

## **Donkey and Mule Natural Behaviors**

Our topics for this week are:

- **Differences between donkeys and their hybrids, mules and hinnies**
- **Physical abilities of mules compared to horses**
- **Mule behavior compared to horses**

### **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.

The term “burro” is Spanish for donkey. In English, “burro” infers a feral donkey. Donkeys and small mules were beasts of burden in the southwestern United States and favored by prospectors and miners. Large mules were preferred for agricultural work in the south and southeastern United States.

Mules are hybrids of the breeding of horses and donkeys. As a beast of burden (packing and pulling wagons and carts), mules have been preferred to horses since ancient times despite the more muscular hindquarters and pulling power of the horse. Mules can thrive on poorer food than horses, eat less per pound of bodyweight, drink less water (they sweat much less than horses), have thicker skin than horses and are less susceptible to saddle sores, and have much harder hooves, rarely requiring shoes to work. Their durability for work lasts more years than in horses.

Donkeys and mules also excel at surefootedness for travel in rocky, mountainous areas. Mules were the most desirable draft animals during the western migration in the U.S. Large mules from the southeastern U.S. were used to pull wagons across the plain states. Smaller mules from the southwestern U.S. were preferred as pack animals in mountainous passages.

A male donkey is called a jack (also called an ass), 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 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.

### **Mules and Hinnies**

Mules are bigger and more independent than horses, but like donkeys, they will not entrust as much leadership to humans as horses do. Mules will defer to human dominance, but they are less submissive than horses. They are less herd bound and less inclined to spook and bolt. Mules have exceptional strength and endurance and, from their donkey mother, relatively small hard feet designed for rocks and desert conditions. The manes of mules are roached (cut short) because the mane is stiff and sticks up getting in the way of a pulling collar. They are less athletic in turning and running than horses. Therefore, mules are superior to horses in some tasks and inferior in others.

Hinnies have more horse-like appearance than a mule. However, they tend to have more behavioral characteristics of a donkey since they are imprinted by their jenny mother, compared to mules being raised by their mare mother. Mules have longer ears than hinnies. Hinnies have

a more horse-looking head and their overall size is slightly smaller than a mule. They do not have a true forelock. The size of the dam affects the size of the offspring. Mules have more donkey-like color and hinnies have more horse-like colors. Mules are more common than hinnies because mules are larger and have more pulling power. It is also easier to breed a jack to a mare than a stallion to a jenny.

Mules and hinnies are handled similarly to horses. Horses do not forget rough handling but may forgive it to a certain extent with gentle handling later. Mules are less prone to forgive. Difficulty in handling mules may be from bad experiences the mule had in earlier life. A mule will remember specific individuals who have been unkind to them and wait for an opportunity at a later time to retaliate.

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. Compared to horses, mules are stronger, more feed efficient, and capable of working more years.**
- 2. Donkeys can be good livestock sentinels of danger and guardians of livestock.**
- 3. Hinnies are stallion - jenny hybrids with more horse appearance and donkey behavior than mules.**

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 200 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.