

ToughLove for Rams

Many people believe that rams are inherently dangerous and shouldn't be given attention, but some of them can be very affectionate for their whole lives. Close relationships with the shepherd/shepherdess are very possible as long as they understand and believe that the shepherd is the "alpha ram".

From the time that they are lambs, all rams need to be taught that they are subordinate to the shepherd and that they must never challenge that fact! They can be very gentle and respectful, but one must always remember that they are rams...especially during breeding season.

- A ram should not approach his shepherd/shepherdess without being invited, but if he does, he must stand quietly, and wait for a pat or a word. He should always move away from you when asked to do so.
- Rams (even ram-lambs) must not ever butt or paw for attention, or press their heads against you, or push another sheep out of the way to get the attention. Push them away with a firm "No", even if you are smiling inside. This behavior is no longer cute when they weigh 100 pounds.
- NEVER pet a ram on the top of his head....they consider this a challenge and it makes them butty. Rams should always be "chin up".
- A ram must never approach a human with his head down and must not "bob" his head at them. He must never back up, and feint a charge (as young ones do with the older rams).
- Jumping up on people is absolutely forbidden , no matter how cute a little ram-lamb might be at the time.
- Be aware of what the ram is doing at all times. When entering the ram's pen or pasture, it is a good idea to keep him in your field of vision, so that any bad behavior can be dealt with immediately.
- Never use just a single fence to separate rams from ewes, or from other rams in breeding season. For breeding pens, the space should be made of a solid material so that the rams can't see each other, or a distance of 50 feet or more. In the off-season, this can be only a few feet and at this time, see-through fences are fine.

It is not a good practice to give food treats to rams. The ram can express his eagerness to get them as impatience with the giver...and respond with butting behavior.

•No ram should live alone. Rams will always find ways to take out their frustrations by bashing buildings, butting people or other animals, jumping over or destroying fences, etc. Wethers make excellent companions, but more than one is recommended when keeping a single ram.

Discipline

If a ram (or ram-lamb) is too pushy in demanding attention, reject him by pushing him away or shoo him back from you....don't pet him if he has been rude in asking for affection.

Never hit a ram...he will consider this a provocation, especially if one hits them on or about the head. They think: "This human is fighting like a ram....and well, it doesn't hurt THAT much....BRING IT ON!" So the uppity ram becomes even more interested in the confrontation.

In the case of a major misbehavior, we have developed a method for teaching rams that they must never question their lesser position to humans, or the requirements of living in a flock situation. These dominance demonstrations can be used for disciplining a ram for threatening a human, and for various other bad behaviors, such as barn or fence bashing.

The goal is to get them on their backs (helpless) with you holding them down. You establish yourself as "alpha ram".

The technique: first grab him by whatever you can, a horn is easiest for some, but be prepared to hold on. The horns can be used as a leverage point to flip the ram, but that is sometimes more difficult to do with the big boys. Lambs are easily flipped and if your point is made now, you may not need to do this when they are adults.

As a point of interest, there is another way that is easy on the body. After you have caught the ram, get him sideways to you (right against your thighs) and lean over his back, grab the far front leg and a handful of the skin in front of the far back leg and flip him like you are shaking a rug, stepping back as you do it. He will go right on his back. One wouldn't ever hold on to the skin or wool of a sheep otherwise, because it hurts them, but this is a lesson and need not be pleasant. This works especially well when one is irritated....adrenaline helps a lot!

After the ram is on his side/back, hold him with his head cranked severely around to the side, and use a knee to hold him down, until he gives up struggling. If this is a first offense, the sense of helplessness may be all that is necessary. But if the ram has needed discipline more than once, also hold his nose for several seconds with one hand, with the other hand holding the head or whatever body part necessary. Another shepherd-friend holds the noses of her rams until they pass out (!) but we never have gone that far....they lose enough brain cells on their own!

A good end point is when they start to urinate. (Interestingly, holding the nose is one of the accepted methods of getting a urine sample from a sheep.)

While the ram is down, shout at him! Shout something that you can use as a verbal reminder later. It may take more than one application of this treatment to make an impression, especially if he has decided that he can misbehave and still remain alive!