

# Yak in Black ... Forest



The Gehrings shower their alternative livestock with 'hugs and kisses every day'

By Kiernan Maletsky

... Because they eat less than cows.

Lynda and Mike Gehring attended an alternative livestock seminar a little over eight years ago in an attempt to find something to occupy their new 35 acres of land. There, among the animals on display, were several Tibetan yaks. The animals appealed to the Gehrings for several reasons, not least of which was their meager eating habits.

largest, Sherpa, the herd bull, weighs around 1,600 pounds. Take into account his 2-1/2 foot horns and you've got one powerful animal. But don't let his size fool you.

"He's just so gentle. And it comes out in all his babies, to have a personality like that, where anyone can pet them ... they're just puppies," Lynda said. "Sherpa is just one of a kind. Nobody knows of a big yak bull that's just tame and gentle like him."



Top: Yonah and Yelsa the yaks. Bottom: Lynda and Mike Gehring with Sherpa at their farm in Black Forest.

COURTESY PHOTOS



Of the roughly 2,000 Tibetan yaks in North America, 200 are in Colorado, and eight of those are on the Gehrings' farm in Black Forest, along with a rare breed of cat known as a "munchkin," two Missouri Foxtrotter horses and three golden retrievers, including the daughter of a world champion.

With all this star power around, the yaks are still clearly the most interesting animal on the farm. The

Even with a human stranger in the field, the hairy bovines were unfazed. Maybe it is the treatment Sherpa and all the other yaks get, which is "hugs and kisses every day."

The four female yaks, who give birth once a year, lounge around the farm eating alfalfa and scratching themselves on large posts the Gehrings have strategically placed on the land. The calves, whose names always begin with a "y," are about 3 feet tall.

## Yak Facts

- A half-yak, half-beef cow will eat 70 percent of what a pure breed cow will eat.
- The money made on selling yak fiber will pay for all required hay throughout the winter.
- The life span of a Yak is 20-25 years.
- A farmer can feed three yaks with what it takes to feed one cow.
- A bull calf costs around \$1,200; female calves costs around \$1,700.
- By the time it is 2 years old, a yak can pack 150 pounds.
- Yak fiber (hair) sells for \$5-\$16 per ounce.
- Yak meat is 30-35 percent higher in the cancer fighting fatty acid CLA than beef.
- The Qinghai-Tibet plateau is home to 14 million yaks.
- A full grown male yak stands over 5 feet tall at the shoulders and weighs up to 1,600 pounds; cows can reach 850 pounds.

## HISTORY

Tibetan yaks are native to the Himalayas. There, the yak is as important as a car or grocery store to the natives.

"The people use the yak for everything," Lynda said. "If the yak weren't there, the people wouldn't be there."

"Ride, pack, or pull; meat, milk, or wool," is a common expression in the yak-rearing community.

Although yak meat and dairy products have not caught on in the U.S., The International Yak Association (IYAK) has high expectations for the future.

"They're convinced there isn't a healthier meat on the market," Lynda said of IYAK's hopes.

## DIET

A yak requires very little food to survive. Being native to the cold climates of Tibet, this rugged creature can live on sparse grazing land that would starve any other bovine.

The Gehrings have done some research and found that domestic yaks will grow larger and be healthier with several blocks of minerals to lick. Therefore, they have set out six blocks of nutrients including salt in both iodized and mineral form,

cobalt, sulfur, protein, and a mix of vitamins called 12-12 vitamin/mineral. In addition, they put a loose copper mineral in the daily feed as yaks are naturally deficient in copper.

The results of this conscientious diet are plain.

"They tease us at the (annual livestock show in Denver) that we bathe our yaks, but we don't, that's just a healthy diet," Lynda said about the clean, shiny coats of her yaks.

Yak bulls are not supposed to be able to breed until the age of three, but the Gehrings have found that their yaks breed at the age of 17 months.

## CARE

Yaks require very little extra attention. The Gehrings play with them a little bit each morning, giving them butt scratches and hugs.

Twice a year, the yaks need to have their hooves trimmed, a lengthy process that takes the Gehrings about four hours and requires the use of a squeeze chute and head gate — a large green contraption used to hold the yaks in place.