

## Safety in Handling Small Ruminants

Our topics for this week are:

- Handler safety measures for working with small ruminants
- Small ruminant safety and control of predators

The fears of small ruminants are identical to those of cattle. For example, moving into dark areas, loud noises, high-pitched noises, flapping materials, shiny objects, unfamiliar people, and dogs can cause fear in small ruminants. Small ruminants usually move in groups and are distressed when removed from a herd. They will bunch up in 90 degree corners of holding pens. They will not readily intermingle with other breeds and tend to stay near family units within a herd. Their social structures, like cattle, include leaders, dominants, and submissives, and their vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch senses are similar to cattle.

### Handler Safety

#### Sheep

Sheep can be deceptively dangerous. If pressured or startled, adult sheep can bolt en masse and knock handlers down, trampling them. Even a single sheep is capable of knocking a handler down often in an attempt to rejoin a flock. Children that are 5-years-old, or less, should not be allowed in pens with sheep.

Rams are particularly dangerous. Rams are heavier and stronger than the average human and may butt with enough force to kill a handler. Bending over in a pen with a ram can be perceived as a challenge and can result in being charged. Handlers of sheep should never take their eyes off of a ram.

Ram lambs being raised for breeding should be minimally handled. Otherwise, the ram lamb may lose its inherent respect for humans and become dangerous as an adult. It should not be played with by patting it on its head, or otherwise encouraged to butt. Rams will back up in preparation to charge with their head tucked low. Also, stotting or pronking is a stiff legged jump that is used by small ruminants to signal alarm to a perceived threat. Moving a ram with one hand under its jaw aids in controlling its attempts to be aggressive. Stepping 90 degrees to the side at the optimum time when charged by a ram is an effective defense tactic when needed. Throwing water on a ram during a charge may discourage some from further attempts to ram a handler. A dangerous ram can be hooded with a leather "ram shield" to see only down and to the rear.

Rams that are not familiar with each other will butt one another with risk of serious injury. To allow a few days of acclimation, they should be put together in a small pen to eliminate the ability to get a run at each other. A side hobble (a strap from front to hind leg on the same side) can also be used to discourage ramming. Attaching a clog (wood block) to a foreleg with a one leg hobble will also discourage ramming (and jumping fences).

#### Goats

Goats can be very gentle, but they do not tolerate rough treatment and will butt when provoked.

Bucks are particularly dangerous after they reach puberty at 5 to 10 months of age. Signs of puberty include urinating thin streams of urine on their legs, mouth, beard, bellies, and lower aspect of their chest. Scent glands near their horns become active and secrete a strong odor that they will try to smear on animals and people to mark them as their possessions. Intermate rivalry or aggression becomes intense during the rutting season. Rutting season is fall to midwinter for some breeds, particularly dairy goats, but it can be year round for other breeds, primarily meat goats. Aggression can also be directed to humans, especially males. Handlers should never allow a rutting buck to get between the handler and his route of exit.

A goat handler should never ignore a buck goat during rutting season. If threatened by a buck, a handler should not stomp his feet or stare at the buck's eyes because both of these actions are indications of challenge to bucks. Bucks do not back up in preparation to charge as do rams. Signs of aggression can be staring, ducking the chin to present horns forward, pressing horns or forehead against an opponent, and rearing with or without a following charge. No one should be allowed to play with or tease a buck. Scratching or pushing on its head must always be avoided.

A handler may get the buck to delay or abort a charge by spreading his arms out and standing in an erect position to look as large as possible. If close to the buck, the handler can grasp its beard and hold on to it while walking backwards to an exit. If working with horned goats, a small X-shaped incision can be cut into old tennis balls so that they can be jammed on the end of the horns until the handling procedure is finished. Dangerous buck goats should be culled or a ring placed in their nasal septum as with dairy bulls for safer handling. Children should be forbidden to be around bucks. Adult bucks are especially aggressive to each other during mating season and should be housed individually during that season with aisles separating their pens.

## **Camelids**

Camelids generally have an aloof, nonaggressive attitude and are easy to handle. Males are more likely to bite, strike with their heads and necks, and bump with their shoulders. Alpacas tend to kick in defense. Camelids, especially female alpacas, will spit a fine mist of regurgitated rumen contents, if made angry. They usually warn a potential spit victim with gurgling sounds first. They spit at each other more often than on gentle handlers. A hand towel can be stuffed under the nose piece of a halter to protect against spit if handling a gurgling camelid.

Llamas are highly territorial. As a result, young gelded llamas, 18-24 months old, that have been socialized with other llamas can be removed and socialized with other species to become guardians for those species, such as sheep. Intact males cannot be housed together and should not be used as guardians.

Camelids, particularly alpacas, may attempt to avoid a handler by holding its head down. The handler must be prepared when near the camelid for the possibility that the head may suddenly be raised up. Otherwise, it could hit an ill-prepared handler in the face.

Camelids are believed to be easier to handle if "imprinted" (handled within the first few hours of life). However, overhandling a young sexually intact male that is raised in isolation to other camelids can result in a failure to respect human handlers, a condition called "bezerk male syndrome." Aggressive male camelids will put its ears back and its face dangerously near the handler's face. They may stick their head forward and horizontal with the ground and charge to bump the handler with its shoulders and try to knock the handler to the ground. If successful in pinning the victim, it will bite at the victims face, neck, knees, and groin. Excessive handling of

young male camelids should be avoided and orphaned male llamas that have had much human handling should be castrated before weaning.

