

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 handle them 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 behaviour 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.



Restraint

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, quietly close the panels, securing them with baler twine 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. If possible, perform all procedures with goats standing and try to maintain visual contact between the goat 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 or restraint 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 bruise or gore you with their horns (early disbudding of kids is recommended for both human and animal safety). However, try to avoid catching or holding goats by the horns. This may be painful and can cause much more struggling than if you hold their head. Another way to restrain goats is to place a hand under the jaw to raise the head. The other hand can be placed on the body or shoulders. Goats are much stronger when their heads are down, so this simple technique works very well. Pushing a goat into a corner with a leg applying pressure against the chest may also be effective. Always release the goat as soon as possible when you are done a procedure.

When catching goats, a shepherd's crook may be a useful tool. Dr. Paul Morris recommends a light, reasonably priced aluminum model that is about one to two meters long and has two built in grips. "The crook allows producers to extend their reach, making it easier, faster, and safer to catch goats." Further, you can reach overtop of a group to get a specific goat. He noted that using a crook is less stressful for both the producer and the goats and using this tool makes catching goats, "less of a rodeo." The crook should be used to slow down and catch the goat. Once caught, elevate the goat's head and remove the crook.

Tip: Having an assistant restrain your goat while you are treating makes things easier, especially if you have a goat that is hard to handle or do not have handling equipment.

Note: Avoid handling heavily pregnant goats if possible. If handling is absolutely necessary, ensure you use extreme care to avoid stress, as this could lead to premature kidding.

Weighing

A livestock scale is a worthwhile investment on your farm. Purchase one that can be used for all the goats on your property – from kids to bucks. Weighing your animals is the best way to calculate doses of medications and avoid over or under medicating. The scale is also valuable for tracking weights of meat goats you are planning to market, especially if the buyer wants a specific weight range.

Taking the time to allow goats to explore the scale (or any new equipment) before you need to use it allows them to go slowly and satisfy their natural curiosity. By allowing them to explore the scale and offering food at the other end, goats will quickly understand what you are asking and make future weigh-ins much easier.

A livestock scale should be low to the ground. If the scale surface is smooth, consider placing a grooved rubber mat on it to provide goats

with 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 lead your goats onto the scale and prevent them accidentally 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 bottle 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 lid 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. ■

This project was funded in part through *Growing Forward 2 (GF2)*, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative. The Agricultural Adaptation Council assists in the delivery of *GF2* in Ontario.

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