

Risks of Handling a Ram

Our topics for this week are:

- **Inherent behavior of rams**
- **Innocent play with a ram that can cause them to become more aggressive**
- **Methods to avert or survive a charge by a ram**

Lots of children's stories involve sheep. Sheep are depicted as kind and caring. They may be threatened by others but they do not threaten anyone. That is mostly true and reflects the character of ewes and lambs. It is not the character of an adult ram.

An adult ram is extremely strong, can weigh 150 to 350 lb, and can run 40 miles an hour. They are aggressive, especially so during breeding season, and can easily kill an adult human. I have known this for a long time, but until recently when I was investigating some genealogy, I did not know that one of my great grandmothers was killed by a ram.

During evolution, species improvement required rams that could be the breeder of a flock to able to dominate and physically defeat lesser rams. Fighting other sheep and other species that challenges a ram is inherent in their nature.

Single purpose for Keeping a Ram

Rams have one purpose in life, which is to breed ewes. It is not to be a pet for a human. Ewes can be bred by artificial insemination, so keeping a ram is not necessary to be able to raise sheep. The incidence of injuries to humans by rams has decreased because fewer people attempt to handle rams, not because rams are less dangerous.

Raising a Ram

How a ram is raised in its 1st year of life significantly affects its aggressiveness towards humans. However, this may not be apparent until after the ram is a year of age, or older. Ram lambs should not be handled when not necessary and never rubbed or patted around its head. Ram lambs that begin to show aggressiveness should be caught and laid down and held on their side. They should only be released after they do not struggle.

Housing a Ram

Rams should be isolated from ewes, except when they are expected to breed. However, they should be housed with a companion wether. Rams should be contained in an area out of vision of where ewes are contained. Fences for containing rams must be escape proof. If more than

one ram will be housed together, they should first be contained together in a small pen just big enough for them to stand up and turn around in. Although they will wrestle, they will not have enough room to charge each other until they get used to each other's smells. Spraying their nostrils and genitals with a cheap cologne or Vick's vapor rub can speed the adjustment time to each other. Releasing them into a larger enclosure should be near dark and when they have not recently had access to water or food so that getting water and food will be an early distraction for them in a new, larger enclosure.

Preparing to Handle a Ram

If preparing to handle a ram, another person should assist. Never handle a ram without another person at least being present. You should carry a 3 to 4 foot long, 2 inch in diameter stick for distraction or as a means of pushing the ram away. Before entering a pen with a ram, remind yourself to never take your eyes off the ram and to never lower your head. If you drop something that you need to pick up, squat, keeping your torso and head erect while watching the ram.

Response to being Charged by a Ram

If planning to charge, the ram will back up. If you try to back away, the ram will interpret your movement as a challenge and will charge. Use your stick to strike the ground in front of you. This may confuse the ram and allow you a chance to escape. If it charges and you try to run away, the ram will outrun you unless you are very near a gate, the ability to climb a fence, or roll under it.

The safest response if there is no nearby escape is to walk toward the ram. This may confuse it and stop the charge. Your assistant may be able to distract the ram from continuing until you can escape. If not, and it continues to charge and you are agile, wait until the ram is close and has risen on its hind legs and then dodge to the side. Rams in full charge cannot quickly make a right turn. As a last resort, use your stick to strike at its nose. A ram that ever charges a handler should be culled and sent to slaughter.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Rams are not sheepish**
- 2. Rams should never be kept as a pet**
- 3. Handler body language can provoke a charge by a ram**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Handbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and can be found on Amazon as well as from other major book sellers.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 100 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.