

Handling of Donkeys and Their Hybrids

Our topics for this week are:

- Handling of donkeys, mules, and hinnies
- Backpacking with donkeys and mules

Donkeys

Donkeys are highly gregarious and protective. They are vocal and communicate with loud noise similar to “hee-haw” called braying.

Approaching and Catching

Capturing a donkey that has had frequent handling when it was young is usually easy. Most will approach a handler, and others will stand still when moved to a corner. Separating a donkey from a herd is very difficult because they usually have a special buddy and do not like separation. It is best to move the herd to the desired location, capture the donkey wanted, and then move the herd back. If the buddy has been identified, it should be kept with the desired donkey, if possible. Head collars are convenient means of capture and restraint.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Routine Restraint

As with other animals, as little restraint as possible should be used with donkeys. It is good to talk to and pet donkeys, but a handler should avoid stroking their eyes, ears, and flanks which they resent.

Halters for ponies or horses can be used on donkeys, but many donkeys do not like their ears touched, so their ears should be avoided when haltering. Handlers should unfasten the strap that goes over the poll and refasten. The crownpiece should not be pulled over ears.

Donkeys can often be restrained by a head hug or hug with chin hold. The chin hold consists of placing a thumb into the bars of the mouth and grasping its chin. A halter or loop of rope around the donkey’s neck should also be present and held with the other hand, rather than grasping an ear. If the donkey backs to escape the hold, the handler should go with it and guide it using the chin hold as a rudder to position its rump into a corner of a stall or pen.

Nose twitches are not well tolerated and donkeys will often strike out with a foreleg.

Leading and Tying

Donkeys that are frequently handled may be led with a halter and lead rope as with a horse. Those that do not lead by a halter and lead rope can be driven by the handler being on the donkey’s left side and reaching over the donkey’s flank to tap the donkey’s right flank with his hand or a stick. If three people are available to move the donkey, one can lead while the other two use a tied loop to assist with the rump. Untrained donkeys may be small enough for 2 handlers to cradle in their arms and carry short distances.

Donkeys are tied by their lead rope in the same manner as horses, but tie rings must be

placed lower than that for horses. The donkey should be tied at its withers height, or a little above. Donkeys are not as claustrophobic as horses. They can be tied closer than horses to a tie ring.

Riding, Guiding, and Driving

Adult donkeys can carry people who weigh up to about 100 lb. They have a much different conformation of their back and thorax than that of horses and ponies. Therefore, saddles must be made specifically for donkeys because pony saddles will not fit properly. Due to the shape of their chest, the saddle should be fitted with a crupper, a strap that attaches the back of the saddle to the base of the tail to prevent the saddle from sliding forward.

Depending on the style of training received, saddle donkeys can be guided by taps with a stick on the sides of their neck or by a bridle with a snaffle bit and reins.

On level ground, a donkey can pull up to 300 lb. when trained with long reins, a proper harness, and light cart.

Lifting a Foot

Donkeys must be taught tolerance in having their feet handled when young, similar to horses. Handlers must not lift the feet as high as is typical of holding horses' feet. Instead, donkey feet should be held lower for their comfort, not above the handler's knee. If they are older and may have arthritis, their feet should be lifted as low as feasible.

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 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 opportunity at a later time to retaliate.

Adult, conditioned pack mules carry their load on rigid or soft pack (aparejos) saddles made for mules. A saddle pad or blanket is used under a rigid saddle. Thick pads are needed for pack saddles. Riding saddle blankets are too thin to be used as a pad for pack riding. Rigid saddles are made of wood (Sawbuck) or aluminum or fiberglass (Decker) and held in place by cinches, breechings, and breast collars. Sawbuck saddles have two cinches; Deckers have one. Rigid saddles are designed to allow the weight to be carried evenly on both sides of the upper

chest without pressure on the top of the spine. Heavier loads can be carried more comfortably with the Decker saddle.

Panniers are the detachable bag or box packs that are attached to saddles to carry the load. Manties are canvas tarps that are wrapped around the cargo. Sawbuck saddles are made for panniers and Deckers will carry either manties or panniers. Sawbuck saddles and panniers are preferred for the southwestern U.S. because packing is easier without picking up burrs, thorns, and insects that handling manties on the ground tend to adhere to. Decker saddles and manties are more common in the Northwest U.S. because when crossing streams and rivers, panniers can fill with water and prevent a pack animal from getting up if it slips while crossing. Soft pack saddles also distribute the load weight on both sides of the upper chest. Horses and mules can be used for packing but require a different shaped pack side bars than burros. The average pack weight for a horse is 175 lb., for a mule 225 lb., and for a burro 200 lb.

When leading a pack animal, the lead rope should not be tied. It should be loosely wrapped around the saddle horn and maintained on the downhill side in case the pack animal falls and the lead rope must be quickly released. If leading multiple pack animals, a breakaway string should be used on each animal's lead rope. The end of the lead ropes should not dangle closer than 18 inches from the ground. The most inexperienced pack animal should be the first after the rider's horse. Whenever resting on a slope, pack animals should be trained to face the downhill side. Otherwise if falling rocks startles them, they could jump backward and down the slope or off a ledge.

Mules can also be used for riding. Mules have thicker withers than horses which cause saddles slide forward easily, requiring the use of breeching or a crupper, and a breast collar. Army mules had their tail hairs trimmed into the shape of bells around the tail. If the tail was completely shaved, the mule was called a shavetail. This meant the mule was untrained. One bell meant it was trained only to pack. Two bells indicated it could pack and be driven to pull loads. Three bells, the highest rank, meant it could also be ridden.

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

- 1. Donkeys resist many restraints commonly used on horses.**
- 2. Donkeys are strong beasts of burden, but their abilities are limited and should not be exceeded. For example, riders of adult donkeys should not exceed 100 lb in weight.**
- 3. The maximum pack weight for a donkey should be 200 lb and cart load to pull should be no more than 300 lb.**

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 food 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.