

How to Handle Goats

Our topics for this week are

- **Recognition of normal goat behavior**
- **Moving and separating goats to be handled**
- **Physical restraint of goats**

Behaviors

Adult sexually intact male goats are bucks (billy is an older term). Castrated males are wethers. An adult female goat is a doe (nanny is an older term). Young goats are kids. 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. Horns, size, and age determine social dominance among able-bodied goats.

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.

When kids are handled and become frightened, they may shriek with childlike sounds to distract a handler and call for adult goat help.

Sanitation

A handler of small ruminants should wear appropriate dress to protect against skin contamination with hair and skin scales or saliva, urine, and other body secretions. Gloves should always be worn when handling the mouth or nose of sheep and goats due to the risk of contagious ecthyma (soremouth, orf). Ticks should be controlled. Basic sanitary practices should be practiced, such as keeping hands away from eyes, nose, and mouth when handling small ruminants, in addition to washing hands after handling them.

Approaching and Catching

Methods of handling goats vary and depend on if they are dairy, meat-producing, or wool-producing goats; brush clearers; or companion pets. Approach and capture should be done gently or the goat will become aggressive and try to butt. Signs of aggression in bucks are

curled tail over back, raised hair on the back, sneezing and snorting, stamping the forefeet, and rearing up on its hindlegs.

Domestic goats are curious and will come to a handler if he does another task in their pen. The handler should pet the goat, then gently restrain it by holding at the base of the skull with both hands or grasp its collar if it has one. A shepherd's neck crook can be used if the goat is evasive. Leg crooks should not be used due to the risk of leg injury.

Catch Pens

A catch pen is advisable, particularly for meat goats that are not frequently handled. The pen should be used to feed and water to desensitize goats to the catch pen for future captures and handling. To accustom them to a catch pen and handler presence, the handler should feed grain in a small pile for each goat and kneel down near them and talk to them. If a buck is in the group, the handler must be watchful of his actions. Practice captures should be performed at a regular time when the goats are in the catch pen.

Neck Chains or Collars and Halters

Dairy goats often have neck chains or collars for handling and identification. Colored plastic chains or flat web collars can be used to identify groups of goats by age, family, productivity, or other criteria. Dog collars are hazardous because of the metal buckles which can become caught and cause strangulation. Collars that lace together or plastic chain collars are safer than buckled collars. Other goats will often chew off a herdmate's leather collar. Leather collars also trap moisture and will lead to bacterial or fungal infections. Nylon web or plastic chain collars permit better air circulation to skin and drying than leather.

Plastic chains should break under moderate strain to prevent entrapment on a fence, by another goat's horns, or on other objects. Goats can be led by their collar or a separate leading collar with a leash can be used for leading and tying them for restraint.

Aggressive bucks should wear a neck chain. This allows them to be captured with a bullstaff. A halter with a lead rope can then be placed on their head and control exerted by the dual use of the staff and lead rope.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Basic Equipment and Facilities

Meat or milk goat handling equipment is commercially available that are reduced size versions of the equipment used on cattle. Basic handling equipment for meat goats includes collecting pen, crowding pen, alleyway, and sorting pens. Gates should be drop down. Optional equipment includes a goat tilt table, squeeze chute with headgate, elevated platform, scales, foot

troughs, and loading ramp. Since goats are more independent and good jumpers, the sides of alleyways and pens must be higher (up to 6 ft) than those used for working with sheep.

Moving and Separating

Milk and companion goats should be trained to follow rather than attempting to herd them.

Goats are more independent thinking than sheep. The Latin word caprine, referring to goats, is related to root for “capricious”, meaning doing things on a whim. Rather than herding them, it is more effective to identify the lead goat, usually an alpha doe (herd queen), and capture and lead her so the others will follow to a smaller pen for sorting or capture. During breeding season, the alpha male buck will assume leadership and drive them from the rear of the group. By routinely feeding goats, they will follow the handler as they do the herd queen, but if the handler tries to drive them, they are likely to scatter, and if during breeding season, the handler may be challenged by bucks.

Goats do not like to move from light into dark. They like to move to more open spaces, uphill rather than down, into the wind rather than downwind. They do not like to cross water or go through narrow openings, and they hate getting wet.

Goats can be trained to be led by a halter, but most are led by a collar around their neck. Bucks may need a halter and a bull staff clipped to their collar to control their movement, preventing the handler from being butted or stuck by a horn.

