

An Introduction to the Donkey & Mule

The Donkey

To most people the donkey is an animal, which has long ears and brays. But, you can also recognize him by his frequently grey or brown coat, (although he does come in other more “sporty” colors) a light nose & belly, a black cross on his back and shoulders, a short thin upright mane and a tail which is tufted at the end resembling the tail of the cow more than the horse. The hooves of the donkey, which he doesn’t like to get wet or muddy, are small and box shaped, and much more elastic than those of his cousin, the horse.

The donkey probably has more names than any other species in the equine family. His Latin name is *Equus Asinus* or Ass – with the male of the species being a Jack (hence the term Jack Ass). His lady friend is a Jennet or Jenny. Donkey was originally an English name for the Ass taken from “dun-key”. Meaning a small dun or grey colored animal. Those of us in the Southwest use the Spanish word, Burro, for the ass.

Besides having a lot of names, the donkey comes in about as many different sizes, shapes, breeds, and colors as the horse. Visit one of the many donkey and mule shows across the country and you will see four basic size groups: Miniature – up to 36” tall at the withers; standard – 36 to 48” tall; and large standard – 48” to 56”. The mammoth – or Jack Stock is over 56” or 14 hands tall. Within those sizes you will see many colors, gray, browns, blacks, reds, and even spots. Also you will see many body types from deer-like and graceful to strong and sturdy, something for every job or personal preference.

As Betsy Hutchin’s states in *The Donkey’s & Mule as a Backyard Hobby*, “The most enjoyable thing about Donkeys as members of the equine world is the fact that they are exceptionally loving, almost in the same manner as a dog. They love to be touched and no amount of playing with, or loving will spoil them for work. They are highly intelligent. For some reasons, rumors to the contrary have always existed, but all one has to do is once have a horse and then a donkey and any belief in the stupidity of the ass is banished. They also have a definite sense of humor, sometimes mischief, and a great love of human company. All in all, whether you ride or drive your donkey, or just love him, he is an unexcelled pet in the large animal category.”

The Mule

To produce the hybrid equine called a mule, mate a male donkey (jack) and a female horse (mare). The opposite cross, using a male horse (Stallion) and a female donkey (jennet) is called a hinny. Even though the mule and hinny hybrids have the same sexual characteristics and drive as their parents, they are sterile due to an uneven number of chromosomes – 63. The Mule gets some of its characteristics from the sire, which tends to come out in the extremities. Thus, a mule...has a short thick head (if the jack has a short thick head), long ears, a short mane, thin legs, narrow hooves, a narrower body than a horse, and no hindlimb chestnuts, like an ass; in size, shape of neck and croup, speed, strength and type of tail, it is like a horse. A hinny is smaller and more horse-like than a mule, with shorter ears, a larger head and broader hooves; but has the ass's calmer disposition. (Note: while these things are generally true, the truest thing is that animals vary so much from individual to individual that sweeping generalizations are not to be taken too seriously)

Contrary to popular belief, a mule is neither vicious nor stubborn, but will respond as he is treated. The mule, which is well cared for and not abused, makes an excellent riding or working animal.

Mules come in all sizes, from the small miniature to the giant draft mules. The smallest mules come from miniature jacks and miniature horse mares. The draft mules come from Mammoth jacks and large draft mares. Saddle mules are being bred from Quarter horse mares, thoroughbreds, and other pleasure riding type mares and standard & large standard sized jacks. Hinnys come in about the same sizes, but as E.C. Porter states in *A Breeder's Notebook*, "It is simply the very low conception rate of the jennet (even to a Jack), which makes the breeding of hinnies much less sure and not at all profitable, compared to the breeding of mules."

Mules today are used for packing, pleasure riding, "coon" hunting and jumping, driving, and even racing. Because of their strength and sure – footedness, mules are being used more and more by cross – country and endurance riders as good, dependable mounts. As a matter of fact mules today are being used in many areas that were thought of as the exclusive province of horses such as fox hunting, dressage, combined driving, cow work, all sorts of recreational uses.. and even show jumping!

Donkey & Mule Terminology

Ass: The correct term for the animal commonly known as the donkey, burro or jack stock. The term comes from the original Latin term for the animal which was *Asinus*. The scientific term for the term is *equus asinus*. Thus ass is the correct term. The term fell into disrepute through confusion with the indelicate term “arse” meaning the human backside. You are never at fault when you refer to one of these animals as an ass, and the term is not improper unless you misuse it so yourself. The difference between asses and horses is a species difference. You might compare it to the difference between zebras and horses, different species but closely related and able to interbreed.

Jack: The term used for the male of the ass species. Thus, often used term jackass – which is correct if redundant.

Jennet: The term for the female of the ass species. The more usually used term is Jenny, which is considered correct in non-technical use.

Burro: A word taken directly from Spain. It means the common, everyday working donkey found in Spain and Mexico. It came into usage in the Western United States. As a general rule, the term burro is heard West of the Mississippi and the term Donkey east of the Mississippi where English language is more common.

Wild Burro: These are the feral (originally domestic) asses, which run wild in the Western part of the United States. The American Donkey and Mule Society prefer to keep the term burro for these animals. When registered they are registered as “Standard Donkeys” and the origin and breeding is given as wild burro.

Donkey: A word taken from England. The derivation is uncertain but most authorities think that the name comes from dun (the usual color) and the suffix “ky” meaning small. Thus “a little dun animal”. In earlier England the word ass as taken from the Romans, was the word used for this animal. The donkey variation is a relatively recent variant.

Mammoth or American Jack Stock: This is the largest breed of donkey in the world. Males must stand 56 inches and up, and females must be 54 inches and up. These animals have their own registry The American Mammoth Jack Stock Registry and also can be registered by ADMS.

American Spotted Ass: While asses of all sizes can come in “pinto” or spotted coloring, the term American Spotted Ass is a trademark for asses registered with the American Council of Spotted Asses, which is trying to establish foundation stock for spotted asses.

Miniature Donkey: Originally imported from the Italian islands of Sicily and Sardinia, plus some other places around the Mediterranean, these donkeys must be under 36 inches at the withers to be registered by ADMS as miniature. These animals are registered by the American Donkey and Mule Society. They are often referred to as Sicilian donkeys, but this is colloquial usage.

Standard Donkey: This covers the size range of most donkeys in the world. The size range is from 36.01 inches to 48 inches at the withers. This size donkey is often called a “burro”.

Large Standard Donkey: Donkeys from 48.01 up to 54 inches for females and 56 inches for males are designated large standard donkeys. These are good donkeys for adults to ride or work and for breeding saddle mules.

American Breeds of Mules

The old breed terms of Cotton, sugar, mine mules etc. are not relevant today. The breed names are now the following. Keep in mind that these breeds are not differentiated so much by size as by the type of mare the mule was bred from.

Miniature Mule: Bred from various types of pony mares or miniature horse mares, Fifty inches is usually considered the cut-off point for miniature mules.

Saddle Mules: Bred from mares of saddle horse breeding. These vary in size from small to very large but have riding type conformation and looks.

Pack/Work Mules: Bred from mares with some draft blood or of heavy work rather than for saddle type conformation.

Draft Mules: These are the largest mules and are bred from various breeds of draft mares. Belgian mules are the most common, valued for their bright sorrel color, but mules from, Percheron, Clydesdale, Shire and other draft breeds are popular also. The larger and heavier the better with these mules, but refinement is desired as well.