# UNDERSTANDING DONKEY BEHAVIOUR

There is a tendency to treat donkeys as if they are small horses with big ears, but donkeys are different! They differ from horses both physically and in their behaviour. Millions of years ago, donkeys and horses did have the same ancestors, but they have evolved to be very different species. Understanding the differences between species is of vital importance to the correct handling, care and welfare of donkeys and mules.

## THE ORIGINS OF DONKEY BEHAVIOUR

The behaviour of their wild ancestors primarily influences domesticated donkey behaviour. The domestic donkeys' African ancestors evolved in the rugged terrain of northern Africa in areas that had shortages of food and water. Sparse vegetation and limited water supply meant that the environment could not support large herds of donkeys. Because of these challenging environmental conditions, African Wild Asses adapted to live more solitary lives than wild horses.

Donkey mares adapt to these sparse conditions by living on their own or in groups of just two animals such as with the previous year's foal. Wild donkey stallions create territories which they defend from other stallions. This territorial behaviour increases a stallion's chances of breeding with solitary mares.

MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE DONKEYS' TRUE NATURE IS A COMMON CAUSE OF PROBLEMS

Wild donkeys' territorial and solitary social behaviour differs from free-ranging horse behaviour and results in domesticated donkeys exhibiting more territorial behaviour than horses. Their territorial instincts are the reason donkeys are sometimes used as guard animals for flocks of sheep and goats against dogs, foxes, coyotes and wolves.

The donkeys' territorial nature also means that occasionally, individuals will chase and attack small stock such as sheep, goats, poultry, cats and dogs. This type of behaviour is considered normal for donkeys. These attacks can sometimes lead to fatal injuries. However, not all donkeys display this behaviour, and some donkeys may live with livestock companions.

It is difficult to predict how individual donkeys will behave with other livestock. Therefore, The Donkey Sanctuary does not recommend keeping donkeys directly with livestock or pets. If donkeys are to live with other animals, we recommend introductions are made gradually over several weeks. Introductions should start from the safety of adjacent paddocks and across a suitable fence to assess the donkeys' reaction to their new companions. If donkeys and small stock do share an environment, there should always be escape routes and protected areas provided.

## ARE DONKEYS STUBBORN OR STOIC?

Stoic and stubborn are two terms that are often associated with donkeys. Understanding these two labels for donkey behaviour allows a much safer and more effective interaction during any handling.

Stoic is a word that frequently used to describe donkey behaviour. Stoicism is typical survival behaviour in prey species such as donkeys. Appearing healthy reduces the chances of being attacked, as predators are more likely to select weaker, easier targets. In the wild stoic behaviour may also have benefited stallions during the defence of breeding territories. It is vital to realise that their stoic behaviour does not lessen the donkey's experience of pain or distress.

When compared to horses, the donkeys' stoic nature means they show more subtle body language when in pain or distress. Donkeys also have a strong sense of self-preservation and are unwilling to do things which they perceive as dangerous. The donkeys' stoic nature, minimal body language, and their natural propensity to freeze when threatened or frightened, combined with a reluctance to put themselves at risk, results in donkeys commonly being mislabelled as stubborn.

However, research carried out at The Donkey Sanctuary showed that both donkeys and mules outperformed horses (and in the case of mules they exceeded dogs) in a test of spatial cognition and perseveration abilities. Both donkeys and mules were more accurate and faster problem solvers when challenged to detour through a changing gap to reach a food reward. It is always essential to take account of this quick learning ability when training donkeys and mules, as they learn both wanted and unwanted behaviours very quickly.

## WHY DO DONKEYS BRAY?

The bray is one of six vocal sounds a donkey makes. Each donkey's bray is unique and can be heard over long distances. In the wild, male donkeys bray as a territorial display and for communication to distant females.

In domestication, both male and female donkeys bray for various reasons. Braying can be from excitement, anticipation, loneliness, territorial response, boredom, sexual arousal, and healthy communication between donkeys. When a donkey learns braying is effective at getting human attention or food, it can become a learned behaviour.

If a donkey is braying continually or without apparent reason, then it is essential to explore the cause of their braying.



