

Natural Behavior in Sheep Compared to Goats

Our topics for this week:

- **Behaviors common to sheep and goats**
- **Characteristics of sheep**
- **Characteristics of goats**

Sheep and goats became the first domesticated livestock about 10,000 years ago by nomads in the Middle East. Domestic goats originated in Iran.

Appearance

Some sheep and goats have a similar appearance. Goats carry their tail up unless they are sick or frightened. Sheep carry their tails down. Sheep tails are often docked to reduce the risk of infections caused by feces smeared on and around the tail. Sheep have a philtrum (groove) in their upper lip; goats do not. Most goats have horns, and most sheep do not. Sheep horns curl more than goat horns do. There are more than 200 breeds each of domestic sheep and goats.

Behaviors Common to Sheep and Goats

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. Their social structures, like cattle, include leaders, dominants, and submissives. 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 vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch senses are similar to cattle.

Characteristics of Sheep

Sheep have the strongest social ties of any domestic animal. They hate to be alone but will act distant or aloof to animals other than sheep. The main defense of sheep is to run as a flock, sacrificing the young, weak, and slow on the periphery of the flock to predators to ensure the survival of the flock in general. In the wild, ewes form flocks of approximately 20 who are led by the oldest ewe. The oldest ewe with the greatest number of offspring is usually the flock leader. Within a flock, subgroups form, particularly among ewes and their direct descendants. The most dominant ewes will position themselves furthest from possible threats. Rams form separate smaller flocks. Horn size is a significant factor in horned breed flock hierarchy. Sheep are awake 16 hours a day and sleep 4 to 5 hours a day, which is much less than cattle. Sheep spend half of their daylight hours grazing short, young grass, and clover. Dawn and sunset are

avored grazing times. Sheep apprehend grass with their dental pad and lower incisor teeth and graze closer to the ground than cattle. Cattle cannot graze where sheep have recently grazed. Sheep prefer to graze on higher ground facing into the wind to better monitor for the smell of predators. Sheep communications include body language, visual, olfactory (smell), and vocal signals. Sheep vision is similar to cattle vision, except in those with long wool around their face. These “closed face” breeds have a portion of their range of peripheral vision blocked, called “wool blindness.” Sheep have good depth perception which allows them to move among rocks with sure-footedness. Lowering of the neck and head is a visual submissive posture. Stamping with a front foot is a threat for aggressiveness. Lowering and twisting the head is a horn threat suggesting aggression. Vocal communications include bleating to locate others or relate distress. Ewes “rumble” to lambs, and the “snort” of rams indicates irritation and possible aggressiveness. Odor is important among sheep for identification. They have three pairs of scent glands: suborbital face glands beneath their eyes, groin glands on each side of the udder, and interdigital glands between the toes on each foot.

Characteristics of Goats

Goats are herd animals, but unlike sheep, goats can be independent and will scatter if endangered. They are also more inquisitive, quicker, and more agile than sheep. Social status is more evident in goat herds than in sheep flocks. Each herd is led by a dominant female, the queen. The head buck is usually the oldest and largest. Wild goats form variable sized groups, but groups of 3 to 5 does are most common. Bucks group separately, except at breeding seasons. Horns, size, and age determine social dominance among able-bodied goats. Goats are browsers, eating weeds, leaves, vines, and shrubs while grazing for about half their daylight hours. They are more selective about what they eat than sheep. Goats try to avoid being caught in rain and will seek shelter from inclement weather more often than sheep. Goats will nibble to investigate and communicate. They will butt to play or to re-establish their dominance. Bucks will stamp and sneeze when acting aggressive. They will flick their tongue just before rearing to begin a charge to butt an opponent. Males have scent glands in their skin behind the horns, above their hocks on the inner surface of their legs, and under their tail which produce strong odors during rutting (mating) season. In addition, bucks will urinate on their face, beard, chest, and front legs. All these odors are rubbed on territorial markers and possessions, especially during mating seasons. When kids are handled and become frightened, they may shriek with childlike sounds to distract a handler and call for adult goat help.

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. Four or more sheep always herd as a group**
- 2. Goats will freely scatter if driven or frightened.**

3. Goats are quicker, more agile, and more curious than sheep.

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 Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and available from all major science book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 150 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.