

Moving Groups of Sheep

Our topics for this week are:

- **Herding and leading characteristics of sheep**
- **Sheep herding precautions**
- **Sheep herding dogs**

Care of Small Ruminants

All small ruminants should be handled slowly and quietly. All have relatively fragile bones that can break much easier than horses and cattle bones. With the exception of some goats, small ruminants have thick wool or long hair that makes them susceptible to overheating and should not be exerted or crowded during warm or humid weather. Newborn lambs may be abandoned by ewes in a flock that is grazing large areas. Penning them together for the first days after birth allows the lambs to become stronger and the ewe to bond better with her lamb.

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.

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.

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. Lambs should be allowed to bond with their mother for a few days after birth before they are allowed to join a flock.**
- 2. Identifying a bellwether sheep can aid in leading a flock.**
- 3. A trained herding breed dog can be extremely helpful in moving sheep flocks.**

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.