

## **Prey and Predator Behavior in Domestic Animals**

Our topics for this week are prey and predator animal behaviors:

- **Physical characteristics of prey animals and predator animals**
- **Hunting tactics of predator animals and defense techniques of prey animals**
- **Animal perceptions of humans as predators or as prey**

All domestic animals evolved as either meat eaters (predators) or food for meat eaters (prey). Common small domestic animals, i.e., dogs and cats, are genetically predators. Common large domestic animals, such as horses, cattle, sheep, and goats are genetically prey. Hogs and rats can be either, depending on the circumstances.

### **Predators**

Predators have eyes that are positioned forward in their skulls, which permits greater overlapping of the field of vision from right and left eyes, and improves depth of vision. Predators stare directly at their prey and are able to track the movement and judge speed of their prey.

Dogs are pack predators that run after their prey. They are instinctively more aggressive if in a group. They are more aggressive to humans with small stature, and if body language is fearful, especially when a human runs away as a prey animal would do.

Cats are solitary hunting, stalking predators. High-pitched sounds and wiggly movements stimulate their predator urges. They have explosive movements used to quickly pounce at their prey from a short distance away. If threatened and immediate escape is not possible, they will remain motionless as a first stage. If the threat continues, they will attempt to warn the threat away by hissing and striking. Finally, there will be an explosive attempt to flee or to attack and then flee.

### **Prey**

Prey animals have eyes that are located on the sides of their skulls. This reduces their depth of vision, but increases their range of vision and detection of motion. Prey animals monitor their peripheral environment to detect the presence of predators. They do not stare at predators, except to assess their intent and decide on a means of escape.

Cattle, sheep, goats, and horses are prey animals. Their primary defense tactic is to flee. Attacks usually do not occur except when fleeing is not an option. Prey animals seek protection in groups. Although they should not be separated entirely from herd members, horses, cattle, and hogs should be moved in small groups to avoid mob action by a large group. Sheep can be moved safely in larger groups.

Common situations that can elicit fear in prey animals are shiny objects, including sparkling reflections on water or shiny metal. High-pitched sounds are often made by prey captured by a predator, therefore clanging, squeaky, or hissing noises, such as gates, squeeze chutes, dandling chains, exhaust fans, and air hoses are frightening to prey animals. Rapid movements evoke fear, such as blowing plastic bags or fluttering banners or flags. Jerky movements by handlers can scare prey animals, as can fan blades that are turned off and blow with the wind. Anything that is unfamiliar in familiar surroundings can be frightening, including clothing, paper bags or cups, different flooring, different panels, puddles of water, or grates in an alleyway. Darkness or blinding glare is avoided by prey animals since either can impair their safety from predators.

### **Perception of Handlers as Predators or Prey**

A handler's body language may unintentionally mimic prey or predator behavior. Humans have predator eyes, directed forward. Because of this, staring at prey animals is perceived as a threat. Moving directly toward them is the pushing approach of a pack predator designed to encourage them to run before a kill. A human standing motionless is like that of a stalking predator, especially if the prey animals are being stared at. The least threatening actions are to have relaxed movements while approaching at an angle without looking directly at the animal. This is the demeanor of another grazing prey animal.

Dogs interpret a human running away from them as prey behavior. Staring directly at dogs or standing over them is considered a challenge for dominance. Playing with cats by wiggly a finger or toe can unintentionally invite a predator attack to a hand or foot.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

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

- 1. Predatory animals have forward focused vision with good ability to assess distance.**
- 2. Prey animals have wide field vision to better scan their surroundings**
- 3. Good animal handlers strive to avoid both predator and prey characteristics when handling animals.**

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](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 250 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.