Winter bites with its teeth and lashes with its tail,” or so the proverb goes and I’m inclined to agree. There are varying ideas as to when winter officially ends, but there is no doubt that in the highest reaches of the Yorkshire Dales we have disproportionately more winter than summer.

February might be the shortest of months in the calendar, but it is the one that really tests the mettle of the shepherd and flock. This is the most cheerless, lonely and barren of landscapes when frozen. There is no respite from the brutal icy blasts of wind that roll in across the moors leaving a scant sprinkling of snow and with it an endless monochrome vista.

“On a bitterly cold winter’s day, ravenous sheep jostle for position, snatching mouthfuls of hay
This is a place that can invigorate, inspire and, at times, infuriate. My fingers might be raw and my senses numbed with cold, but time spent up here watching the flock is not time wasted. Being vigilant now, keeping a close eye upon the weather is of the utmost importance, for if there were to be any talk of a storm then the sheep need bringing down off the hills and into safer ground.

The flock awaits my arrival expectantly, having been alerted daily to the impending delivery of hay by a series of whistles. A whistle carries further than a voice and brings the more adventurous sheep that have strayed further afield streaming back towards me, nose to tail in orderly fashion, in single file on the sheep trods. These well-worn paths through the heather follow the contours of the land and afford the sheep safe passage through perilous ground consisting of blanket bog and peat hags.

Every day, a fresh unsoiled area needs to be found where the flock can be foddered cleanly. The pale green-blue tinged hay brings a hint of colour to the scene, flecks of yellow within, fragile petals of dried buttercups, a distant reminder of the warmth and colour of summer. The sheep mill around. Ravenous, they jostle for position, snatching mouthfuls of hay, wisps of which are picked up and blown away, rolling across the moor like tumbleweed in a Western film.

On most occasions it’s just the sheepdog and myself, though Nancy (now aged two-and-a-half) still likes to travel in the backpack as I do my rounds, master of all she surveys. That’s if she can see at all, as the balaclava keeps twisting around as she cranes her neck to see what is going on. If I turn my head to the side then I can just about catch a glance of a vision in pink complete with a runny nose and a look of surprise. The wind blows, the air is cold and her cheeks are pink, but what a sparkle she has in her eye. I imagine that her senses are in overdrive with the smells, taste and sounds of life on a hill farm.

All of my children have travelled via this conveyance; held securely by the straps, they don’t move, even when I lean forwards to pick up canches of hay. She wears an all-in-one padded warm suit with bootees attached and mittens that I tie in place with baler twine. Cold hands and feet are a misery, but I have discovered over time that mittens for baby are essential in the prevention of bald patches on my head. Tearing my hair out over a missing sheep or a bad forecast is one thing, but Nancy’s tiny fingers tearing clumps of my hair out is a definite no-no.

It might seem lifeless at this time of year, but romance certainly isn’t dead in this neck of the woods. Without fail, every year, my husband Clive will save a few quid by bypassing the newsagents to craft his very own Valentine’s Day message. He is aided and abetted, in his visually spectacular super-sized declaration of his affections, by the sheep. With a little thought and preparation he is able to feed his heaf of sheep in the shape of a heart while I watch him from a vantage point across on the opposing hill end.

Maybe I should get him to raise the baa (sorry) and request that he makes more effort this year by spelling out “I love ewe”.

“It might seem lifeless, but romance certainly isn’t dead in this neck of the woods”
The sea trout is an interesting fish. It’s a brown trout, *Salmo trutta*, which spends part of its life at sea – the so-called anadromous lifestyle, matching that of the salmon.

Not all brown trout do it, but some, generally females, go through physiological changes to deal with salt water, turning silver with faint black spots, and then, at anything from six-inch smolts to adults, go to sea for a year or two. There they eat fish, small crabs, shrimps and prawns, which give them their prized pink-red flesh, and they grow bigger than river-resident trout, averaging about two feet (60cm) but sometimes twice that. They return to their natal rivers in summer, re-adopting brown-trout colouration, and spawn in autumn or winter before returning to sea.

**John Worrall** joins the crew of a Bridlington sea-trout fishing coble off the Yorkshire coast

On the Yorkshire coast and up to Northumberland, fishermen catch them with fixed T- or J-nets, those initials describing the nets’ shapes.

The Yorkshire fishery is about the T-net, which comprises two sections: the lead, around 320 feet (100m) long with a floated top rope and weighted bottom rope, running out from close to the beach; and then the cross member of the T, known as the monk, of similar length but actually a double net deployed in a shallow diamond shape parallel to the beach,
each arm with two consecutive narrowing chambers.

The theory is that when fish moving towards their rivers encounter the lead, they swim along it, away from the beach, and finish up in the monk.

Sea trout tend to react differently to salmon when encountering the lead, hitting it harder and often getting gilled, whereas salmon are more circumspect, bumping it gently and moving along, eventually entering the monk chambers, where they swim freely until extracted. That selectivity has significance for the future of the fishery.

Bridlington-based fisherman Rich Pockley is one of twenty-seven licensed T-netters on the Yorkshire coast. For much of the year, he sets pots for lobsters and nets for sole, working single-handedly with his twenty-eight-feet (8.5m) catamaran, Orcat, but in summer, he teams up with local fisherman Danny Major because setting a T-net is a two-handed job. And they use a second boat, a sixteen-foot (5m) pebble coble, Provider, whose shallow draft can get closer to the beach.

Each section of net is fixed to stakes driven into the seabed at stages down to the low-water mark. The monk is set first, its ends attached to their fixing points, with the seaward part of this double net then stretched out to a central fixing point, and the shoreward part stretched and fixed in the opposite direction so that the monk is opened up into that shallow diamond shape.

The seaward end of the lead is then attached to the same anchoring point as the outer edge of the monk, from where it is paid out across the monk and...