



Guard Donkeys

Kick up herd protection on your hobby farm with a guard donkey.

By Tom Meade

More Donkey References

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs bulletin
Texas Department of Agriculture bulletin
University of Rhode Island Animal Science Dept.
401-874-4183

Coyotes and dogs had been a major problem at the University of Rhode Island's Peckham Farm, home to a prize-winning flock of Dorset sheep.

Then the university bought Bonnie, a guard donkey.

She came to the URI campus in December 2003 after a pack of dogs had attacked the sheep. Of the 26 ewes in the flock then, 17 suffered severe puncture wounds. One was killed, and six badly injured, including one that was so seriously hurt she had to be euthanized a few weeks later. Check out Popular Farming Series: Donkeys and Mules>> Since the donkey's arrival, the university has not lost a single animal, says Dave Marshall, manager of Peckham Farm. Recently, the school acquired a second donkey, named Dee.

In nearby Lebanon, Connecticut, Paul Tubey says he has seen coyotes "lurking" in the woods surrounding his Beltane Farm, but the predators have stayed away from his mixed herd of Oberhasli and La Mancha goats since he acquired a guard donkey.

How Donkeys Do Their Work

Guard donkeys can also protect farm animals from foxes and bobcats, according to the Texas Department of Agriculture, but black bears, wolves and mountain lions may prey on donkeys.

Sight and Sound "Donkeys rely predominantly on sight and sound to detect intruders," according to a bulletin from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Bold, Brassy Braying "When approached, sheep will tend to move so the guard animal is between the intruder and themselves. The donkeys' loud brays and quick pursuit will scare away predators and may also alert the shepherd.

Will It Come to Blows? "In most instances donkeys will confront and chase dogs or coyotes out of the pasture.

Guard Donkey Tips

Guard donkeys should be selected from medium-to-large size stock.

Do not use extremely small or miniature donkeys.

Do not acquire a donkey which cannot be culled or sold if it fails to perform properly.

Use jennies or geldings. Do not use jacks as guard animals because they are frequently aggressive to other livestock and may kill sheep or goats.

Test a prospective guard donkey's guarding response by challenging the donkey with a dog in a corral or small pasture.



Use only one donkey or jenny and her foal per pasture.

Isolate guard donkeys from horses, mules and other donkeys.

To increase the probability of bonding, donkeys should be raised from birth or placed at weaning with sheep or goats.

Raise guard donkeys away from dogs. Avoid the use of herding dogs around donkeys.

Monitor the use of guard donkeys at lambing or kidding as some donkeys may be aggressive or overly possessive to newborns. Remove donkeys temporarily if necessary.

For best results, use donkeys in small (less than 600 acres) open pastures with not more than 200 head of sheep or goats. Large pastures, rough terrain, dense brush, too large a herd and scattered sheep or goats all lessen the effectiveness of guard donkeys. [Top](#)

Source: Texas Department of Agriculture

"If the canines do not retreat quickly the donkeys will attack them by rising up on their hind legs and striking with both front feet. A solid blow can injure, kill or at the very least discourage the predator."

When a visitor brought a leashed dog to URI's Peckham Farm, Bonnie and Dee brayed menacingly as they charged to the pasture fence.

Before buying a potential guard donkey, it's wise to test its reaction to a dog.

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Know Your Donkeys

Like horses, each donkey is different from others, says Dave Marshall, a former farrier.

What about Mules? So you've got your guard donkey, but do you know what you could do with a mule? Read [Make Mine Mules](#) by Sue Weaver.

During lambing season this year, he had to separate the younger Dee from the sheep because the donkey was being impatient and rough with lambs.

"Bonnie, the older one, lets things happen as they happen," Marshall says.

"Dee is an enforcer. She wants everything to happen the way she wants it to happen. But lambs can't conform; they don't have that in their brains. They have no real 'flock sense.' Dee can't put them together; one goes this way and another goes that way, so she tries to grab them.

"Once they turn six months old, Dee will be fine, because the lambs will become part of the dynamic of the flock, and she can watch over them and feel good about it."

Where to Get a Donkey

Donkeys are often available at livestock auctions.

"Jennies (females) are suitable for use as guard animals," advises the Texas Department of Agriculture. "Jacks (intact males), which cost about half as much as jennies, should be gelded before use as guard animals."

Fred Launer, an animal-science instructor at the University of Rhode Island recommends buying guard donkeys from breeders who have selected stock specifically for the donkeys' herd-protection instincts. They may cost more, but it's a wise investment, he says. Dee and Bonnie came from guard-donkey breeders in Pennsylvania.

Find several donkey and mule breed associations [here](#).

Some guard-donkey users produce their own donkeys. The practice allows selection for donkeys with good guarding tendencies. In 2004, URI's Bonnie foaled Clyde, who, after gelding, was sold to a nearby shepherd.



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Donkeys and Socialization

"The donkey should be introduced to the sheep as early as possible to increase the likelihood of the donkey bonding to the flock," according to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

"Getting the sheep and donkey to accept each other as 'flockmates' is the first step in allowing the donkey to exhibit its true guarding instincts. Under ideal circumstances the jenny and her foal should be raised with the sheep. The weaned foal should then be left alone with the flock.

"Many believe that because donkeys are very sociable animals, they must work alone in order to effectively protect the sheep. The concern is that if the donkeys are allowed to mix with cattle, horses or other donkeys, then the sheep may be ignored."

At Beltane Farm in Connecticut, however, Paul Tubey had to buy a pony to be a calming companion for his donkey. That is a common and sound solution for donkeys that can seem to be stressed, says URI's Fred Launer.

Donkey Care

Donkeys are hardy and usually require minimal care, according to the Texas Department of Agriculture.

"Annual worming and occasional supplemental feeding during periods of poor range conditions may be all that is required," say the experts there.

"Water should be readily available and snow or ice should not be relied on for meeting water intake needs during cold weather. Do not allow donkeys access to feed containing Rumensin, urea, or other products intended only for ruminants. Donkeys can benefit from vaccination against common equine diseases, such as tetanus and encephalitis. Veterinary care, hoof trimming and floating of teeth may be needed at times."

Guard donkeys do not need special training, but they are easier to handle after they have become accustomed to a halter.

About the Author: Tom Meade is a writer, beekeeper and vegetable gardener in Rhode Island.

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