

Yaks and Water Buffalo: Alternative Bovines

If you'd like to add cattle to your farm, think outside the box--try yaks or water buffalo. No matter where you live in North America, one or both of these interesting, easy to raise species is right at home and they're perfect hobby farm livestock.

By Sue Weaver

Courtesy Turkey Hill Yaks

Thick, compact bodies, short legs, and humped shoulders are hallmarks of the yak; it also offers cashmere-quality undercoat that can be sold for \$4-5 per ounce. Consider this. Yaks and water buffalo are domestic livestock, not exotics. You don't need special permits, expensive specialty fencing, or elaborate handling facilities to raise them.

Both species thrive on marginal pasture and they require one-quarter to one-half the forage a beef cow eats.

Plus, they're protective mothers that calve with ease; you needn't pull calves when raising these bovines.

They're parasite and disease resistant, they have wonderfully sound hooves, and they're remarkably long-lived.

Best of all, with proper training they're docile, friendly beasts—and you can ride them!

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Yaks

Yaks (*Bos grunniens*) were domesticated somewhere on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau of Tibet around 3000-2500 B.C., then they spread north and south throughout western China to Mongolia and beyond.

Courtesy Turkey Hill Yaks

Did You Know ...

About Yaks? Yaks are perfectly adapted to high altitudes, having larger lungs and heart than cattle found at lower altitudes, as well as greater capacity for transporting oxygen through their blood.

Bos grunniens means "grunting ox". Neither yaks nor water buffalo moo like domestic cattle.

According to *The Yak*; Second Edition, about 1.3 million yaks are marketed in China annually.

Chinese yaks also produce 226,000 tons of meat; 13,000 tons of fiber; 715,000 tons of milk; and 170,000 hides per year.

Read our yak breed profile included with all our with cattle breed profiles.

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There are 14.2 million domestic yaks in the world; 13.3 million of them still in Chinese territories. Smaller populations are found in pockets around the world, including North America.

Why Raise Yaks?

Besides riding and packing with your yaks you can market yak meat (it's dark red, very lean, and wonderfully succulent), skulls, horns and hides (yak robes fetch a very handsome price).

If you'd prefer not to raise them for slaughter, their rich milk (use it to make fancy yak-milk soaps) and cashmere-quality undercoat (each yak yields about a pound of crimped, short-stapled, 14-16 micron fiber every spring and you can comb it out instead of shearing; raw fiber brings \$4-5 per ounce) are in hot demand.

And yaks are beautiful. They have long, dense outer hair coats set off by luxurious forelocks, horse-like tails, and long skirts of hair that almost brush the ground.

Their handlebar horns set off regal, broad-nosed faces.

Thick, compact bodies, short legs, and humped shoulders are also hallmarks of this interesting species.

Cows average 54 inches tall and weigh 500-800 pounds; bulls and steers are taller and weigh 1,200-1,500 pounds full-grown.

Water Buffalo

Worldwide there are 141 million water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalus*) of two types: Swamp buffalo (the sturdy draft type associated with China and Southeast Asia) and

River or riverine buffalo (combination draft and dairy animals commonly encountered in India, Pakistan, and Europe).

They have only one-tenth the number of sweat glands of cattle and their hair coats are correspondingly sparse; some mature buffalo have very little hair indeed.

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What Do Buffalo Look Like

Buffalo are large, immensely strong animals.

Depending on type and breed (there are 12 recognized dairy breeds in India alone) they stand 46-60 inches tall and can weigh 2000 pounds or more. Swamp buffalo have thick bodies, short legs, and crescent-shaped horns that sweep straight back from their skulls;

River buffalo have longer legs, more angular bodies, and shorter horns that curl back and then upward into loose spirals.

Facts about Buffalo

Water buffalo were domesticated from the wild Asian water buffalo (*Bubalus arnee*) at least 5000 years ago. Most are calm, quiet, and very easily handled and trained.

Courtesy Sue Weaver

The milk of water buffalo, like these River buffalo heifers, is used to make some of the world's best mozzarella cheese. Buffalo aren't fast (their average walking speed is two to three miles per hour) but they're steady and unflappable, making them perfect riding and driving stock for people who take time to smell the roses.

An estimated 5 to 15 percent of the world's milk supply is water buffalo milk. Due to its high butterfat and milk-solids content, much of it is used to craft exquisite cheese.

America imports 90,000 pounds of Italian mozzarella di bufala per year and large buffalo dairies in Vermont, Michigan, and California are producing it too.

Meat from young buffaloes is very lean, lightly marbled, and when cooked, looks exactly like comparable cuts of beef. In blind taste tests conducted in Trinidad, Australia, Venezuela, and Malaysia, buffalo steaks consistently rated higher than prime beef!

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Which Will It Be: Yak or Water Buffalo?

Courtesy Sue Weaver

Did You Know ...

About Buffalo? Read our water buffalo breed profile included with all our with cattle breed profiles.

American buffalo are actually bison and only distantly related to water buffalo. The Cape buffalo of Africa belongs to a different genus (*Syncerus*) than either bison or water buffalo. Neither Cape buffalo nor American buffalo have ever been domesticated.

Water buffalo are called carabao in the Philippines. The Philippine Carabao Center is developing a water buffalo capable of producing more than four gallons of milk per day. They also produced the world's first cloned water buffalo in 2007.

Swamp buffalo have 48 chromosomes and riverine buffalo have 50 chromosomes; however their genetic material is much alike and they are interfertile. Many North American water buffalo are mixtures of the two. Light-colored, chevron-shaped marks on the chest indicate swamp buffalo breeding.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu is often depicted riding a water buffalo. The Hindu god of death, Yama, rides a buffalo as well.

Top Depending on your needs and where you live, one or the other species might work out better on your farm. Climate: Yaks take all the cold, blustery weather you can hand them (and they need only windbreaks to thrive); what they can't abide is long spells of steamy, sizzling summer heat.

Swamp buffalo are exactly the opposite; kept in the far North they require warm housing and their ears are still prone to freezing.

River buffalo fall someplace in between; although snow and bitter cold are definitely not their element, they can thrive anywhere in the United States.

Dairy: River buffalo give large quantities of high-quality milk; yaks and swamp buffalo also produce yummy, high-butterfat milk but considerably less of it.

Fiber and pelts: Yaks win hands-down!

Availability: According to *The Yak, Second Edition*, in 2006 there were roughly 2000 yaks and yak hybrids in North America and there are about 4000 water buffalo in the United States.

Hybridization: Yaks are members of genus *Bos*, along with domestic cattle and bison, with which they can interbreed. First-generation hybrid males are sterile but females are fertile. Water buffalo can't produce viable offspring when bred to members of genus *Bos*.

To learn more about these interesting, alternative bovines, check out their Hobby Farm Livestock Breed profiles and peruse these fine resources.

Online Resources

Here are links to online resources for yak and water buffalo:

Yak Check out the yak entry in Wikipedia. Yak Faks (pdf) *The Yak; Second Edition* (476 page book online) International Yak Association

Water Buffalo Check out the domestic water buffalo entry in Wikipedia. Buffalo Production and Research (321 page free download) *The Water Buffalo: New Prospects for an Underutilized Animal* (complete book online) American Water Buffalo Association

About the Author: Sue Weaver is a Hobby Farms contributing editor and, with her husband John, owns a hobby farm and numerous animals--including water buffalo--in Arkansas.

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