

NEW YORK STATE 4-H DAIRY GOAT PROJECT FACT SHEET #18

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BEHAVIOR OF GOATS: PART I – HERD BEHAVIOR

Raising your goat requires more than a knowledge of feeding, breeding and management. Goats are social animals, so you should also understand how goats interact with each other and react to you on a social basis. Getting to know your individual goat or herd takes a lot of practice. Observation and knowledge of a few facts should help you get started.

Under natural conditions, goat herds will establish a “pecking order” or dominance pattern. This pecking order helps to limit aggression among the herd members and may change from day to day.

Dominance of a herd member is determined by three factors: age, sex and the absence or presence of horns. The doe will always be dominant over her female kids, even after several years! The buck is usually dominant over the female when bucks and does are allowed to run together. The presence of horns as a dominance factor becomes obvious when goats in a herd go through their daily ritual of butting heads. The goat that doesn’t back down after this ritual is considered dominant. A goat with horns will usually dominate a goat with no horns.

Once a herd pecking order is established, two special goats become responsible for the herd’s welfare. The most dominant buck becomes what is called the “Top Buck”. This buck is responsible for the protection of the herd and will usually guard the rear when the herd is moving. He is also allowed to breed any doe in the herd before the other bucks. If the Top Buck is taken away, the rest of the herd adapts quickly and another Top Buck is chosen from among the remaining bucks.

The most dominant doe is called the “Flock Queen”. She is responsible for leading the herd to the best grazing areas. When she finds a suitable spot to graze, the other goats will graze in the same area. If the Flock Queen is taken out of the herd, the other goats will show confusion until another Flock Queen is chosen.

A very interesting ritual occurs when the Flock Queen comes upon a plant that is poisonous or inedible. She will sniff the plant and then snort and show obvious dislike for it. All the goats in the herd will take turns smelling the same plant, using its scent as identification of that particular plant. After they have all taken a turn memorizing the plant’s odor, the Top Buck will trample the plant.

In domestic herds, herd members are not allowed to interact naturally. For this reason, you may not observe many of the behavior patterns shown under natural conditions. However, by realizing what behavior patterns exist, you can understand how your herd or individual goat relates to you.

First, you must understand that goats are not truly domesticated animals. They tend to treat humans as one of them. For this reason, the goats in your herd will relate to you in different ways depending upon the roles you play.

Feeding

If you are responsible for feeding your herd, they will associate you with the Flock Queen. The herd may attempt to follow you wherever you go and may be in a state of confusion when you are not around. This becomes a problem when you try to send the herd out to pasture and they keep trying to follow you home.

Driving

If you move your herd by driving them from the rear, they will come to think of you as the Top Buck. However, this only occurs when bucks are allowed to run with the does. If you hold this position, you may have trouble handling the other bucks in the herd who are constantly challenging your authority. To show any troublesome bucks you are in control, it is recommended that you lay the buck on the ground and rub his nose in the dirt. This will show him who is boss!

To avoid any confusion within the herd structure, it is helpful to leave your goats in a group so that natural bonds and roles can be established. However, it is usually desirable to separate males and females for management purposes, and does and kids for disease control.

Suggested Activities

- 1) Using no more than four does, establish a dominance pattern. Place two does together in a roomy area with a container of grain, large enough for only one doe to eat at a time. Note which goat is allowed to eat first. Repeat, using all possible combinations of goats. (If four goats are used, you should have a set of six results.)

Example: Goats A, B, C & D are tested

<u>Pairs</u>	<u>Dominant</u>	<u>No. of times appearing dominant</u>	
A,B	B	A	1
A,C	C	B	2
A,D	A	C	3
B,C	C	D	0
B,D	B		
C,D	C		

In this case the order of dominance, starting with most dominant, is: C B A D

- 2) Analyze some noted behavior in a herd and try to explain your observations.