

Protecting Livestock with Guard Donkeys

Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development

Farmers are increasingly turning to non-lethal techniques for predator management including electric fencing, electronic guards and guardian animals.

In Alberta, guard donkeys have become popular as protectors of sheep and cattle and perform very well under certain conditions.

Advantages of guard donkeys

- Guard donkeys are more accepted by the public for livestock protection than poisons.
- Under certain conditions, they provide around-the-clock protection against predators and other pasture intruders.
- Guard donkeys cost less to purchase and maintain than other guardian animals.
- Donkeys are compatible with other livestock and share similar requirements for feed, water and shelter. They eat grass and hay and do not require special feed.
- Donkeys are well-suited to most traditional methods of predation damage control and can be used in an integrated predation management program. For example, snares and poison bait can be used without special precautions to protect the donkey.

How guard donkeys work

Donkeys probably do not deliberately protect livestock. Many donkeys dislike and are aggressive towards dogs, coyotes and foxes and provide indirect protection for domestic animals. Donkeys have exceptional hearing, a keen nose and excellent vision. They use these senses to detect intruders. They bray, bare their teeth, chase, and attempt to kick and bite dogs and coyotes. Some donkeys will also chase deer, bears, strange livestock, humans and other intruders in a similar fashion.

Donkeys do not intentionally patrol the pasture looking for intruders. They investigate disturbances within the herd or flock and will pursue predators or intruders if they detect them.

They are most successful in protecting livestock in small and level pastures, where the donkey can see all or most of the area from one location.

In addition to the aggressive behavior of the donkeys, the presence of a large animal with smaller livestock may be sufficient to cause some coyotes, dogs and other predators to avoid the area.

Selecting a guard donkey

Consistent and successful guard donkey performance depends on appropriate animal selection, proper training and realistic expectations. Guard donkeys have limitations to their physical and protective capabilities.

A guard donkey is a working animal so it must be sound, healthy and free from any conformational defects. It must be reasonably friendly towards people and easy to handle.

Attributes that contribute to effective guard donkey performance are as follows:

1. Select a donkey from "standard" stock, 44" to 50" (11 to 12.5 hh) at the shoulder. For cattle, the donkey should be a little taller, up to 54" (13.5hh). Do not use small or miniature donkeys or slow, clumsy animals.
2. Not all donkeys are effective guard animals. If one does not work, try another. It is worth the effort even if you have to try several animals. Donkeys live for 30 or more years, so an effective guard donkey will provide protection for many years. Acquire a donkey that is likely to have potential to be a guard animal. The donkey should have some exposure to sheep or other livestock it is to protect. Get a guarantee or replacement clause on the bill of sale if you buy from a guard donkey breeder.
3. Use only females (jennies) or gelding. So not use a mature intact male (jack or stallion) unless it has been raised with stock. Some jack donkeys may attack smaller animals including dogs, coyotes, calves and lambs. For the same reason, unsettled jennies, with or without foals, may be aggressive during estrus and could injure young stock.

Training guard donkeys

Halter break the donkey to lead. Train the donkey to lift its feet for veterinary and farrier work and to lead and unload in a stock trailer or truck.

Guard donkeys may need several weeks to adjust to livestock, so introduce them to stock well before predation is likely to occur.

Keep young donkeys with goat, sheep or cattle after the donkey is weaned. Do not allow guard donkeys to run with other donkeys or horses. In this way the young donkey will think it is part of the flock or herd. Ideally, the donkey should be born in the flock or herd and its dam should be taken away at weaning to let the young animal grow up with the stock.

Place a new donkey on the other side of a common fence line with livestock. This gives the donkey and the livestock an opportunity to safely get to know one another.

A week to ten days following this socialization period, lead the donkey around the cattle or sheep where they can smell and touch each other. Then tether the donkey inside the pen with the stock and feed and groom it there for about a week. By this time both will have accepted each other. Allow the donkey to run loose in the pen or pasture and soon the stock will seek the donkey out in times of danger.

Feed the donkey with the stock so it feels like a member of the flock or herd. If stock are fed from troughs, feed the donkey first from a separate feeder or bowl so the livestock can eat unhindered. Always feed the guard donkey something every time you feed the stock.

Keep all dogs away from donkeys and do not test the donkey by teasing it with a dog. Do not allow farm dogs to become friendly with the donkey. Avoid or limit the use of stockdogs around donkeys.

If a donkey is aggressive towards or fears stock (or vice-versa) remove it immediately.

Using guard donkeys

Donkeys are most effective in small, open, level pastures where the stock tend to band together. The maximum number of livestock that can be guarded by a donkey is unknown, but is probably no more than 200 animals. Donkeys will probably be of little use on rolling terrain or rangeland covered with heavy bush where stock scatter widely.

Use only one donkey at a time with livestock. This is important in larger pastures because donkeys may pal up and wander away from the stock.

There is one exception to the single donkey rule; a jenny with an unweaned foal tends to be much more protective than other donkeys. A mother with a foal will give you an extra advantage because young donkeys will be raised with livestock and trained for you use or sale as a trained guard donkey.

When more than one donkey is needed to guard a very large area or large flock or herd, use jennies with unweaned foals only. Some producers are successful with two geldings, but this is rare.

Fences must be in good repair because donkeys may escape through holes when wires are broken or missing.

Remove the donkey during lambing or calving, particularly in confinement operations, as a precaution against accidents or intentional injury or disruption of the mother-newborn bond. Place the donkey in the flock when the young animals are ready to go to pasture.