

Donkey Behavior: A comparative study of donkey and horse behavior
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Most often donkeys and mules are treated as horses with long ears. These unique creatures have unique behaviors when compared to horses. Many times their behavior has been misunderstood and in some cases the animal may have been treated more harshly than it should have been. The overall strength of mules and donkeys is far superior to that of the horse, especially when compared on a pound for pound basis. These animals tend to use their strength to their advantage. For example, have you ever led your donkey or mule somewhere, like to load it on the trailer, and it just didn't feel like going that day? Quite often when this happens they just quietly turn their heads and drag you along to their desired destination. The head and neck strength is impressive and often used more to their advantage than that of a horse. The same can be true when using a twitch on a donkey; it raises its head or turns its neck to a degree where you have little or no control. Mules and donkeys also tend to use their strength to their advantage when you are saddling or performing farrier work; they may simply lean their shoulders or bodies into you, making it difficult to hold the hoof and stand, or to cinch them up as you are smashed against the barn wall.

Other behavioral differences include the donkey's ability to hide pain. Researchers have often warned owners, caretakers, and veterinarians that a donkey that maybe colicking or having other health problems, even lameness, will not show the signs until it's too late to solve the problem. Some could say the donkey is being too smart for its own good when it hides pain in such a manner (Taylor and Mathews, 1998). Donkeys, unlike horses, continue to eat when they are dehydrated or sick. This is good for an animal that is a native to the desert, but not good for the owner who may not realize their donkey is sick because it continues to eat. Donkeys and mules can also be cautious of water from different areas and refuse to drink until reaching dehydrated levels. Although unlike the horse the donkey and mule will drink a large amount of water at once and rehydrate themselves without health complications (Yousef, 1979). In terms of grazing, donkeys tend to be more browsers, which allows them to selectively pick which type of forages they want to consume instead of eating everything in sight (Aganga and Tsopito, 1998 and Mueller et al., 1998). They can also consume more forage in the same amount of time as a cow their size without chewing faster (Mueller et al., 1998). These behaviors, being browsers and consuming a large amount of forage in a short amount of time proves to be very efficient in areas where forages are sparse. The donkey will use its prehensile-like lips to select forages of higher quality. Also, when digesting food the donkey has a slower digestion transit time when compared to horses, and they seem to get the most out of their feed. This helps explain to a small degree why a donkey can eat poorer quality food than a horse and still stay fat (Izraely et al., 1989)!

As we all know, our long eared creatures enjoy routines. If the farrier or veterinarian is coming to our farm say an hour or two before feeding, the animals tend to be more wary about why they are being caught or fed earlier than usual and may refuse to cooperate.

Trying to explain why your very well trained animal with long ears doesn't want to be caught when it's not the usual feeding time or time to come into the barn to someone who has little experience with them often creates an interesting conversation to say the least. Many times the conversation results in responses such as "you should better train your donkey or mule or get rid of it because I wouldn't own an animal I can't catch!" The correct retort might actually be, "maybe you should learn more about donkeys or mules then you would understand that you have to outsmart them." Donkeys and mules tend to trust people they know and can be standoffish towards strangers. It is often advised when catching mules and donkeys that treats and routines seem to work best, along with slow motions and quiet voices.

So, what do you do when your donkey or mule displays an undesirable behavior, such as refusing to move forward and balking? A recent study at Michigan State University's Animal Science Department with equine behaviorist and expert, Dr. Camie Heleski, addressed that very question after first conducting the study with horses. She was interested in seeing how the donkeys would respond and how it would compare with the behavior of the horses in the project. So to learn more about donkey behavior and how it compares to horse behavior when learning a new task, Dr. Heleski teamed up with Sharon Windsor of Turning Pointe Donkey Rescue in Dansville, Michigan along with the help of an animal science undergraduate student, Laura Bauson, who was very interested in learning more about equine behavior as she plans to pursue a degree in veterinary medicine. The following study addressed the question: "What do you do when your donkey balks at crossing something out of the ordinary?" The study was conducted in November, 2007 at Turning Pointe Donkey Rescue www.turningpointedonkeyrescue.com. MSU researchers tested 50 donkeys using several different applications of learning theory.

So, what do you as a donkey owner do when your donkey balks at crossing something out of the ordinary?

- a) bribe it with some tasty treats
- b) smack it on the behind with a convenient object
- c) talk nicely to it
- d) pull on the lead rope and release the pressure whenever it steps forward
- e) use a crinkly piece of plastic to "startle" it forward

Turns out that a), d) and e) can all work quite effectively.

One method was classified as "traditional, negative reinforcement" which meant, in this case, that the donkey's halter and lead rope were pulled on, and when the donkey stepped forward, the pressure was released. This routine was repeated until the donkey had crossed the obstacle in question...in this case, a tarp lying upon the ground.

Interestingly, though, another method worked just as well and was easier on the handler and the donkey...bribing. Half of the donkeys were assigned to the "bribe" treatment. When the donkey began to hesitate at crossing the scary tarp object, the handler held out a handful of treats – in this case, a bit of sweet feed. When the donkey moved forward to

take some of the treat, it eventually found itself walking onto and then over the tarp. Donkeys were just as likely to cross the tarp with the bribe as with the pressure-response method from above. (And it should be noted, the bribe was not required to continue getting the donkey to cross over the frightening object. Once the donkey had crossed the tarp once, normally no more bribing was required.)

Occasionally neither of these methods worked and that was when “the donkey motivator” was called in. This involved a second person standing behind the donkey with a crinkly, plastic bag on the end of a longe whip. When the donkey would begin to balk, the “motivator” was shaken to make some noise. More often than not, only a few shakes of the “motivator” would get the donkey to step forward and cross the tarp. As with the bribing, once the donkey crossed the first time, rarely was the “motivator” required for future crossings.

According to Sharon Windsor, owner/manager of Turning Pointe Donkey Rescue, “donkeys aren’t stubborn, but they are very cautious.” And in my opinion, too many people are too quick to beat on donkeys to get them to do things...this study demonstrated some effective alternatives that can be used in a way that’s more much more fair to the donkeys.

Dr. Heleski, reported in her study with horse behavior, that “Our work with the horses showed that positive reinforcement; i.e. providing a treat to the horses whenever they would walk forward onto the tarp, was every bit as effective at getting the horses to cross the tarp as the traditional pressure-response method of pulling on the lead rope and waiting for a forward response...plus it was much easier on both the handler and the horse. Unfortunately, in the equine industry positive reinforcement, such as food treats, has garnered a somewhat bad reputation and people will say that you’re ‘spoiling’ the animal.”

This is not to say that food should be relied upon solely, but it can be a valuable tool in the arsenal of handling various equines. (may want to insert cartoon figure of carrot dangling in front of donkey)

One other method that was employed when all other methods had failed was to have 2 handlers each with a lead rope attached to the side of the halter. For some reason, having the 2 handlers on the sides of the halter seemed to work when all other methods had failed. <not sure whether this paragraph should be included or not>

Just a few things to keep in mind the next time your donkey decides to be extra cautious ☺ For more information on equine behavior, visit www.myhorseuniversity.com and check out the Equine Behavior class that Dr. Heleski has developed. If you have any questions or comments please email me at mcleana5@msu.edu.

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