

## **The Goat: A Natural and Cultural History**

Interview by [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions](#)

Why Goats Matter: They're Intelligent, Emotional, and Unique  
October 12, 2020

*A discussion about these curious and gentle beings with unique personalities.*

I recently read an excellent book by goat and sheep expert, Sue Weaver, called *The Goat: A Natural and Cultural History*. I've always enjoyed watching goats, and was pleased to see a comprehensive work devoted to these smart, curious, gentle, independent, and social animals, who also are full of character and display unique personalities.<sup>1</sup> Here's what Sue had to say about her recent book.

### **Why did you write *The Goat: A Natural and Cultural History*?**

I'd already authored three goat books for other publishers when Ivy Press contacted me about writing *The Goat*. I already had copies of *The Dog* and *The Horse* on my bookshelves, so I was familiar with the series and knew that writing *The Goat* would be, for me, a dream come true. I love doing research and was fortunate to be assigned the best project editor ever, Angela Koo, who made writing *The Goat* sheer joy. I've enjoyed writing all of my goat books, but this one is my favorite literary effort to date.

### **How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?**

We've had goats for 19 years. At first we bred highest-quality, registered Boer goats but as ethical vegetarians, we soon realized that selling kids that could ultimately end up on someone's dining table was not for us. Our Boer does become expensive pasture ornaments. Then we began collecting goats that needed good homes.

History is another of my passions. I'd researched goat domestication and the fascinating role of goats' interactions with mankind for another of my books, *The Backyard Goat*, but that merely whet my appetite. *The Goat* gave me an opportunity to dig in and do some really in-depth research. I loved it!

### **Who is your intended audience?**

I think anyone who appreciates goats will love this comprehensive, beautifully illustrated book. Princeton University Press did a fantastic job with *The Goat*!

### **What are some of the topics you weave into your book and what are some of your major messages?**

Our story of the goat begins in chapter 1 as we take a look at how goats traveled the road from prehistoric beast to man's four-legged helper. In it we consider true wild goats, among them *Capra aegagrus*, first domesticated in the Fertile Crescent 10,000 years ago and ancestor to today's goats worldwide, and why it was relatively easy to bring him in from the wild. We also see how goats spread quickly around the globe in the company of Neolithic herders and later, colonists, seafaring traders, and explorers, sometimes escaping their handlers and returning to the wild as feral goats.

Chapter 2 addresses biology and anatomy. We survey their bones, their organs, their hooves, their splendid horns, and each of the goat's five senses. We lightly touch on genetics, on dwarfism, and what makes some goats 'faint'. We also examine a wide array of colors and markings before taking a peek at the differences between goats and their cousins, the sheep.

In chapter 3 we delve into goat society and behavior, and what makes goats tick. We see how they interact with one another and establish a hierarchy, and why this is important to goats. We consider courtship and the goat, when and how they breed and how they choose their mates. We look at how their early lives unfold and how kids play and mature.

We consider vocalizations, why goats call and what it means. Are goats smart? They are, and we show you why we know it's so.

In chapter 4 we look at properly caring for goats: trimming their hooves, attending them as they give birth, and addressing common health issues. We consider the hows and whys of handling and training them, and how to troubleshoot behavior quirks. We round things out in Chapter 5 by observing how goats and humans interact: milk goats, meat goats, fiber goats, goats for vegetation control, even goats that pack your gear when you go camping.

We learn that goats were widely used as cart and carriage goats and how we can do that yet today. Along the way we consider how goats once posed with children in vintage photos and hauled the wagons of eccentric 'goat men' in the early twentieth century. Goats abound in world myth and we'll take a peek at some of them: the goats who pulled Thor's chariot, the Yule goat, and goat deities like the Basque goddess Mari and Chemobog the Western Slavic god of the dead, British and European goat fairies, and the half-goat gods Pan and Faunus. We consider goats raised to become religious sacrifices, past and present, and military mascot goats as well. Then a quick look at goats and musical instruments from drums to bagpipes, horns, stringed instruments, and beyond. Finally, a peek at goats in popular culture. Then we bring you a gallery of glorious goats from around the world.

You may never look at goats the same way again.

### **How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?**

Surprisingly, there are only two other somewhat similar books in print. The others are *Goat* by Joy Hinson Dr. C. Naaktgeboren's *The Mysterious Goat; Images and Impressions*. The former is a wonderful little book in Reaktion Press' Animal series, the latter is a beautiful and lavish limited edition produced in The Netherlands. I recommend both. The *Goat*, however, covers the topics in much more depth than *Goat* and is far more affordable than *The Mysterious Goat*. It's the best of all worlds.

Are you hopeful things will change for the better as people learn more about the fascinating cognitive and emotional lives of goats?

Oh, yes, absolutely! Goats are such intelligent animals, and when handled compassionately, affectionate and trusting. I hope my enthusiasm shines through!

### **What are some of your current projects?**

Tom Kitch at Ivy Press planned to pitch another book in this series, *The Sheep*, at the London Book Fair but due to the Covid-19 shutdown, the fair was canceled. I'd still like to write the book, hopefully for Princeton University Press. But that project is currently on hold. Meanwhile, I'm writing articles and a column about goats and sheep for Hobby Farms magazine and articles for their sister magazine, *Chickens*. I'm also on the verge of self-publishing at Amazon and have two manuscripts ready to go (*Horse Tips & Tricks; More Than 400 Ways to Care for Your Horse Better, Safer, Faster, Cheaper* and *Goat Tips & Tricks; 500+ Ways to Take Care of Goats Better, Easier, Cheaper*).

Finally, I'm slowly, because technology is definitely not my forte, putting up a website where readers can download my animal care material as free PDF files. Since I don't have a lot of money to donate to animal rescues the way I wish, in this way I believe I can help animals by helping their owners understand and take better care of them.

### **References**

### **Notes**

More about Sue Weaver: "I've been working as a freelance writer since 1969, when I sold my first article to *The Western Horseman* magazine. Horse-crazed from the cradle, I initially specialized in writing about horses and sold hundreds of articles to dozens of equine publications until switching to small farm topics in the spring of 2000. Along the way my husband and I moved to the southern Ozarks and began raising Miniature Cheviot sheep. Then I was given a fair of

newborn Boer goat kids. Thus my love affair with goats began. Since then I've specialized in writing for publications associated with *Hobby Farms* magazine and in writing non-fiction books about animals. Various publishers have published 13 to date, along with a 14th that includes a great deal of my material. Themes include donkeys, camelids, chickens, cows, pigs, and of course, sheep and goats. We no longer breed animals but still maintain a large menagerie of livestock pets, many of whom are elderly and/or rescues, including 34 goats.

Bekoff, Marc. [The Rich Emotional Lives of Chimpanzees and Goats](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. [Why Sheep Matter: They're Intelligent, Emotional, and Unique](#).

Baciadonna, Luigi et al. [Goats distinguish between positive and negative emotion-linked vocalizations](#). *Frontiers in Zoology*, 2019.