Practical Goat Husbandry: Restraining and Weighing Goats

This article is the first in a two-part series. Look for “Practical goat husbandry: treating your goats” in the next issue of Alliance.

Being able to restrain, treat, and weigh your goats is a key part of their health care. No one wants to wrangle and wrestle a goat when performing basic health care. There is no reason why you can’t train your goats to accept handling and making them feel in a low-stress manner. Goats are naturally curious and have very long memories. This makes them easier to train, but also allows them to remember negative experiences for a long time. Taking time to teach your goats and making handling a positive experience will make routine husbandry practices easier for both you and your herd.

Remember, always handle your goats gently and never, yell, kick, shove, drag, or become frustrated with them. No matter their age, they will remember good or bad experiences with you. Goats that remember bad experiences will only become harder to handle, making a small problem much worse over time. Patience is key when working with any animal. Consider rewarding goats for good behavior during handling and procedures with feed or scratching (if they enjoy this). Feed is a great distraction if you are trying to handle a goat.

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Restraining

If you need to catch goats that are in a large pen, you may want to move them to a smaller pen or create a temporary holding pen inside the existing pen. Place a few livestock panels in the corner of the pen, and move the goats down the wall towards the corner. Once the goats are in the corner, quickly close the panels, securing them with taller wire or short chains and clips. The goats can now be caught much more calmly, avoiding the need to chase.

Do not tip goats onto their hind end as is done in sheep. Goats will strongly resist this and can even cause injury to handlers by striking out with their hooves. It is possible, perform all procedures with goats standing and try to maintain visual contact between the goal you are handling and the rest of the herd.

Goats wearing a neck chain or collar can be tied or held in place by an assistant. You might also consider using a stanchion or chute system to restrain your goats for a bit more control. Handling equipment like chutes are especially helpful for goats that do not get a lot of human interaction, such as some meat goats. If you don’t have handling equipment, you can straddle the goat’s neck. This works best if you back a goat into a corner so they cannot back out from under you. Be especially cautious when restraining a horned goat this way, as they may be able to trample or gore you with their horns (early disbudding of goats “in the next issue of Alliance.

A livestock scale should be low to the ground. If the scale surface is not a smooth, consider placing a grooved rubber mat on it to provide goats added traction and reduce slipping, which can make goats fearful. You can offer a small amount of feed on the scale to encourage your goats to step onto it.

If your scale does not have a built in chute or pen on top of it, placing it in an alleyway of your handling facility, a narrow hallway, or putting up sides on the long ends of the scale may help you herd or load your goats onto the scale and prevent them from stepping off the sides. If you like, you can put doors on the short ends as well. Just make sure they are open when you are directing the goats to get on the scale, because they are unlikely to want to walk toward a “dead end”. Have an assistant close the far door once the goat is on the scale.

Special considerations for kids

Shortly after birth is the best time to begin gently handling your goats. Start building a relationship with the kids so they begin to associate you with good things, making them less fearful and less stressed when you need to handle them for procedures. Positive interactions with kids can involve both feeding or delivering milk or feed.

Further, bottle feeding, providing a nipple, or letting kids suck on your finger are great ways to restrain a kid for minor procedures like checking their navel. They will typically be distracted and let you handle them with little protest. Be sure to wash your hands and change any soiled clothing between kids to minimize disease spread. Working from the youngest to the oldest animals and from healthy to sick can also minimize disease spread.

As you will need your kids’ weight to calculate the amount of colostrum or treatments to give them, or calculate their average daily gain, it is good practice to weigh them shortly after birth. If you have a livestock scale, introduce them to this by weighing them there. Placing them in a rubber tote is ideal for carrying them from the pen and placing them on the scale. Never put the kid on the rubber tote while a kid is inside. If you don’t have a livestock scale, a household scale or a sling scale will do.

If you are picking up or holding kids, lift their chest and abdomen and carry them horizontally. Never pick them up by horns, neck, legs, tail or other body parts.

Summary

As a producer, you are often responsible for performing many routine health care procedures on your goats. Being confident in your ability to do so correctly and knowing how to handle your goats will make the experience much easier for you and your herd. If you are uncomfortable performing any health care procedure, ask your herd veterinarian to demonstrate then watch you complete the procedure.

Remember to take your time and be patient when handling goats. If you try to rush or become frustrated, handling will be unpleasant for both you and your goats. By focusing on reducing stress during handling, restraining your goats for basic procedures can be much simpler.

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