Bucks have strong odors that will rub off on handlers. The odors come from scent glands that are especially active during breeding season and the urine that they spray on their beards and front legs. Handlers should take care not to stand in front of bucks and within urination range of bucks during breeding season. Because of their odor and aggressiveness at breeding season, bucks are not handled as frequently nor can be handled as gently as does.

Dogs are generally ineffective in herding goats. Goats will climb, scatter, and fight, all of which are incompatible with effective herding with dogs.

Restraint of Individual Goats and Portions of Their Bodies

Pressing Against a Wall

A goat can be restrained by backing the goat into a corner with a solid wall. The handler then presses it against a wall with one leg between its neck and shoulder and the other leg against its chest.

Jaw and Neck Hold

Small and medium-sized goats can be restrained by a hand under their jaw and the other hand on the upper part of the back of their neck.

Straddling

Some goats can be straddled for restraint. The goat is backed into a corner and the handler straddles its neck holding the goat still with his knees on both sides of the goat's neck. Straddling can be hazardous if attempted on horned goats or adult meat goats.

Flanking

A handler can flank a goat by standing next to it and reaching over the neck to grasp the foreleg nearest the handler's body. His other hand grasps the flank. While lifting the goat, it should then slide it down the front of the handler's leg onto its side. The hand on the flank is moved to the bottom hind leg and the handler's elbow presses on the goat's neck while the hand on the front leg continues to restrain that leg.

Platform and Stanchion

Milking of goats is typically done with the doe standing on an elevated stand. Some include stanchions similar to cattle chutes with headgates. The goat may voluntarily walk up onto a platform if trained with grain as a reward, or it can be led by its collar to the platform and walked up onto the platform. Stanchions also aid in performing foot trimming and grooming.

Side Sticks and Neck Cradles

Sticks from a halter to a chest strap (suringle) or neck cradles can be used to prevent chewing on the legs or to prevent a dairy goat who has learned how to nurse itself.

Spanish Halter

Spanish halters are similar to a tie-down used for horses. A strap or cord from a halter is run between the front legs and attached to a surcingle. The Spanish halter allows most normal grazing but prohibits the goat from eating from lower tree branches.

Tattooing

Most goat breed registries require an identification tattoo on the ear flap, or in breeds with small ears, the tail web. Restraint that is used is holding the head or having the head in a stanchion.

Trimming Hooves

Hooves need to be trimmed about every 8 weeks depending on how abrasive the ground is in their enclosure. Goats are usually trimmed while they stand in the same manner as horses. An assistant handler may be needed to manually restrain the head and is preferred rather than tying the goat by a halter lead. Elevated platforms or small tilt tables may also be used for hoof trimming restraint.

Restraint for Kids

Kid goats are captured as if picking up a small dog. Small kids can be carried with an arm under their chest and abdomen while the hand of the same arm grasps the kid's front leg nearest the handler's body. Kids should never be restrained by an ear, horn, the neck or a leg.

Kids up to 20 lb. can be held with their heads up and back to the handler and the handler restraining the kid's right front and rear legs with the right hand and the left front and rear legs with the left hand. The same hold can be used while the handler sits and holds the kid on its back on the handler's lap. This positions male kids for castration.

Larger kids can be restrained by straddling the kid, holding the body by pressing the kid just behind the shoulders with the handler's legs while the handler blocks forward movement with a hand behind the kid's jaws.

Another method is to straddle the kid, grasp each front leg and raise the kid onto its hindfeet and hold its chest between the handler's thighs.

Kids should be disbudded within 4 days of birth. Horns present a hazard to other goats and to handlers. In addition, the goat may entrap its head more easily with horns than without. Properly performed disbudding will also remove the adjacent skin containing the scent glands. Dehorning older goats should be avoided due to the stress involved and risk of complications. Restraint for disbudding a small kid is to hold the kid on the handler's lap in sternal recumbency while restraining the head movement with both hands on the neck just behind its ears.

Alternatively, a goat holding box may be used which is similar to a suitcase but with a hole for the goat's head to stick out.

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. Unlike sheep, goats are likely to scatter during attempts to move them.**
- 2. When handling a goat near its mouth or nose, a handler should wear gloves and long pants to avoid transmission of contagious ecthyma.**
- 3. Except for milking, the most frequent need to handle goats is to trim their hooves.**

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 350 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.