

Catching Sheep and Moving Groups

Our topics for this week are:

- Approaching and catching sheep
- Moving groups of sheep
- Handling methods for sheep

Sheep became domesticated in Mesopotamia about 10,000 years ago. They were originally kept as sources of meat, milk, and skin. Later, they were selectively bred for their ability to grow wool. Sheep were also important symbols in religions. They were part of Greek mythology as the sheep with the Golden Fleece, the symbol of kingship. Aries, the ram, was the first sign of the Greek zodiac. Sheep were sacrificed in religious ceremonies by Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews. Several sheep-related terms are used in Christianity, e.g., flocks, shepherds, pastors, and Sacrificial Lamb of God.

Domesticated sheep are not native to the Americas. They were brought to the western hemisphere via the Caribbean islands by Christopher Columbus' second voyage in 1493, to Mexico in 1519 by Hernan Cortes, and to the southwest of what is now the U.S. by Francisco Vasquez de Coronado in 1540. The British brought sheep to Virginia in the early 1600s.

Adult sexually intact male sheep are called *rams*. Castrated males are *wethers*. Females are *ewes*. Young sheep are *lambs*.

Approaching and Catching

To catch an individual sheep, it is necessary to herd the desired individual with the *flock* ("mob", British) into a small catch pen with 10 to 15 other sheep. Temporary corrals can be created using welded wire at least 40 inches high and steel T posts, or similar fencing. Herding flocks into the pen can be facilitated with a properly trained, herding-breed dog.

Once the flock is in the pen, the handler should quietly approach the desired sheep straight from behind staying in their blind spot. The capture is done by placing one arm under the sheep's neck and the other arm behind the rump. If needed, the sheep may be briefly immobilized by grasping a thigh just above the stifle. This may give time enough to get the other hand beneath the jaws. Handlers should never grab or pull the wool.

If 90 degree corners are present in the pen, the handler can move the desired sheep toward a corner. Cornered sheep will face the handler, who grasps its head and neck with both hands and moves the sheep's front end to the side. The sheep will try to move forward and the handler grasps the loose skin of both flanks to slow or stop it and then the handler grasps the neck and rump.

Shepherd crooks are either neck (about 4 fingers wide at the bend) or for the hock (less than 2 inches wide at the bend). Neck crooks are safer for sheep, but leg crooks may be more useful for horned sheep. Leg crooks have the potential to injure legs if used roughly or if the sheep strongly resists.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Basic Equipment and Facilities

Sheep handling equipment is commercially available that are reduced size versions of the equipment used on cattle. Basic handling equipment for sheep includes collecting pen, crowding pen, alleyway, and sorting pens. Gates should be drop down. Optional equipment includes a sheep tilt table, squeeze chute with headgate, elevated platform, scales, foot troughs, dipping tanks, and loading ramp.

The collecting pen should provide 5 to 6 sq ft/sheep. The crowding pen should have an 8-ft radius. The alleyway should be up to 28 inches wide, at least 8 ft long, and 3 ft high with sloping sides that adjust to different size sheep. Higher alleyway sides may be needed for taller breeds. Alleyways are used for individual treatment and sorting. Alleyways should have solid sides but with a 4-inch gap at the bottom to allow air circulation from underneath. A squeeze chute tilt table is helpful in trimming hooves, checking fertility of rams, and performing multiple procedures on one sheep.

Because of their thick wool, sheep are better treated for external parasites using dip tanks than with sprays or pour-ons. The alleyway to the dip tank should be curved. Dip tanks should be 12 ft long on the top and 6 ft long at the level bottom. The other 6 ft are cleated slopes. It should be 2 ft wide at the top and 1 ft wide at the bottom, and 6 ft deep. Dipping is best done 1 week after shearing in the spring. Just two sheep are driven in at a time. Young lambs do not need to be sheared first and lambs under a month of age should not be dipped.

Packing Alleyway

A 3-ft alleyway can be used to pack groups of sheep facing the same direction. One handler packs the group with his legs and vaccinates, drenches, or ear tags one sheep at a time and then pushes finished ones behind him, gradually working through the whole group. Adult rams cannot be included since they become aggressive after being turned back behind the handler. The group can be cleared out of a packed alleyway by a herding dog trained to “back” sheep. To back sheep the dog jumps on the sheep’s back and moves toward the front of the group, jumps down and turns the sheep, and herds them out of the alleyway.

Moving Groups

Leading

Leading sheep can move sheep a short distance by enticing them to follow the handler who provides an opportunity for the sheep to eat a small amount of grain along the way. A ewe with a newborn lamb can be moved by a handler carrying the lamb near the ground (no more than a foot high) and the ewe will follow. Capturing the lead ewe in a flock and moving or leading her will result in the rest of the flock following. A bellwether (leading sheep with a bell on a collar) or a “Judas” goat can be trained to follow a handler and lead sheep.

Herding

Herding sheep is achieved using flight zones and balance points as with herding cattle. Unlike cattle, sheep do not stop and turn nor attempt to fight. If a sheep briefly strays from the flock, keeping the flock together will result in the stray sheep returning.

Sheep should be taught to herd in directions dictated by a handler. Teaching sessions in a small pen with at least 6 sheep consist of moving them around the pen at a walk and occasionally stopping them in a corner to rest. Practice sessions should be about 20 minutes for at least 3 consecutive days. Repeat herding exercises should be done once per month.

Herding sheep can be done very effectively by well-trained herding dogs. Herding dogs and guardian dogs can be of great help to shepherds of sheep, but in different ways. A herding dog is not a guardian dog, or vice versa. Herding dogs are usually moderate-sized (30-50 lb.) intense, workaholic athletes. Guardian dogs are large breeds often exceeding 100 lb. Guardians like to rest near flocks and watch sheep during the day, although they are protective and should become aggressive with possible predators. Guardian dogs are effective for goat herds, but goats do not flock together in danger like sheep and cannot be herded by dogs as effectively as sheep.

Herding dog breeds differ considerably and can be categorized as gathering, tending, and driving dogs. The gathering breeds are border collies, kelpies, Australian shepherds, collies, and bearded collies. Border collies and kelpies dominate in sheep gathering competition. A group of 3 sheep will scatter if over-pressured by handlers or herding dogs, but a group of 4 or more will usually not separate when herded. Herding dog trials use 3 to 6 sheep to better evaluate the dog's technique.

The tending breeds are Belgian Malinois, Belgian sheepdogs, Belgian tervurens, Bouvier des Flandres, Briards, German shepherd dogs, Beauceron Pyrenean shepherds, and Pulis. These were originally bred with the intent to have them patrol the perimeters of a flock and keep the sheep in a particular grazing area.

The driving breeds are Rottweilers, Welsh corgis, Old English Sheepdogs, and Australian Cattle dogs. They were originally used on sheep to drive them to market and assist in moving sheep in stockyards.

Sorting Panels

Sheep can be moved and sorted by herding into a small pen and using 4 ft portable sorting panels (hurdles). Groups of 3 to 4 sheep should be sorted at a time. Sorting individual sheep will cause a sheep to panic.

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

- 1. Sheep can be led short distances by handlers, with food lures, lead ewes, or Judas goats.**
- 2. Herding breeds of dogs are subdivided into those that gather, tend (guard), or drive sheep.**
- 3. Neck crooks are better than leg crooks for catching sheep without horns.**
- 4. Dip tanks are better for treating sheep for external parasites than spray or pour-on parasiticides.**

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

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.