## BONDING BEHAVIOUR IN DONKEYS

Bonding in donkeys is a complex behaviour and not yet fully understood. Our experience at The Donkey Sanctuary is that donkeys can bond strongly with their companions. Bonding has implications for both the welfare and behaviour of the donkey. Therefore, handlers must always consider bonding behaviour during the management and handling of donkeys and mules.

As donkeys can form lifelong friendships and generally do not like being kept alone, The Donkey Sanctuary recommends that donkeys live with other donkeys.

The intensity with which donkeys bond to their companions varies with the individuals involved. Donkeys may bond in pairs, or they may form groups of three or four. Bonding can even be unequal, with one donkey strongly attached, but the other donkey does not share the bond as strongly. Separating some bonded donkey pairs, even over a stable door, can create considerable stress in either or both animals. This stress could stop bonded companions from eating, which may lead to a potentially fatal condition called hyperlipaemia. See factsheet: hyperlipaemia for further information.

Bonded donkeys should be kept together at all times unless a vet directs otherwise. For this reason, donkeys do not make suitable companions for horses or ponies who are stabled or exercised separately.

Donkeys can also bond with other livestock such as sheep, ponies, cows, goats, geese and chickens. To find a suitable companion for a single donkey, it is essential to consider the temperament of both animals, as well as their physical needs, age, gender and past experiences.

When a donkey dies, any bonded companions should be allowed access to the body of their dead companion, until they lose interest and move away. If this does not happen, there is an increased risk of developing hyperlipaemia. To help a donkey cope with losing a friend, a new companion needs to

be found as soon as possible.

See fact sheet: Dealing with death for further information.

## AGGRESSIVE PLAY

Perhaps due to the donkeys' territorial nature, aggressive play seems to be a regular feature of donkey behaviour. The amount that donkeys play depends on their character, age, gender and availability of suitable companions. Young male animals are most likely to engage in bouts of aggressive play. Although aggressive play often decreases as donkeys age, some donkeys can continue to play aggressively well into their teenage years and beyond.

Aggressive play involves similar behaviour to adult fighting typically seen between stallions in the wild. However, aggressive play is less severe and with more of a friendly feel to it. Unlike serious fighting, donkeys who are play fighting keep their play going by switching between defensive and offensive roles.

During aggressive play, donkeys stop short of serious injury, although minor wounds may occur. Occasionally, if donkeys are miss-matched in temperament, size or age these play bouts can escalate and become one-sided, leading to severe injuries.

Visit our website to find further resources on behaviour and how to tell the difference between aggressive play and real fighting.

## ENRICHMENT AND OBJECT PLAY

Correct diet, companionship, movement and mental stimulation are all vital if donkeys are going to exhibit normal behaviour. Donkeys evolved to travel long distances in search of sparse vegetation. Searching for food kept them mentally stimulated and maintained a healthy weight. However, problems such as overfeeding, boredom, and reduced social interaction can occur as donkeys now often live in environments where food is readily available, and the distance they can travel is restricted.

Providing environmental enrichment for donkeys can help reduce the adverse effects of domestication. However, carry out an assessment first to ensure any enrichment provided suits the individual donkey's needs.

Some donkeys will play with objects in their environment. They will nibble, lick, sniff, chew and carry items they find. This behaviour varies between donkeys, but both male and female donkeys will pick up objects and play with them. Sometimes this will lead to a "tug of war" between two donkeys.



Providing safe toys for donkeys that enjoy playing in this way can provide vital mental stimulation and enrichment for the donkeys.

The Donkey Sanctuary has an extensive online enrichment resource with ideas for enrichment activities, the link to which can be found on The Donkey Sanctuary website.

For further information on enriching your donkey's life, here is the link to an environmental enrichment resource created by the Donkey Sanctuary.
https://view.pagetiger.com/EnvironmentalEnrichmentforDonkeys/EnvironmentEnrichmentfordonkeys

## MARES, STALLIONS AND GELDINGS,

There are significant differences between the behaviour of donkey mares, geldings and stallions. Therefore, it is essential to consider the gender needs of donkeys when it comes to enrichment, companionship, normal behaviour and handling. It also is critical to choose suitable companions carefully. Selecting animals with similar behavioural and management needs will reduce conflict and stress between donkeys.

