

Scared STIFF



Rare fainting goats ‘fall over’ when frightened or excited

Story by Nick Thomas

Photos by Debby Thomas

At first glance, there appears nothing unusual about the herd of some 30 goats that Sharon Reeves raises on her six-acre farm near Tillman’s Corner in west Mobile. But when the animals fall to the ground, rigor mortis stiff, from the noise of a lawnmower, the unexpected bark of a stray dog, or even just the anticipation of feeding time, it’s clear these are no ordinary goats.

“They ‘faint’ when frightened, startled or excited,” explains Reeves, who isn’t particularly concerned when her herd starts dropping like flies as a noisy car comes up the driveway. She knows the goats will recover quickly enough. Reeves is one of a handful of breeders in the state who raise Tennessee Fainting Goats, one of the rarest breeds of goat in the United States, according to the International Fainting Goat Association (IFGA).

Dr. Dawn Booth, a professor of clinical pharmacology at Auburn University’s school of veterinary medicine, says the goats suffer

from a hereditary condition known as myotonia.

“The startling sets into motion a reflex that in most animals would allow them to run away. But in these goats, all the skeletal muscles simultaneously contract, the animal becomes paralyzed, balance is lost and it falls over.”

The term “fainting goat” is actually a bit misleading, according to Booth, since it’s a muscular phenomenon and the goats remain conscious. She says the animals are immobilized for just a few seconds, then spring back to life, apparently no worse for the ordeal.

The goats were first introduced to Marshall County, Tenn., in the 1880s by a man named John Tinsley who purportedly brought four of the animals from Nova Scotia. They quickly reproduced and became popular with farmers for their meat. But according to Reeves, who is a former president of the IFGA, the goats weren’t well treated in the past.

“In the 1940s, sheep farmers began running a few Tennessee

Fainting Goats in the herds to help save the sheep from coyote attacks,” she says. “The goats would stiffen up and the coyotes would attack the easier prey, which allowed the sheep to run away.”

It was a good arrangement for the sheep but, not surprisingly, few goats survived to a ripe old age. In fact, their numbers declined significantly and by the mid 1980s, the number in the United States declined to fewer than 2,000. Breeders soon began marketing them as pets and to zoos, and their the numbers have recovered somewhat with more than 5,000 in the United States today.

Reeves began breeding the goats three years ago, and does much of the work maintaining the animals. Alan, her husband, helps out with the deworming, hoof trimming and tattooing. Even her mother-in-law, Evelyn Reeves, has become enchanted with the animals and now creates fainting goat embroidery on a variety of items such as baseball hats, T-shirts, or tote bags, which she sells around



Sharon Reeves is one of an estimated 5,000 breeders in the United States today

the country from her Mobile based home business.

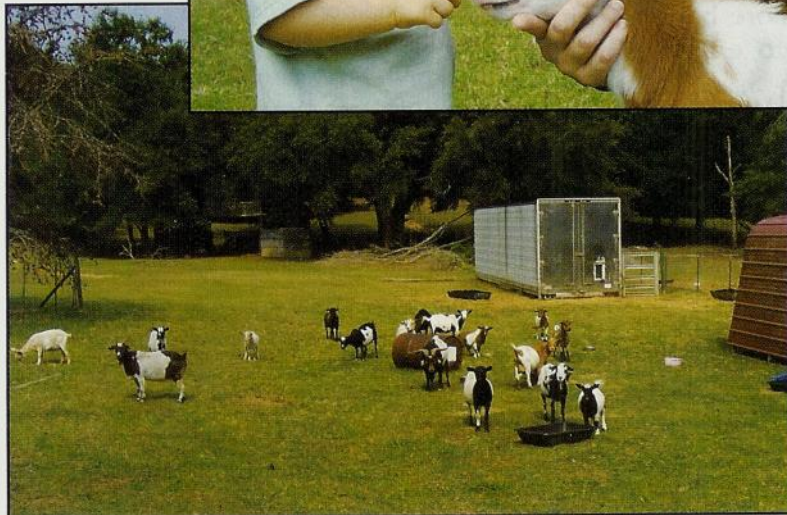
Reeves says that her mother-in-law, like many friends and relatives, were initially skeptical when they were told the goats had fainting spells. "Even now, people often won't believe us until they see them for themselves."

Reeves says the degree to which a goat faints varies from animal to animal. "Pretty much anything that startles them suddenly or excites them – even feeding – will cause them to stiffen. Then it's usually all four legs in the air."

Despite their nervous disposition, Reeves says the goats are very gentle and make good pets. They can even be trained to walk on a leash with a little patience. And because their myotonia keeps them from being able to jump fences, they are easy to contain.

Young goats normally sell for around \$250, while older animals may run another \$100. Contact Reeves through her Web site www.rfaintingfarm.com, or call her at (251) 661-0190. ☞

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Reeves raises the goats on her six-acre farm in Mobile County