

#32 SAFE CARE AND HANDLING OF SHEEP

Evidence for wild sheep becoming first domesticated occurs in Central Asia and dates from about 10,000 years ago. Later, at about 3,500 years ago, wool was first spun into yarn that was subsequently woven or sewn into fabrics.

Sheep are not native to North America and were first brought from Europe by Christopher Columbus as expedition food. Early Spanish explorers took sheep with them in their travels and as a result, sheep were introduced into Mexico and the Western United States. President Woodrow Wilson allowed sheep to graze on the White House lawn during his term of office from 1913 to 1921.

Sheep Characteristics

Being knowledgeable about the following behavioral characteristics may be helpful when working with sheep:

- They have a strong natural urge to herd together and will form groups or flocks for protection.
- Predators of sheep include coyotes, wild dogs, and mountain lions. Large raptors such as eagles and hawks are capable of taking young sheep for food.
- They are social animals and prefer to graze in groups with other sheep nearby.
- Sheep have good hearing and can be startled by loud noises. They also have a wide field of vision and a good sense of smell.
- They typically move into the wind so they can smell and anticipate what they may encounter.



Photograph Courtesy of Solano County 4-H Program

Safe Care and Handling of Sheep

- Sheep can move quickly and are surprisingly strong for their size. Therefore, approach sheep slowly and calmly within their field of vision. Allow sheep to let you approach them.
- Be cautious around rams. They can be aggressive and should not be trusted - especially during the breeding season. Never turn your back to a ram.
- A single sheep can be controlled and moved by holding them under their jaw and pushing its tail bone or dock.
- Speak in a quiet and deliberate manner in order to keep sheep calm.
- Sheep naturally feed on pasture grass and forbes which provide a balanced nutritional diet. Hay, alfalfa, and clover can be fed to sheep with feed supplements and additives to assure a healthy and properly balanced diet.
- Lambs need to have free access to their mothers.
- Poor or lack of appetite is a common indicator of sick sheep. Contact a veterinarian if you believe you have a sick sheep.
- Promptly report any injuries to or from sheep to your group leader, parent, or guardian.

Always wash your hands with soap and water after touching sheep or any other ani