



Not just horses with big ears

At 24 years of age, Marble needs special boots to keep her mobile.

She has founder, a condition where the bones in her front feet have shifted position, making them tender to walk on. It's a common disease in donkeys, usually caused by overeating.

Founder is one of the major reasons many donkeys end up at the Donkey Sanctuary of Canada or one of their associated foster homes, like Moose's Roost Stable run by Joan Doyle near Orton.

It was 12 years ago when Joan took in her first donkeys. Already a seasoned horsewoman, Joan saw an ad for the foster farm program.

"We had room," she thought, and she hasn't thought twice since. "They put a special magic in a barn. They're not 'just a donkey'."

Joan has four donkeys



Paul Fischbach gets some help from Willy the donkey to trim Marble's hooves. At 24 years old, she wears special boots to protect the soles of her feet, made tender by founder

there now, along with a few retired horse boarders.

Silver-gray Willy, now 16, was one of the first to arrive

along with his mother in 2002. Willy has never known poor handling, unlike many other donkeys that end up in foster care.

It's easy to see that Willy has a special connection with the farm farrier, Paul Fischbach, as he gently wanders over to 'help' Paul trim Marble.

"They're not born difficult, they're made difficult," said Paul.

As Paul explained, their hooves are designed for desert conditions and the moisture in our climate softens the hoof wall, leaving them prone to infections such as white line disease or abscesses. He trims Joan's donkeys every six weeks.

"Often people don't realize that a donkey is not just a horse with big ears," said Kim Hayes, operations manager at the Donkey Sanctuary of Canada south of Guelph, the organization that retains ownership of the donkeys in foster care.

"There are major differences."

Their digestive system is designed to handle larger quantities of coarse fibre – shrubs, twigs, and bark – and their feet grow more sole than a horse to endure the great distances they would travel in their native Africa to find food.

In their natural environment, it would be like eating

a stick of celery and a piece of lettuce and having to walk around the house between mouthfuls, said Kim.

In Southern Ontario, donkeys are living like they've got an endless bowl of ice cream served on the couch in front of the television. They can't associate the pain in their feet with what they're ingesting and they end up with founder.

Some can't be saved.

They can handle the cold; they can handle the rain, but they can't handle both. They are warm climate desert animals and they do need shelter.

Their social structure is different from a horse too. Their natural desert-type environment often won't support large herds.

Unlike having a horse stallion with his harem of mares, a donkey family group is often just a jenny – a female donkey – and her current foal and yearling.

The jack, or male donkey, will stake out his territory independently.

What you end up with is a more independent temperament but a greater tolerance of each other. Donkeys don't need the personal space the same as a horse; they will all quietly stand close together at a feeder, more like cows, without the typical horse-style bickering.



BY KAREN DALLIMORE
The writer is a freelance writer and horse fanatic near Orton

"Donkeys do best in pairs," explained Kim, but often when they are used as flock guardians for sheep they are on their own.

That works well in terms of them bonding with the flock they must protect, but it's not best for the animal.

Unfortunately, as guard animals, they also get in metabolic trouble on the rich production pasture they graze alongside sheep and goats, and their health issues are often not noticed until it's too late.

Every spring Kim will get a call, "my donkey killed my lamb or goat!"

Is it a young, intact male, she asks?

"Yes, how did you know?"

Young donkeys will play rough, grabbing another animal with their teeth, and they don't back down. The donkey may get the flock of sheep running and think it's a game, only to be called 'bad' for just doing what donkeys do.

The very trait of fighting with their teeth and front feet to attack coyotes can get them in trouble.

And as for that 'stubborn' donkey reputation, Kim says that it's not deserved.

Where horses will resort to flight if they think they're in danger, the stoic donkey will stand their ground and fight.

Add this to the fact that many are often scared by infrequent and inappropriate attempts to handle them and you have a description of many of the donkeys that end up in the Donkey Sanctuary or their affiliated foster homes.

As far as Kim is concerned, she'd like to believe that the Donkey Sanctuary might not be needed someday.

If more people understood that they're not 'just a donkey' and looked after them properly, she'd gladly close the doors, but meanwhile...



What strikes you most when you enter the loafing shelter at the Donkey Sanctuary of Canada is the calmness. The herd is quiet and content, gently coming close to visitors, simply looking for a scratch.