

ToughLove for Rams

Many people believe that rams are inherently dangerous and shouldn't be given attention, but some of them can be very affectionate for their whole lives. Congenial, and even close, relationships with the shepherd are very possible as long as the ram understands, and wholeheartedly believes, that the shepherd is the "alpha ram".

It is our premise that badly behaved rams are made, not born. This is not to say that some rams are not more challenging than others. And it is important to note that rams who have been well-brought up in the flocks of their birth, can still be rendered dangerous by poor choices on the part of the shepherds into whose flocks they move as adults.

The point is to prevent this eventuality; from the time that they are lambs, all rams need to be taught (and reminded) that they are subordinate to the shepherd, and that they must NEVER challenge that fact!

They have to understand (in the core of their being) that there are RULES that cannot be violated. Unfortunately ram-lambs are often the most friendly and charming, and so it is vital not to allow them to ever "demand" attention. To permit this shift in dominance can be life-threatening later on.

Note that the behavior of an adult ram who is already dangerously aggressive to people likely cannot be modified by the techniques we will describe later. Unfortunately, that ram needs to be euthanized.

THE RULES:

- Rams (including lambs) must not ever butt or paw for attention, or press their heads against you, or push another sheep out of the way in order to dominate your attention.
- A ram must never approach a human with his head down, and must not "bob" his head. He must never back up, and feint a charge (as young ones do with the older rams).
- Jumping up on people is absolutely forbidden, no matter how cute a little ram-lamb might be at the time.
- A ram should always move away from you when asked to do so.
- Ideally, a ram should not approach his shepherd without being invited. But if he does, he must stand quietly, and wait for a pat or a word.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

It is in the genetic nature of every ram to understand the hierarchy of his living situation. Any ram who moves into a new situation needs to know immediately “who is in charge”. In some way or another, depending on his personality, he is going to test the situation to determine his authority. This applies to all other sheep in the same flock, and to his shepherds.

Unfortunately many rams move to new homes as breeding season approaches, when their hormone levels are rising. Placing the ram with or near ewes, and/or feeding grain, only intensifies their stress and desire to control their environment.

Although most well-brought-up rams will automatically be submissive to humans, in the stress of a new environment, some may test the shepherd. This would not usually be an aggressive attack, but head-bobbing or other warnings may be used to solicit a reaction.

Under any circumstances, it is critically important that the shepherd respond immediately, and confidently, to any threats or displays of dominance toward humans. An inexperienced shepherd may not sense that they are being tested, and may inadvertently jeopardize their authority. For example, showing fear, backing away, avoiding the ram, or trying to ply the ram with treats can send the message to the ram that the human feels subordinate..

Once a ram believes that he is in charge of the shepherd, there is a serious potential for dangerous behavior. When truly aggressive behavior occurs in an adult ram, that ram may never be completely trustworthy again. It is vital to prevent this sort of escalation.

AVOIDING PROBLEMS

•NO RAM SHOULD LIVE ALONE In the boredom of isolation from other sheep, rams will find ways to take out their frustrations by bashing buildings, butting people or other animals, jumping over or destroying fences, etc. Wethers make excellent companions, but more than one is recommended when keeping a single ram.

•We do not ever give food treats to rams. Once treats are expected, the ram’s eagerness to get them can lead to impatience with the giver...and he may respond with butting behavior.

•NEVER pet a ram on the top of his head....they consider this a challenge and it makes them butty. Rams should always be “chin up”.

•Be aware of what the ram is doing at all times. When entering the ram’s pen or pasture, it is a good idea to keep him in your field of vision.

- Never use just a single fence to separate rams from ewes, or from other rams in breeding season. For breeding pens, the perimeter should be made of a solid material so that the rams can't see each other, or be separated by a distance of 50 feet or more. In the off-season, this can be only a few feet, and at this time, see-through fences are fine. Some folks run rams and ewes together for a couple of months in summer, but we never have.

- Never strike a ram...he may consider this a provocation, especially if one hits them on or about the head. They think: "This human is fighting like a ram....and well, it doesn't hurt THAT much....BRING IT ON!" So the uppity ram becomes even more interested in the confrontation.

EXPLANATIONS & DISCIPLINE

LAMBS....

who violate "the RULES" (see page 1) can be disciplined more mildly than older rams, but never less definitely! The idea is that they learn immediately that they are not in charge.

For any undesirable behavior, push the lamb away with a firm "No", even if you are smiling inside.

If "No" doesn't get the idea across, pick the ram-lamb up in a way that is uncomfortable to him...allow him to dangle until he feels frightened...all the while, saying "no" or giving some other verbal reminder.

Alternatively....or if these methods don't have an effect....you may move along to more serious dominance demonstrations. We flip the ram-lambs on their backs or sides, shouting "No!" This is physically easy while they are small, and one such treatment as a youngster often makes a lasting impression; that ram may not ever require another reminder!

ADULTS....

In the case of a major misbehavior, we have chosen a method for teaching rams that they must never question their lesser position to humans, or the requirements of living in a flock situation. These dominance demonstrations can be used for disciplining a ram for threatening a human, and for various other bad behaviors, such as barn or fence bashing.

The goal is the same as that for naughty ram-lambs: to get them on their sides or backs (helpless) with you holding them down. You establish yourself as "alpha ram".

The techniques:

- 1) You may use the classic shepherd's maneuver for placing a sheep on its rump, but then move the ram to his side.

- 2) In the heat of the moment, you may grab the ram by whatever you can, a horn is easiest for some, but however you do it, be prepared to hold on. The horns can be used as a leverage point to flip the ram, but that is sometimes more difficult to do with the big boys.

3) As a point of interest, there is another way that may be easier on your body. After you have caught the ram, get him sideways to you (right against your thighs) and lean over his back, grab the far front leg and a handful of the skin in front of the far back leg and flip him like you are shaking a rug, stepping back as you do it. He will go right on his back. One wouldn't ever hold on to the skin or wool of a sheep otherwise, because it hurts them, but this is a lesson and need not be pleasant. This works especially well when one is irritated....adrenaline helps a lot!

After the ram is on his side/back, hold him with his head turned severely around to the side, and use a knee to hold him down, until he gives up struggling. If this is a first offense, the sense of helplessness may be all that is necessary. But if the ram has needed discipline more than once, also hold his nose for several seconds with one hand, with the other hand holding the head or whatever body part necessary. Don't hold their noses until they pass out...they lose enough brain cells on their own!

While the ram is down, shout at him! Shout something that you can use as a verbal reminder later. It may take more than one application of this treatment to make an impression, especially if he has decided that he can misbehave and still remain alive!

For the majority of rams, it shouldn't take many of these lessons, perhaps only one, to establish your "alpha" position. Nevertheless, you are armed with the confidence of your dominance, and can repeat the lesson if needed. Hopefully you and your ram can be friends for life.