Stallions are prone to exhibiting sexual behaviour and aggression. Stallions can be difficult to handle by inexperienced people. Unless stallions are used for breeding purposes, they should be castrated to prevent unwanted pregnancies and not kept with mares for this reason. Castration can also reduce aggressive behaviour leading to injury in other donkeys.

Geldings are often easier to handle and train, as they are less influenced by sexual behaviour. Geldings tend to be less aggressive than stallions, although they can still engage in aggressive play.

Mares exhibit reproductive behaviour and will come into 'season' every 18-21 days. At this time, their behaviour can change. They may become more friendly, or they may become more defensive and difficult to handle. They may be more receptive to being mounted, or they may mount other donkeys.

Mare and Geldings can be kept together happily and may become bonded companions.

For further information on the differences between the sexes and guidelines for castration, see the separate fact sheet on the behaviour of mares, stallions and geldings.

## DONKEYS HAVE A REASON FOR EVERYTHING THEY DO

Donkey behaviour is influenced by many factors. When faced with a behaviour issue, it is essential first to identify the benefit of the behaviour to the donkey. When attempting to establish the causes of behaviour, there are seven areas to consider. These areas are pain, medical conditions, environment, genetics, evolution, previous experience and human interaction. All of these may play a part in any behaviour issue. Once the motivation for the donkey's behaviour can be established, the cause of their behaviour can be identified.  The most effective and ethical way to resolve behaviour issues is to remove the cause of the problem wherever possible.

## PAIN

Pain and veterinary conditions are the most likely causes of behaviour issues in donkeys. However, because of their stoic nature, it is easy to overlook pain in donkeys. Therefore, getting to know what is normal behaviour for a donkey and spotting subtle changes in behaviour is crucial to the early recognition of illness or behaviour issues in donkeys.

Changes in a donkey's character and behaviour can be signs of pain or medical conditions, so always have a vet rule pain out before working with a behaviour issue.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN MY DONKEY DEVELOPS UNWANTED BEHAVIOUR?

When experiencing changes in donkey behaviour, it is crucial to seek help sooner rather than later.

'Unwanted behaviour' is the term used when donkeys behave in a way that is undesirable to human handlers. However, to the donkey, their behaviour is not a problem or unwanted it is there to help them cope with a situation or to solve a problem they face.

Lots of things can affect donkey behaviour. Try to establish the causes of a donkey's behaviour before trying to change their behaviour with any training. You may need help to do this from a vet or an equine behaviourist. When trying to find the causes of problem behaviour, think about the six factors that influence donkey behaviour: evolution, genetics, pain and health conditions, environment, human interaction and previous experiences.

Many factors may play a part in unwanted behaviour. The key to working with donkeys is to accept that there is always a reason for their behaviour. Try to look at things from their point of view, and understand how they feel. Establishing the motivation for their behaviour can help find the cause. If you can remove the cause, there should be a change in the donkey's behaviour.

It may not be simple though. If your donkey has shown unwanted behaviour for a long time, it will be deeply ingrained and may take many months of consistent work to change. Getting help early will increase the chance of successfully working through problems. It will reduce the risk of someone getting hurt.

### WHEN TO SEEK HELP FROM A QUALIFIED, EXPERIENCED BEHAVIOUR PROFESSIONAL

- If you notice changes in a donkey's behaviour, get help sooner rather than later.
- If you have never successfully dealt with this sort of issue before.
- You do not know the cause of the unwanted behaviour.
- If you do not have a clear plan to follow.
- If you have lost your confidence or are fearful of working with a donkey.
- If the donkey's behaviour is getting worse.
- When working with the donkey could be dangerous.
- If you lack experience with keeping donkeys or training.
- To solve behavioural problems, you may need the help of a qualified professional with experience in donkey behaviour.

## Further Information

### THE DONKEY SANCTUARY HAS RESOURCES ON ALL ASPECTS OF DONKEY AND MULE BEHAVIOUR ON OUR WEBSITE

Contact us for specific advice on behaviour at
equine.behaviour@thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk

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The Donkey Sanctuary was founded by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE in 1969.
The Donkey Sanctuary (registered charity number 264818) and its sole corporate trustee, The Donkey Sanctuary Trustee Limited (Company number 07328588) both have their registered office at Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, EX10 0NU.
Incorporating: The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys (EST); The International Donkey Protection Trust (IDPT).