

Approaching, Catching, and Moving Goats

Our topics for this week are:

- Approaching and catching goats
- Handling facilities for goats
- Moving and sorting goats

The domestic goat is a subspecies of a wild goat from eastern Europe and southwest Asia. They were domesticated first in India and then in the mountains of Iran about 10,000 years ago, being kept for their meat, milk, hair, and skin, as they are today. Goatskin bags have been valued for transport of wine and the production of *kafir*, a fermented milk drink. Goats are probably the longest domesticated livestock species due to their curiosity and ability to survive in a variety of environments. They were brought to the New World by the conquistadors and became well established on many Caribbean islands.

In some instances, meat-breed goats can be pack or draft animals. Wethers that are at least 34 inches high at the withers and weigh 200 lb. are generally used. Adult goats of that size can pack up to 20-25% of their body weight. Training with small packs can begin at 5 to 6 months of age. Adult meat-breed wethers of sufficient size and physical conditioning can also be taught to pull small carts.

Methods of handling goats vary and depend on if they are dairy, meat-producing, or wool-producing goats; brush clearers; or companion pets. Common dairy breeds are the Alpine, La Mancha, Toggenburg, Nubian, Oberhasli, and Saanen. Boer is the most common meat breed. Angora and Cashmere (Kashmir) goats produce fine fibers, mohair and cashmere. Angora wool is from Angora rabbits. Pygmy goats are companion pets.

Adult sexually intact male goats are ***bucks*** (billy is an older term). Castrated males are ***wethers***. An adult female goat is a ***doe*** (nanny is an older term). Young goats are ***kids***.

Approaching and Catching

Approach and capture should be done gently or the goat will become aggressive and try to butt. Signs of aggression in bucks are curled tail over back, raised hair on the back, sneezing and snorting, stamping the forefeet, and rearing up on its hindlegs. Goats do not bite or kick.

Domestic goats are curious and will come to a handler if he does another task in their pen. The handler should pet the goat, then gently restrain it by holding at the base of the skull with both hands or grasp its collar if it has one. A shepherd's neck crook can be used if the goat is evasive. Leg crooks should not be used due to the risk of leg injury.

Catch Pens

A catch pen is advisable, particularly for meat goats that are not frequently handled. The pen should be used to feed and water to desensitize goats to the catch pen for future captures and handling. To accustom them to a catch pen and handler presence, the handler should feed grain in a small pile for each goat and kneel down near them and talk to them. If a buck is in the group,

the handler must be watchful of his actions. Practice captures should be performed at a regular time when the goats are in the catch pen.

Neck Chains or Collars and Halters

Dairy goats often have neck chains or collars for handling and identification. Colored plastic chains or flat web collars can be used to identify groups of goats by age, family, productivity, or other criteria. Dog collars are hazardous because of the metal buckles which can become caught and cause strangulation. Collars that lace together or plastic chain collars are safer than buckled collars. Other goats will often chew off a herdmate's leather collar. Leather collars also trap moisture and will lead to bacterial or fungal infections. Nylon web or plastic chain collars permit better air circulation to skin and drying than leather does.

Plastic neck chains should break under moderate strain to prevent entrapment on a fence, by another goat's horns, or on other objects. Goats can be led by their collar or a separate leading collar with a leash can be used for leading and tying them for restraint.

Aggressive bucks should wear a neck chain. This allows them to be captured with a bullstaff. A halter with a lead rope can then be placed on their head and control exerted by the dual use of the staff and lead rope.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Basic Equipment and Facilities

Meat or milk goat handling equipment is commercially available that are reduced size versions of the equipment used on cattle. Basic handling equipment for meat goats includes collecting pen, crowding pen, alleyway, and sorting pens. Gates should be drop down. Optional equipment includes a goat tilt table, squeeze chute with headgate, elevated platform, scales, foot troughs, and loading ramp. Since goats are more independent and good jumpers, the sides of alleyways and pens must be higher (up to 6 ft) than those used for working with sheep.

Moving and Separating

Milk and companion goats should be trained to follow rather than attempting to herd them. Goats are more independent thinking than sheep. The Latin word *caprine*, referring to goats, is related to root for "capricious", meaning doing things on a whim. Rather than herding them, it is more effective to identify the lead goat, usually an alpha doe (herd queen), and capture and lead her so the others will follow to a smaller pen for sorting or capture. During breeding season, the alpha male buck will assume leadership and drive them from the rear of the group. By routinely feeding goats, they will follow the handler as they do the herd queen, but if the handler tries to drive them, they are likely to scatter, and if during breeding season, the handler may be challenged by bucks.

Goats do not like to move from light into dark. They like to move to more open spaces, uphill rather than down, into the wind rather than downwind. They do not like to cross water or go through narrow openings, and they hate getting wet.

Goats can be trained to be led by a halter, but most are led by a collar around their neck. Bucks may need a halter and a bull staff clipped to their collar to control their movement, preventing the handler from being butted or stuck by a horn.

Bucks have strong odors that will rub off on handlers. The odors come from scent glands

that are especially active during breeding season and the urine that they spray on their beards and front legs. Handlers should take care not to stand in front of bucks and within urination range of bucks during breeding season. Because of their odor and aggressiveness at breeding season, bucks are not handled as frequently nor can be handled as gently as does.

Dogs are generally ineffective in herding goats. Goats will climb, scatter, and fight, all of which are incompatible with effective herding with dogs.

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

- 1. Neck chains or collars facilitate handling of dairy goats.**
- 2. Goats can be led using a queen goat or food more easily than driving them.**
- 3. Dogs are generally not useful in herding goats.**

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.