

Miniature Donkeys As Livestock Guardians?

by Jane Savage, NH

Since I still get calls asking about the use of Miniature Donkeys as guard animals, I decided to see what information was available on the web about donkeys as guard animals. As I searched the web on this topic numerous hits came up with many referencing Miniature Donkeys including the book "Caring For Your Miniature Donkey" which has a whole article on donkeys as livestock guardians. The considerations on some of these sites were not about the donkey's size, but personality or gender. They indicated that not all donkeys were suitable as guardians and jacks should not be used. Other sites, some of which were Miniature Donkey breeders, suggested perhaps larger donkeys would be more appropriate, but few stated they should not be used as guard animals.

Many of the individual states have information on using guard animals for predator control under the Department of Food and Agriculture. A number gave a pros and cons of using guard dogs, llamas and donkeys comparing each. The Texas Department of Agriculture directly states do not use small or Miniature Donkeys. An article from the Alberta Canada from the Agriculture and Food Department also states DO NOT use Miniatures. The information from Colorado State University Extension Service gave a thoughtful analysis of guard animals with an in depth description of guard dogs. The author indicates dogs can be more effective against bear and mountain lion predation because Llamas and donkeys are afraid! (Who says they are not smart!) They do not mention donkey size as a consideration. The California Food and Agriculture article entitled "Choosing a Guard Animal" also does not clarify the size of a donkey as a factor in selecting a guardian.

Most of us are well aware of the natural aversion donkeys have to dogs and other small animals that get into their pastures, but not everyone is aware that Miniature Donkeys are just not big enough to fend off predators or even big dogs. There are references and horror stories about the numerous attacks on Miniature Donkeys by dogs. Anyone who has experienced this will never forget it. A case in point is vividly described by Nadia Attia-O'Bryan, Little Friend Ranch. Her painful experience of loosing two sweet donkeys in a herd of 18 by a viscous dog attack is described on her web site. The slaughter took place as one dog ran the donkeys while the other, a German Shepard, ravaged them. Nadia strongly speaks out against the use of Miniature Donkeys as guard animals.

In another account Pat Scanlan of Texas describes a similar heartbreaking story when he lost his beloved donkey, Little Gringo, to dogs. (Asset#54 Summer 04) He further comments "two or three gentle family dogs become a raving murderous mob when a prey animal starts to run from them"

Last year there was a well-publicized incident of a Miniature Donkey, pastured with a horse and pony, severely mauled by a dog and spent weeks recovering at a local vet clinic. He lost an eye, his tail and had numerous other serious wounds. There was a Herculean effort to save this little donkey. He survived, but the dog was never found. There are many other stories like these, which leaves me to believe we need to protect our minis from dogs as much as possible.

An article in the Brayer (vol. 39#1 Jan/Feb 2006 pg. 94) titled "Fate's Hand" makes some interesting points regarding donkey vs. canine behavior. "The differences (between donkeys) lie in the physiological. Standards and Mammoths are larger, stronger; therefore they hold a different position in the prey ladder.

Of all the donkeys Mammoths have the odds of success in their favor when large vicious canines are concerned. Standard donkeys are one to three steps down the ladder in a less favorable situation depending on their physical stature. Most standards can easily kill ONE vicious dog with little or no battle scars. Add one dog to the equation and your donkey's odds go down to moderate to severe wounds...Donkeys work in a group, however when the going gets "sticky" they act/think independently. Canines do just the opposite, which is why they are so dangerous...

The mini's lack of height, weight and bone mass puts them BELOW any aggressive dog. It is the exception that a mini will take on a dog of 60 lbs. or more. Mini's can be effective with controlling, deflecting and even killing small prey. On that list armadillos, rabbits, raccoons, beagles, poodles, spaniels and other non-aggressive dog.

When two or more of aggressive canines team up, they instinctively work together for the meal ticket. Once it begins, the canines continue to become more excited and fixed on the kill. Hence the violence, slow cruelty of picking apart, and totally mauling the victim."

I actually use Great Pyrenees to guard my donkeys and think they are wonderful for our situation. When people ask me about guard animals I refer them to a reliable breeder of livestock guardian dogs. I have had many calls from well meaning people looking for a livestock guardian for their flocks and say to me. "Oh, I've always wanted a Miniature Donkey and I heard donkeys are great guardians so I want to buy one to put in with my sheep (or goats) to protect them and I will have a cute pet and a guardian too!"

With the information available as breeders and owners of Miniature Donkeys we should help educate people that they are just not an appropriate livestock guardian. Many people hear donkey and think all donkeys can do the same work they don't realize the Miniatures are just too small.