

Domestication and Natural Behavior of Donkeys

Our topics for this week are:

- Domestication of donkeys
- Breeding for mules and hinnies
- Natural behavior of donkeys and mules

DONKEYS, MULES, AND HINNIES

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.

Six donkeys were introduced to the New World in 1495 at the request of Christopher Columbus on his second visit to the Caribbean islands. Donkeys (*burro* in Spanish; burro in English now infers a feral donkey) were later brought to Mexico and other sites throughout the New World by conquistadors. Donkeys and small mules were further spread in the southwestern United States by prospectors and miners. Feral herds of donkeys still exist in the Great Basin area of the West. 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 used by the Carthaginian military commander, Hannibal, to cross the Alps to invade Rome in 218 BC and by Napoleon to cross the Alps in 1800 to attack Austrian forces.

Mules were the most desirable draft animals during the western migration in the U.S. Mules were trained to move forward by the command “get up” to turn left by “haw”, right by “gee” in the northern U.S. (“yee” in southern states), and stop by “whoa.” “Come up” meant start. “Easy” was the verbal signal for slowing down. 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 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.

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

- 1. Donkeys and their hybrids are less likely to flee threats than horses and more likely to aggressively defend themselves.**
- 2. Donkeys and mules are more suited to rocky terrains than horses.**

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 book 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.