



Bellwether

by Nicole Roca

The practice of using bells on our livestock has become more whimsical over the years, but the tradition of putting bells on animals can be traced back as far as 5,000 years ago in Africa. Since then, bells have been used on many animals and by countries all over the world to serve as a means of location and protection.

For herds of goats and sheep in the wide open plains of South America or the equally vast savannahs of Africa, bells help shepherds keep track of their flocks. And imagine being a shepherd in the foggy hills of Great Britain, the Pyrenees mountains or the forests of Europe---bells are an essential tool to locate flocks. The word 'Bellwether' is defined by Webster's dictionary as someone or something that leads others or shows what will happen in the future. Shepherds choose the most trusted, confident wether in a herd of goats or sheep to wear the bell as it travels calmly and follows the shepherds' lead. Thus,

the rest of the herd easily follows the bellwether. In some herds, the shepherd may choose to put a bell on several of such sturdy and reliable animals. A different type or size of bell is put on several animals and the shepherd can tell by the different bell tones where or who is leading the herd. On a small farm operation, the shepherd may put a bell on their ram or buck as it's comforting to hear that audible bell and know that they are safely enclosed in their quarters.

Another function of putting bells on sheep and goats is that it gives them some protection from predators. The flocks that live out in the fields, plains and woods in the U.S. share those areas with everything from feral dogs to coyotes, bobcats, wolves and boars. The sound of the bell on an animal in a flock is *not* a natural sound to predators and alerts them to 'something being off'. The sound of bells could deter predators from getting any closer and hurting our animals.

When thinking about using bells in a herd, remember these tips:



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"The remains of the oldest bells were made from wood. The strongest bells over time have been made from brass or heavy metal. Bells can be made from any metal, horn or wood. Clappers are made from metal, horn, wood, glass, bone or plastic, depending on the size of the bell and the tone desired."

1. The collar will take more getting used to than the sound of the bell. The collars are generally made from leather or wood, although the practical vinyl material of today's time makes a sturdy choice also.
2. The size of the bell is also an important consideration as it should be suitable to the size of the animal. The bell is meant to be heavy enough to hang down from the animal's neck, so the sound it makes when the animal is grazing is low and soft. If the animal were to be spooked or chased by a predator, the sound is loud and clanging—an alarm alerting the shepherd to danger.
3. Generally, the larger the bell, the deeper the tone-- the smaller the bell, the higher the tone. Bells are typically referred to as 'cowbells' and can be found at most farm supply stores but it's fun to search a little deeper online if the shepherd is interested in authentic sheep or goat bells. A quick Google search can provide many choices, both new and vintage, so that any shepherd can take part in the tradition of livestock wearing bells.