

Sheep!

One of the larger hurdles in herding is learning to read sheep, or anticipate their next move based on what you know of sheep behavior & the situation at hand. If the idea of upper level competition or a Herding Championship appeals to you, you must have an understanding of sheep behavior. For most people, it is a skill that must be worked at.

Sheep are timid, nervous and easily frightened animals and for the most part defenseless against predators like coyotes and wild dogs. Their only means of survival is to flock together in large numbers and to run away from predators.

The behavior is a combination of instinctual and learned responses. The inherited behaviors, flocking, following & moving away from threats actually aids the human shepherd. By controlling the dog, the shepherd controls the herd.

Sheep are flockers

Most breeds exhibit a strong flocking behavior. Flocking behavior is advantageous to non-predatory animals; the strongest animals fight their way to the center of the flock which offers them great protection from predators.

Safety in numbers

Groups of sheep are more relaxed than a single sheep, a couple or a few sheep.

Sheep are followers

Due to their flocking behavior & their belief in the safety of numbers, sheep follow one another & move as a unit.

As soon as lambs are on their feet, they know to follow. Unlike deer, who feed their fawns then 'park' them, lambs follow their mothers out to graze. Fawns lie hidden until their mom returns. If a lamb is rejected by his mother, he will follow other ewes, humans, dogs, anything that walks past may be their mother. Mothers can be protective of their lambs and almost hostile to other lambs. Generally ewes will not allow any lamb to nurse except hers. Ewes will push or head-butt other lambs to shoo them away.

Old time shepherds had special names for the different roles individual sheep play within their flock. The sheep that roams furthest away from the others is an outlier. The bellwether follows an outlier, signaling to the others that they may follow in safety. When it moves, the others will also move. Traditionally this was a castrated ram (wether) with a bell hung around its neck. The tendency to act as an outlier, bellwether or to fight for the middle of the flock stays with sheep throughout their adulthood.

Sheep spend more time eating than any other activity. Their other two activities are sleeping & ruminating (cud-chewing). Sheep are awake about 16 hours a day, drowsy for another 4 or 5 hours and only sleep about 3 or 4 hours. Ruminating takes about as much time each day as the sheep spends grazing. While ruminating, sheep lie down in groups, 'burp' up the plant material swallowed earlier for a more thorough chew. Sheep must be relaxed, stress or perceived threats will cause sheep to avoid or stop

ruminating.

Calm, unstressed sheep move at a slow "mosey", like they have nowhere to go & all day to get there. Their chins are at about knee height, their expressions relaxed. They may string out single file, following one another nose to tail or mosey along two by two. Worried sheep bunch tightly together. Sheep touching sheep. They move as a single unit. Their heads are held high. Depending on the degree of worry, their speed varies. Highly stressed sheep press heavily on one another. They have a deer-in-the-headlights look. Their head is perched high atop their vertically stretched neck. Ears are at attention, openings facing the perceived threat.

In research about the auditory sense of sheep, there is evidence that sheep are sensitive to high-pitched noises. (Curious... herding whistles make a very high-pitched sound.)

Sheep fear unfamiliar items (people, dogs, new buckets, jackets on fence posts) in their familiar surroundings as well as unfamiliar surroundings.

Sheep will move toward other sheep or humans perceived as friends (the food human... the way to a sheep's heart is through its stomach!)

Sheep don't like wet feet & will avoid standing water or mud.

Sheep move easily from dark to light areas, but hesitate going into shadows or dark spaces. Sometimes sheep jump over shadows.

It's worthwhile to budget a little extra time during your herding lesson to watch the sheep the other students & their dogs are working. Practice reading the sheep. Watch the sheep to see if you can tell where the dog is. Watch the sheep react when the dog moves beyond their flight zone.

Check out these websites:

www.sheep101.info (Everything you never knew about sheep.)

www.sheepgame.co.uk (Virtual sheep herding.)

Herding email groups to join:

<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/TendingDogs/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GSDHerding/>