Many aspects of handling horses can be applied to camelids, such as avoiding feeding treats by hand to discourage crowding and invasion of a handler's personal space, allowing crias to learn by watching well-behaved adult camelids being handled, learning to be led with a halter and lead rope by gentle pressure and well-timed release, and learning patience and respect by being tied by a halter and lead rope for increasing periods of time.

## **Small Ruminant Safety**

### **Care of Small Ruminants**

All small ruminants should be handled slowly and quietly. All have relatively fragile bones that can break much easier than horses and cattle bones. With the exception of some goats, small ruminants have thick wool or long hair that makes them susceptible to overheating and should not be exerted or crowded during warm or humid weather. Newborn lambs may be abandoned by ewes in a flock that is grazing large areas. Penning them together for the first days after birth allows the lambs to become stronger and the ewe to bond better with her lamb. When goats or camelids are used for carrying packs the packs should be balanced, properly mounted, and not exceed 20% of the ruminant's body weight.

### **Predator Dangers**

Small ruminants are prey to a larger range of carnivores than are horses and cattle. One-third of all sheep and goat losses are from predators. All small ruminants have an innate fear of carnivores, but they can become socialized early in life to the presence of dogs.

All small ruminants need protection from roaming carnivores, such as dog-proof ruminant enclosures or herd guardian dogs or donkeys. The leading predator of small ruminants in western states is the coyote, but in the eastern U.S. it is roaming dogs. Roaming dogs are usually not true predators. They are serial killers that chase sheep for fun rather than food and may maim them without a killing bite. In addition to coyotes and dogs, other predators of small ruminants include bears, cougars, bobcats, foxes, feral hogs, birds of prey (hawks, eagles), and carrion birds (vultures, ravens) also kill weak, injured, or low ranking sheep. Large flocks of sheep, sheep on open range, and those in areas with abundant predators should use 2 or more guardian dogs or other guardian animals.

Other means to guardian animals for reducing predators include putting bells on some ewes so that there is an auditory alert to a flock being chased. Mesh fencing that discourages predators, and gathering sheep in well-lit pens at night near a handler's residence can also be helpful.

### **Guardian Dogs and Other Guardian Animals**

Guardian animals are highly recommended for the safety of sheep and goats that are in open pastures. The animal most adapted to guarding sheep is the guardian dog, a member of a breed that has been selectively bred to guard sheep and goats for more than 6,000 years beginning in the mountains of what is now Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Most guardian dog breeds for protecting sheep appear somewhat like sheep which enables them to visually blend in with flocks.

Guardian animals are intended to protect flocks from predators and serial canine killers.

Care must be taken in approaching flocks when a guardian animal is present since a strange handler may be perceived as a predator. Guardian dogs are the most efficient guardians, but more than one is needed. Two should be available to chase a predator in increased confidence and safety while a third or more remains to protect the sheep from other predators. Guardian breeds are Akbash, Anatolian shepherd dog, Briards, Great Pyrenees, Komondor, Kuvasz, Maremma, Shar Planinetz, Spitz, and Tibetan Mastiff.

Single castrated (gelded) male donkeys or llamas can also be acceptable guardians if properly selected, prepared for guarding, and maintained as a member of a sheep or goat herd. Sexually intact male donkeys or llamas are too aggressive to sheep and goats, and sometimes people, and should not be used. More than one castrated male donkey or llama will bond with their own species rather than sheep and goats, if given the chance. Guardians that are not dogs must remain single to be effective. Standard-sized donkeys should be used because miniature donkeys are too small to protect a herd, or themselves, from dogs and coyotes. A female llama can also be an effective guardian if it cannot be used for breeding.

Gelded donkeys or llamas can be effective against coyotes which do not hunt in packs or single dogs, but are not effective against packs of dogs or wolves. Donkeys will sound an alarm (braying) and will bite and strike at invaders. Llamas tend to be more selective in guarding against real threats to a flock and not aggressive to innocent dogs, foxes, and other nonthreatening pasture invaders, than are donkeys.

All guardian animals have to be trained to protect sheep. Guardian dogs are first socialized with sheep at an early age (just after weaning) by being kept in separate, adjoining enclosures with sheep. Socialized guardian dogs can then be allowed in pastures with sheep between 4 months and 9 months. Guardian dogs should be socialized and routinely handled by owners but reside with the flock at all times. A guardian dog's focus should remain on the flock, while herding dogs bond and focus on the handler. Herding dogs should live with the owner; working guardian dogs should not.

Gelded male llamas should be socialized with other llamas until the age of 18 months to 2 years and then socialized for guarding sheep or goats. In that time, it will attain the physical size and strength needed and have exposure to the territorial behavior of its elders.

Donkeys should be introduced to small ruminants prior to a year of age, i.e., keep in adjacent pasture or paddock until it bonds with the sheep or goats. Guardian donkeys should be kept away from dogs, including herding dogs.

Llamas and donkeys have different qualities for being a herd guardian. Donkeys are often gregarious and seek human attention; llamas tend to be aloof. Llamas eat the same vegetation and require the same vaccinations as sheep and goats; donkeys have different feed, vaccination, and hoof care requirements. And finally, donkeys tolerate hot weather much better than llamas.

Care must be taken not to overfeed guardian animals or they will become complacent and lethargic.

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Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Adult rams, buck goats, and stud llamas can be dangerous to handlers, extremely dangerous during mating seasons.**
- 2. Male camelids that are pampered when young can become highly aggressive**

- as adults.**
- 3. Some breeds of dogs were developed to herd small ruminants; other breeds were bred to guard small ruminants.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.