

# Donkey Love – Little-Known Facts About Donkeys

Donkeys tend to be overlooked in terms of respect compared to other members of the equine family (like horses), but donkey enthusiasts are eager to change that. These humble animals have been revered for centuries and are valued for their affectionate, playful personalities, and strong work ethic.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Donkeys were revered in ancient times and highly valued for carrying heavy loads and facilitating trade across the Sahara
- Donkeys have a reputation for being stubborn, but that's only because they're cautious, independent thinkers who tend to "look before they leap"
- Donkeys are intelligent, personable and affectionate, and are kept for purposes of companionship, guarding sheep and goats and, in some areas of the world, as pack animals
- Enthusiasts often say donkeys are more personable than horses and make great hiking companions. They're even used in some areas as therapy animals
- Donkeys like to spend time with their humans but also require a donkey buddy to thrive

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In the U.S., donkeys are often regarded as a slower, stubbier version of a horse, but not only are they an entirely separate species, they also have unique attributes that make exceptional animals in their own right.

Although the number of donkey enthusiasts pales in comparison to the number of horse lovers, the former is a devoted group eager to set the record straight about these intelligent and lovable animals.

The Donkey Welfare Symposium, held annually at the Cornell University veterinary school in Ithaca, New York, is a highlight of the year for donkey experts, but even this has a surprisingly low attendance (only 77 people attended in 2016).

Those in-the-know are eager to set the record straight, bust some widespread donkey myths and let the world know why donkeys deserve some serious respect.

## Donkeys Were Revered in Ancient Times

In 2002, researchers discovered the skeletons of 10 donkeys that had been carefully buried alongside an early Egyptian king.<sup>1</sup> Their burial in this extremely high-status area shows the animals were highly valued and respected.

The ancient donkeys had a shape more similar to the wild ass, from which they were domesticated, than modern-day donkeys, but wear-and-tear on the animals' shoulder and hip joints suggests they were, in fact, domesticated animals used for carrying heavy loads and facilitating trade across the Sahara.<sup>2</sup>

Donkeys are strong and hearty animals, capable of surviving on meager vegetation and little water, which suited them to life as desert pack animals. Although camels are often associated with trekking across the desert, donkeys actually did it first.

"It was the first transport off human backs," Fiona Marshall, Ph.D., a professor of archaeology at Washington University in St. Louis, told The New York Times.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, though donkeys are still used as pack animals in some areas of the world, they are often mistreated, abused and may be slaughtered for meat and gelatin.<sup>4</sup>

## **Donkeys Are Independent Thinkers and Make Excellent Guard Animals**

Donkeys have a reputation for being stubborn, but a more apt description would be cautious.

If a donkey is unsure of where he's being led (over a stream or near a cliff, for instance), he will stop and consider the situation before proceeding. He may paw at a stream to gauge its depth or investigate a shadow before crossing over it. As the Times reported:<sup>5</sup>

*"They like to think before they act. The reason may be that their ancestor, the African wild ass, is not a herd animal. Wild asses have individual territories, and each must decide where to go and when to eat, run or fight."*

*'Donkeys have retained some of that thoughtful intelligence,' said Dr. Marshall ... They like to decide for themselves."*

This is part of what makes them valuable for another lesser-known purpose than packing: guarding. Donkeys make excellent "guard dogs" for animals like sheep and goats, and many farmers use them as such.

After first trying to scare off predators with vocalizations, they're quick to charge and will fight off dogs, coyotes, foxes and even mountain lions.

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) even has an entire section of their website devoted to "Guidelines for Using Donkeys as Guard Animals with Sheep," in which they explain:<sup>6</sup>

*"Donkeys rely predominantly on sight and sound to detect intruders. When approached, sheep will tend to move so the guard animal is between the intruder and themselves. The donkeys' loud brays and quick pursuit will scare away predators and may also alert the shepherd."*

*In most instances donkeys will confront and chase dogs or coyotes out of the pasture. If the canines do not retreat quickly the donkeys will attack them by rising up on their hind legs and striking with both front feet. A solid blow can injure, kill or at the very least discourage the predator."*

# 'A Dog You Can Ride'

Donkey lovers will also be quick to tell you that these animals make loyal, affectionate pets, with personalities and playfulness that rivals dogs. Donkey owner Kimberly Brockett of Tripledale Farm in Guilford, Connecticut told the Times, "It's a dog you can ride."<sup>7</sup>

Enthusiasts often say donkeys are more personable than horses and make great hiking companions. They're even used in some areas as therapy animals. Donkeys like to spend time with their humans but also require a donkey buddy to thrive.

Donkeys are such social creatures that the Longhopes Donkey Shelter in Bennett, Colorado strongly recommends adopting donkeys in bonded pairs, noting that, once bonded, "they will eat, sleep, play and protect each other every day of every month of every year."<sup>8</sup>

This doesn't detract from their ability to forge human bonds, of course. In the Denver Post, Kathy Dean, founder of Longhopes Donkey Shelter, said, "I like to call them big, overgrown dogs ... But really, the donkey is the New Age equine."<sup>9</sup>

## Raising Donkey Awareness

In 2016, 80,000 donkeys were exported from Niger to China, where the animals' skin is used to produce ejiao, a gelatinous substance used in tonics believed to cure insomnia and coughs and revitalize the blood.

The local people in Niger, many of whom still depend on donkeys for their livelihoods, have since seen major increases in donkey prices (from \$34 to \$147).

Amidst concerns that the local donkey population could be wiped out altogether, the government banned donkey exports, but other areas have not. Donkey thefts and cruelty have surged as the animals have gained value in animal trade for "medicinal purposes."<sup>10</sup>

Also of concern is the increasing use of tractors and trucks in developing countries, leaving donkeys out of a job and vulnerable to slaughter. At the Donkey Welfare Symposium in 2016, it was hoped that raising awareness about these intelligent creatures may help them garner deserved respect and better treatment around the globe.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [PNAS March 11, 2008](#)

<sup>2, 3</sup> [The New York Times March 25, 2008](#)

<sup>4, 5, 7</sup> [The New York Times October 31, 2016](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs \(Archived\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Longhopes Donkey Shelter \(Archived\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Denver Post November 6, 2008](#)

<sup>10</sup> [The Guardian September 13, 2016](#)

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