

How to Catch a Sheep



—Ulf Kintzel

Catching a sheep the correct way with the blue leg crook. The crook hooks in above the hock and is then held up.

While living in New Jersey, a friend of mine and I used to shear sheep for small flock owners. The new customers were always advised prior to our arrival how to go about penning up the sheep so we could catch them to shear them. In one instance, the owner had chased the sheep around the barn the morning of our arrival to get it into the barn, where the sheep had never been. The sheep then knew something was up and different and did not go in. Upon our arrival, the owner, out of breath and composure, called the sheep stupid. I asked how smart he wants the sheep to be. After all, this “stupid” sheep had already outsmarted him today.

The point of the story is that you need to get into a sheep’s head—you have to know how a sheep thinks to know what to do. While at times it may look stupid to you what a sheep does, in a sheep’s mind it all makes sense. The sheep is not the stupid one if you can’t catch it. Its survival instincts will cause it to act in ways that the owner should understand and anticipate. And oh yeah, I was not asked to come back to shear that sheep. I wonder why....

So let’s assume your sheep are in the pasture and you notice one that limps or has a string or wire wrapped around the leg or is sick or has worms or whatever else and you want to catch it. How do you catch it? It is relatively simple when you do grain feeding. You do it when you feed your grain. The task is quite a bit more difficult if you do grass-fed.

Let’s start by addressing what a sheep thinks and how it functions. Just like us, sheep are creatures of habit. If you have a daily routine, they will learn to follow

that routine and usually be quite cooperative. Change one thing and they will get suspicious and may stop cooperating. That means you don’t want to start thinking about how to catch a sheep when the moment arises. You want to start thinking about it today, right after you read this article. What you need to do is incorporating the place or facility where you want to catch a sheep into your routine. A place to catch a sheep could be a pen or stall in the barn. It can be a pen you set up in the pasture. This pen should be familiar to the sheep. Trying to get the sheep in any pen or stall or corner of a paddock will fail when you try to do it for the first time when you need to catch a sheep.

Larger flocks have the advantage of “absorbing” the sheep you want to catch rather than scattering all the sheep. However, it is not feasible to get them into a pen in the barn each time you want to catch a sheep. Instead, you can use an electric netting in a corner of your grazing cell to make an enclosure. Don’t make it just as big as you need it. You may have problems getting all the sheep in, especially the last ones. Make it a bit bigger at first and then, when all sheep are inside, make it smaller to your liking by moving individual fence posts closer.

Always move the sheep you wish to catch towards the other sheep. This way, the other sheep keep it from racing around. That is what I mean by a larger flock “absorbing” the sheep you want to catch. If you drive it away from the flock and try to catch it, it will outrun you.

A blue leg crook, sold by Premier One Supplies, is a very handy tool when catching sheep. The pictures show how to catch and how not to catch a sheep with that crook. Pay special attention to the spot where the crook



Catching a sheep the wrong way: When the crook is hooked in between foot and back and then pulled back, the sheep is left with a lot of strength and incentive to struggle and fight.

hooks in. When attempting to catch the sheep, make sure you have the crook ready and hold it low. Don't raise it up in the air when you approach the sheep or run after the one you want to catch. They soon figure out what the crook means and will stay clear of you. Here is another rule of thumb that puts you inside a sheep's head: You have one good try to catch a sheep. So, plan it thoroughly and then execute your plan decisively. After that one try, if it was an unsuccessful one, the sheep will know you are trying to catch it and will react far sooner and quicker to any of your additional attempts. Remember, sheep aren't as stupid as people think they are. There are just far too few people who are able to outsmart them.

Also, use your kids to get the sheep together or where you want them! I am often asked for some advice of a herding dog. A herding dog doesn't function like a drill or blender. You can't just use it and then put it aside. You have to train the dog, which takes time, knowledge, and

skill. You have to be able to assert leadership. You have to work the dog regularly. You have to be able to watch the dog while you are watching the sheep you wish to catch. These are no small tasks. If you have kids, they work great getting sheep together, provided they are the kind who love the outdoors and listen and aren't the ones that walk with their eyes glued to the screens of their cell phones. Have them form a line and steadily and gradually push the sheep where you want them. The more kids, the better.

I hope this article will be of help to some of you who have struggled to catch a sheep. I know Stephen A. will appreciate the article. His phone call after some unsuccessful attempts to catch a sheep triggered me into writing it. I surely hope he has been able to catch his sheep before this article went to print. If not, he can now give it another try....

On a personal note: In the last weeks and months I have received an increased number of calls from fellow sheep farmers in Ohio, seeking breeding stock. While I discontinued my delivery to Ohio a few years ago, I am reconsidering. While I am notoriously sold out early on any ewe lambs, I will have a sizable selection of ram lambs available, all sired by my new rams from Lewis White Dorpers in Oregon. So, if you live in the proximity of Holmes County, Ohio, or in western Pennsylvania, give me a call. I am usually sitting by the phone at 6 AM on most weekdays. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.

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