

Bells and Whistles

By Nan Hassey

In the last issue of *Goat Tracks*, Matt Lyons asked the question, “In addition to the BMP’s what can we do about this [lost goat] problem?”



Well, there are several things not covered in our Best Management Practices which could go a long way toward helping us keep track of our goats on the trail. We lose very few goats as it is, so adding some extra precautions could take our losses down to near zero. Not all of these ideas will be practical for every situation, but think about which ones might work for the type of goat packing you do and consider adding them to your own personal list of “BMPs”.

The first suggestion is to use bells. Bells have been used by goat herders for thousands of years to keep track of large numbers of goats browsing in the wilderness. Many of us like to complain that bells are noisy and distracting and may keep us from fully enjoying our wilderness experience, but let’s not too quickly dismiss the wisdom of the past. It’s important to weigh the distraction of bells against the headache of losing a goat. In goat herds, the lead goat is usually equipped with a bell, not only so the goatherd can find it, but also to help the other goats in the herd stay close to their leader.

On the trail, we have fewer goats and they must stay closer together, so equipping each with his own bell is not a bad idea. If your goats start to lag, you’ll hear the bells becoming fainter. If your goats wander into the brush, you can follow their sound. If one goat gets startled, you’ll hear it immediately and have more time to react (and catch him if he’s running the wrong way). If you count heads and realize a goat is missing, you will have a better chance of finding him if he’s wearing a bell. If you have a goat that insists on lagging behind, give him an extra-loud bell with a distinctive sound so you can hear when he starts to drop back. Bells have the added advantage of warning hikers, horseback riders, and predators that you are approaching. The best predator is the one you never encounter, so giving the wildlife a heads-up on your approach may prevent a goat-loss incident from occurring in the first place.

Another good practice is to use bright colors so you can more easily spot a goat that wanders off-trail. I know a lot of folks prefer to use natural, muted colors for their packs so

they can blend in with the wilderness, and I appreciate the aesthetics of this idea. However, if your goat strays into bushes or a boulder field he may be impossible to spot without a bit of bright color. It's amazing how even the flashiest goat can blend into the landscape. Take a look at the photo of Sputnik standing less than ten feet away in the trees. Were it not for the blaze orange pack you would never spot him. Some people use wide, orange neck collars or tie brightly colored pieces of fabric to their earth tone packs. When hiking in the wilderness, it's better for your goats to be distractingly bright than to disappear into the landscape.



Where is the goat??

Another practice my husband and I have been working on is training our goats to come to a whistle. Our voices do not carry far and they are easily confused by wind and terrain. If you cannot make a loud, piercing whistle with your lips, buy one and train your goats regularly with it at home. If you give your goats a treat when they come to the whistle, they will learn to race toward the sound every time. In the event that one of your goats gets separated from you on the trail, he will appreciate having a loud, clear signal to follow back to you. Often when a goat gets separated he panics and runs the wrong way because he doesn't know where you are. The whistle will be a familiar, comforting sound that snaps his brain out of panic mode so he can stop running and find you. The piercing sound is less likely to be confused by echoes or wind so he'll have a good idea what direction to go.

It's important not to take more goats than you can reasonably keep track of and manage. I tend to think that three goats is about as many as I could control, while my husband doesn't like to control more than one. Be realistic about your personal limit and stick to it. If one person takes six goats on the trail, there's a much higher chance of one being overlooked. If you have a lot of goats with several hikers, appoint certain individuals responsible for specific goats so that one person doesn't have to do all the head counting and controlling. As you are hiking, look behind you periodically to count heads. If you have one goat that insists on lagging, you will have to look behind more frequently. You may even need to tie the lollygagger to one of his mates. Don't take for granted that the lagging goat will eventually get lonely and catch up. He might not, so if you see a potential problem, be proactive.

Always be ready to deal with dogs. Domestic dogs are probably the most common cause of packgoat incidents. Always be on the lookout for dogs wandering off-leash. Most dog owners are ignorant about packgoats and may not be aware that their pet could frighten or even kill your goats. If you see a dog, immediately call your goats and physically take control of each of them. Never assume your goats are tough enough to tackle a dog. Hang

onto your goats and ask the owner to please leash their dog. Be ready to defend your goats with pepper spray, a Dog Dazer (available from www.northwestpackgoats.com), or a stout stick. Train your goats to run behind you at the first sign of danger, and expose them to large dogs in a controlled environment so they are less likely to panic and bolt if they encounter one on the trail.

Finally, check your goats' health and equipment regularly. A goat in poor condition or one with a pinching saddle, girth gall, or bruised hoof is more likely to lag on the trail or even turn back. Making sure your goats are happy, healthy, and comfortable will go a long way toward ensuring that they enjoy being with you on the trail and are physically capable of keeping up. If your goats love their job you'll find that it's much harder to leave them than to lose them. Keep your friends close and your goats closer!

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Finn is properly outfitted in bright colors, bell, and halter with attached lead.