

WHAT MAKES THEM TICK?

Understanding behavior is essential to properly raising and handling sheep/goats.

First and foremost, sheep/goats are social animals that become agitated if they are separated from the rest of their group. This is especially true with sheep. Individual sheep/goats should not be kept in isolation for long periods of time (except for health reasons). Even rams/bucks should have a "buddy." Pet sheep/goats should be kept in pairs or small flocks.

Sheep/goats form strong social groups and can recognize their flock mates. They establish a hierarchy or "pecking order." There are usually dominant animals that lead the group. Dominance can be complex and is influenced by different factors, including age, sex, and horns. There is a special strain of Icelandic sheep that is known for its extraordinary leadership.

Sheep have a strong flocking instinct. They stick together. The term is gregarious. It varies by breed and is a deep-seated survival mechanism that protects them from predators. Sheep have a strong "follow the leader" tendency, which helps to keep the group cohesive. The group's cohesiveness makes it easier for shepherds (and herders) to look after large numbers of sheep. Goats stick together, too, but they are more likely to explore. It usually takes about 4 to 5 sheep/goats for them to display their natural flocking (or herding) behavior.

Sheep and goats have many contrasting behaviors. Goats are more curious and independent whereas sheep are usually more distant and aloof. Goats are more aggressive than sheep and will usually dominate them, especially if they have horns.

One of the biggest behavior differences between sheep and goats is foraging behavior. Sheep are grazers but will browse. Goats are browsers but will graze. Goats will seek shelter more readily than sheep. Both don't like to get their feet wet. They are upland grazers.

While head butting is a normal behavior that is used to establish dominance, it should not be encouraged, especially in males. There is a tremendous amount of force behind a ram's head butt, up to 800 lbs.

Sheep/goats can usually recognize their caregiver(s) by their voice (or call) or face and are wary of strangers and more apt to flee in their presence.



Sheep/goats are prey animals. When facing a predator, they will flee. They rely on their senses to evade predators. They have excellent peripheral vision, poor depth of perception, and decent night vision. They are not color blind, but their color perception is less developed. They may react in fear to unfamiliar colors. They have very sensitive hearing. Loud noises frighten them. Sheep/goats should always be handled calmly and quietly.