what they’ve just seen – flies, rather than a particular type.

The head-fly (*Hydrotaea irritans*) is identifiable by the orange colour at the base of each wing. Intense swarms of head-flies, and the rasping of their mouthparts on exposed skin, irritate both the sheep and the skin, attracting more flies. These flies only produce one generation a year. Egg laying occurs on dead vegetation or faeces, then larvae hatch in the autumn before entering a diapause until the following

spring. Pupation follows, then hatching – which peaks in mid-summer. Skin damage can occur naturally at the base of growing horns, therefore horned sheep tend to be worst affected.

Synthetic pyrethroids are the prevention and treatment of choice. Try and get sheep owners to apply them before the emergence of flies, or at the very least when they are first seen – hence the reason you need to be able to identify different types.

Blowflies are another case entirely, with greenbottles (*Lucilia sericata*) and blackbottles (*Phormia terrae-novae*) able to strike normal skin after being attracted by damp, dirt, faeces and urine, or a combination of all four! Bluebottles (*Calliphora*) may come along later to join the party, and even cannibalise other maggots.

As the weather warms up, the life cycle from egg to an



Image: Ian Webb

**Horned sheep are more vulnerable to headflies**

adult female fly, laying eggs, can be complete in as little as seven days.

After the fly has been lured in to lay her eggs, these eggs hatch and progress to mature maggots in three to 10 days, which is when their rasping mouthparts, ability to introduce bacteria, and excretion of ammonia products all cause their nasty damage.

It’s well worth going through the data sheet with clients at the beginning of each fly season, as the subtleties of use of the blowfly strike prevention medicines are difficult for people to remember from year to year.

Maybe rather than heralding the arrival of the first swallows, we should be looking to mark the arrival of these flies instead!

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Treatment for this should really occur before the adults are seen, which is why I’m stressing that they need to be identified, as growth inhibitors such as cyromazine and dicyclanil are the way forward to prevent the progression of larvae to maggots. In established strikes, a knock-down synthetic pyrethroid is usually needed in addition.