

# Introduction to the Veterinary Profession

VETS30030 / VETS90122



Module: Care and welfare of domestic animals

Large Animal Behaviour

Sheep

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# Sheep origins



Ovis aries descended from the Asiatic

(Ovis orientalis) mouflon around 10,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. We see woolly sheep about 4,000 years later

- The mouflon was very suitable for domestication: a relative lack of aggression, a compact size, early sexual maturity, a social nature, high reproduction rates
- Studies comparing European and Asian breeds of sheep showed clear genetic differences between the two

# Sheep breeds

- There are a large number of sheep breeds bred in different environments and for different purposes.
- In Australia the majority of sheep are Merino (for wool) and Merino crosses (dual purpose wool/meat). Sheep breeds specifically for meat are becoming more popular (e.g. Poll Dorset, Dorper). Sheep are also used to produce milk (e.g. East Friesian sheep).
- While breed, and genetics in general, has an effect on behaviour, life experience has a major influence.

# Group behaviour

- Sheep are gregarious, but there are breed differences (e.g. Merinos, herding)
- They tend to rest closely together (and in times of danger) but disperse more during grazing
- Social facilitation of behaviour



# Flock behaviour



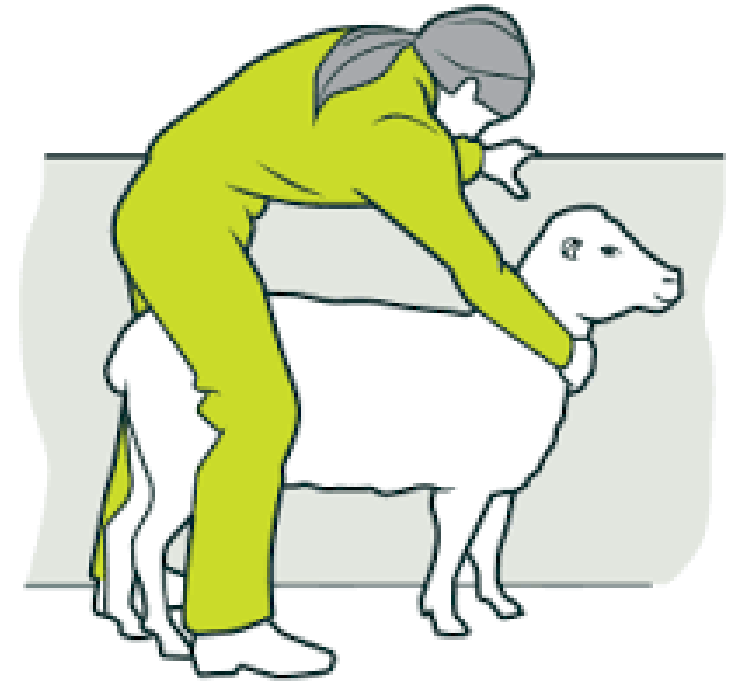
- Live in flocks
- Complex social hierarchy, particularly obvious when competing for limited resources (e.g. water trough, supplemental feed)
- Use of home ranges with specific bedding grounds
- Natural grazing behaviour can include 8-16 km/day, depending on water source and feed availability
- Preferred grazing times are early morning and late afternoon

# Social hierarchy

- Complex social hierarchy, but little aggression
- Oldest ewe often most dominant, pushing, rather than fighting
- Stomping leg can be threat, lowered head and head shake sign of submission
- May lower head and rush at subordinates
- Vocalisations used mainly for social re-instatement
- Goats are more aggressive than sheep, use their horns
- Goats rear heads when rushing at opponent
- When sheep and goats are mixed and fight, sheep often win

# Handling of sheep

- Isolation is highly stressful to sheep
- Use of dogs causes stress
- Move sheep in groups with gentle movement
- Food can be used to entice them
- Use confinement facilities
- Drafting gates can be used draft off selected sheep



# Videos

- Flight zone
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zNKbfaCxbU&list=PL4OaBCdO34bBi3AxpqZLtIG-0qVZSnf8s&index=13>
- Husbandry activities
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6Lmmr8MMGY&list=PL4OaBCdO34bBi3AxpqZLtIG-0qVZSnf8s&index=12>