

The Versatile Donkey

Our topics for this week are:

- **Natural behaviors of donkeys**
- **Proper handling of donkeys**
- **Uses of donkeys**

Donkeys have served as a beast of burden for humans for about 5,000 years. They have been used for riding, pulling wagons and carts, and guarding livestock, especially sheep from canine predators.

At about the same time that horses were becoming domesticated and used in the grassy plains of the Steppes of Asia, other members of the family Equidae, the donkey (ass) from Nubia in the northwestern, rocky, dry corner of Sudan were being domesticated in Egypt for transportation and the guarding of property. Donkeys from Italy are descendants of the Somali wild ass. Those from the rest of Europe are from the Nubian wild ass.

Six donkeys were introduced to the New World in 1495 at the request of Christopher Columbus on his second visit to the Caribbean islands. Donkeys (burro in Spanish; burro in English now infers a feral donkey) were later brought to Mexico and other sites throughout the New World by conquistadors. Donkeys and small mules were further spread in the southwestern United States by prospectors and miners. Feral herds of donkeys still exist in the Great Basin area of the West.

A male donkey is called a jack, and a female is a jenny. A mule is an offspring of a jack and mare. A male mule is a john and a female mule is a molly. A hinny is an offspring of a stallion and a jenny.

Natural Behavior of Donkeys

Donkeys evolved in rocky, arid, semi-desert conditions which required donkeys to have the ability to defend themselves from predators since they were unlikely to out run them. Food was scarce and large groups could not find enough food in one location. Their social structure became based on family units rather than herds. Hence, their social structure and reaction to danger is much different than with horses.

The family unit is typically a jenny, foal, and yearling protected by a dominant jack. Less dominant males usually form bachelor groups. Within families and bachelor groups, a donkey will form strong bonds with just one or two other donkeys and become very distressed if separated from their preferred herdmate.

Their ability to flee from danger is less than that of horses, so they are less flighty (less likely to easily startle and run) and more fighty (they are more likely to attack if threatened). They will bray loudly to either communicate with scattered members of the family unit foraging for food or to deter a predator. Mules retain most of these donkey characteristics.

Donkeys have a natural aversion to dogs. Desensitization to dogs usually requires a longer period than in horses.

Donkeys in the wild live in small groups. They tend to bond with a companion and become very distressed if separated. It is best if they bond with another donkey. If they bond with a horse or pony that will be removed from the pasture for training or work, the donkey will become distressed. However, donkeys or mules used as pack animals can become “bell sharp”, led by a bell on a buddy horse rather than a lead rope. They are not built for efficient flight, like horses, so they are less likely to bolt from novelties in their environment and more likely to freeze in place or fight if believed to be threatened. Donkeys become very territorial and are intolerant of new animals in their environment or smaller animals such as dogs, cats, sheep, and chickens if not desensitized to them. Because of their calm disposition, jennies have been used to teach foals to be led by a halter and lead rope and to develop patience in being handled.

Donkeys vary in size. Minis are under 36 inches, Standards are 36 to 54 inches, and Mammoths are taller than 54 inches. Each can carry up to 25 percent of its weight in combined tack, supplies, and rider.

Donkeys are highly gregarious and protective. They are vocal and communicate with loud noise similar to “hee-haw” called braying. Capturing a donkey that has had frequent handling when it was young is usually easy. Most will approach a handler, and others will stand still when moved to a corner. Separating a donkey from a herd is very difficult because they usually have a special buddy and do not like separation. It is best to move the herd to the desired location, capture the donkey wanted, and then move the herd back. If the buddy has been identified, it should be kept with the desired donkey, if possible. Head collars are convenient means of capture and restraint.

Routine Restraint

As with other animals, as little restraint as possible should be used with donkeys. It is good to talk to and pet donkeys, but a handler should avoid stroking their eyes, ears, and flanks which they resent.

Halters for ponies or horses can be used on donkeys, but many donkeys do not like their ears touched, so their ears should be avoided when haltering. Handlers should unfasten the strap that goes over the poll and refasten. The crownpiece should not be pulled over ears.

Donkeys can often be restrained by a head hug or hug with chin hold. The chin hold consists of placing a thumb into the bars of the mouth and grasping its chin. A halter or loop of rope around the donkey’s neck should also be present and held with the other hand, rather than

grasping an ear. If the donkey backs to escape the hold, the handler should go with it and guide it using the chin hold as a rudder to position its rump into a corner of a stall or pen.

Nose twitches are not well tolerated and donkeys will often strike out with a foreleg.

Leading and Tying

Donkeys that are frequently handled may be led with a halter and lead rope as with a horse. Those that do not lead by a halter and lead rope can be driven by the handler being on the donkey's left side and reaching over the donkey's flank to tap the donkey's right flank with his hand or a stick. If three people are available to move the donkey, one can lead while the other two use a tied loop to assist with the rump. Untrained donkeys may be small enough for 2 handlers to cradle in their arms and carry short distances.

Donkeys are tied by their lead rope in the same manner as horses, but tie rings must be placed lower than that for horses. The donkey should be tied at its withers height, or a little above. Donkeys are not as claustrophobic as horses. They can be tied closer than horses to a tie ring.

Riding, Guiding, and Driving

Adult donkeys can carry people who weigh up to about 100 lb. They have a much different conformation of their back and thorax than that of horses and ponies. Therefore, saddles must be made specifically for donkeys because pony saddles will not fit properly. Due to the shape of their chest, the saddle should be fitted with a crupper, a strap that attaches the back of the saddle to the base of the tail to prevent the saddle from sliding forward.

Depending on the style of training received, saddle donkeys can be guided by taps with a stick on the sides of their neck or by a bridle with a snaffle bit and reins.

On level ground, an adult donkey can pull up to 300 lb. when trained with long reins, a proper harness, and light cart.

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. Never use a donkey's ears as a means for restraint.**
- 2. Donkeys cannot outrun most adversaries, so their defenses are more vocal and confrontational than horses.**
- 3. Donkeys are smart, strong for their size, sure-footed, and can tolerate harsh environments better than horses.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 300 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.