

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a horse's eye, looking slightly to the right. The eye is dark and framed by the horse's coat, which is a mix of brown and grey. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the horse's hair and the shape of the eye.

Keep an Eye on Predators With

By Steven Lukefahr

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Guard Donkeys

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IN SOUTH TEXAS, IT IS COMMON TO SEE DONKEYS IN PASTURES with cattle. This is because their value as guard animals is well known. Although coyotes are abundant in the region, a pack of hungry and aggressive dogs from the neighborhood is the main problem. They are out to seriously injure or kill. At least the lowly coyote usually eats what it kills.

So why donkeys? There are several reasons, some being unique to the species, which address this question. First, like cattle, donkeys are grazers and do not need to be fed individually, unlike guard dogs.

They are not ruminants. They are monogastric herbivores. They have an enlarged cecum that functions in some ways like a rumen.

For example, donkeys can consume fibrous roughage feeds because the cecum contains microbes that can



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digest fibrous feeds (roughages), making that energy available to the animal.

Donkeys can consume low-quality coarse forage and they require less energy than do horses. In addition, being smaller than a standard horse, they consume less feed. A donkey can live to the ripe old age of 40 to 50 years.

Donkeys are heat-tolerant due to their evolution in drought-prone and extreme heat, semi-arid brush and desert regions, being a descendant of the African wild ass. While their hair coat is extremely short or slick during summers, they can still produce a warm hair coat in winters.

As a flight or prey species, donkeys were well adapted to outrunning their natural predators, such as leopards

and lions. However, as guard animals, a standard-sized donkey is fully capable of running down smaller predators such as coyotes and dogs.

The female donkey, a jenny, is the desired guard animal. A jack, or male donkey, is usually aggressive towards other jennies and may even attack calves. I have yet to lose a calf to predators when a jenny was in the pasture.

As guard animals, donkeys are genetically programmed with a suite of key natural behaviors including alertness, maternal, social and territorial behaviors.

Donkeys have a broad repertoire of acute senses including hearing, sight and smell, and they often detect danger long before cattle do. If a threatening sign or predator situation exists, a donkey is likely to freeze and examine the potential threat rather than panic and take flight.

If a donkey detects a predator or stranger, it usually responds by chasing it down head-on, using its teeth to bite and its hooves to strike and trample the foe, all while loudly snorting and braying. The unfortunate victim, if it survives the attack, will well remember the episode and so should avoid this territory in the future. The donkey protects its territory, which is a place to rear her offspring.

In a natural society, female donkeys do not display strong dominance or pecking order behavior — each member has equal status. This fact likely explains why a jenny does not act “bossy” with cows. It is amazing that donkeys will bond to cattle as a member of their social group.

I have never had issues between bulls and donkeys. In a serene and well-managed environment, donkeys are docile members of the herd, with calm, passive temperaments. They graze and move with the cows — but are always on the alert. For example, when calling cows to move them to a fresh pasture, the guard donkey will always move with the cows.

The jenny’s territory is her foal’s learning environ-

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ment, the place where it is taught to readily imprint and adopt the aforementioned behaviors. The jenny should be bred to foal a few months before calving season so she can teach her foal.

The length of pregnancy is 12 months. If the foal is a male, I will sell it at weaning age. If the foal is a female, I even delay weaning so she can receive a refresher training course in the second year, in order to reinforce and test her suite of desired behaviors. A young donkey that does not adopt these behaviors should be sold.

Lessons for the foal

So what behavioral lessons does the jenny teach her foal? The first lesson is to seek out a cow that is calving and then stay with the wet calf at least until it is up and walking with the cow. When making pasture rounds during calving season, I know there is a newborn calf if I see an isolated donkey with a cow.

The jenny teaches her foal to be on guard and defend the calf in a potentially threatening situation involving a predator(s). This same training extends to showing her foal how to chase and attack, and possibly even kill, the predator. The foal soon knows that it must always stay on the alert.

A distress bawl of a calf should always be a cue for a jenny to run to the calf to determine if it needs protection. On several occasions, I have seen a jenny nudging a separated calf towards its dam, or staying at the fence line if the calf got on the other side.

Another satisfying behavior is that a jenny will faithfully serve as a babysitter when cows go off to graze and calves are lying down together taking naps. In addition, when moving cattle to a fresh pasture it is common for a few calves to follow in the rear of the group. However, more often than not, the jenny is the very last animal, because she is moving calves up from the rear.

Because I lease land in different locations, I sometimes need to move the cattle and donkeys by trailer. This past summer, my 16-foot trailer was loaded with 1 breeding bull, 3 cows, 4 calves, and 1 donkey. There was no fighting or kicking, or even signs of discomfort or aggression.

Once the calves are a few months old, I wean the foal by taking it home and pasturing it with my horse to minimize weaning stress.

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A couple of months before calving season (mostly in May), the trained-and-ready young donkey is taken to a different herd than where her dam resides, so she can bond with the cows. Except when rearing a foal, I keep only a solitary donkey in each cow herd.

Donkey management

Purchase a jenny that was reared with cattle. Do not buy a family pet. I bought my first jenny in 2005 for \$260. She had been with cattle for 5 years and was pregnant. Her foal was a jack, which I sold at weaning age for \$225.

Breed the jenny so that she foals at least every 5 years. The purpose is to reinforce instinctive maternal behaviors. Ideally, find a breeding jack from a ranch where donkeys are used as guard animals.

A jenny does not require any special feeding. She will do just fine on grass even during droughts. Years ago, I had a female mule that for the first couple of years did a fine job of guarding my Barbados sheep. Then I began to notice that she spent a lot of time at my neighbor's fence line. I came to learn that they were hand feeding her grain, carrots, apples, etc.

By that time, she was already spoiled and I had to sell her because she lost interest in staying with the sheep. Lesson learned: instruct your neighbors not to feed the donkeys. Also let them clearly know that donkeys can be dangerous and will even attack humans if they enter a pasture that they identify as their own territory.

Donkeys are an easy-care species of livestock. The donkey is still a species that is relatively unblemished by human selection. I have yet to have a donkey with any health issues. They do not readily colic on mesquite beans. I have never had to trim their hooves, probably because they are on hard ground in pastures. Donkeys also seem less affected by external parasites such as flies and ticks than are cattle.

Donkeys can be a good investment and when properly managed, they deserve their fine reputation as guard animals. **TC**

Editor's note: Steven Lukefahr is a professor in the department of Animal, Rangeland, and Wildlife Sciences at Texas A&M University-Kingsville.