

Safety Considerations for Cattle Handlers

Our topics for this week are:

- Keys to safer handling of cattle
- Handling risks related to breed, gender, and handling facilities
- Defense strategies against being injured by cattle

Despite their long domestication, cattle are still the most likely farm animals to injure people who handle them. Unlike with horses, flight is not an effective means of defense for cattle. Cattle are more inclined to stop and fight. Most injuries are the result of improper handling or carelessness. Cows determine their rank in a group by shoving, and each is an individual with a different level of desire to test their rank. Reducing the risk of handler injury requires preventing unnecessary agitation in cattle, preventing improperly maintained containment and handling facilities, and recognizing signs of the desire of some cattle to exhibit aggression.

Genetic selection of calm cattle is prudent. Overly aggressive individuals should be culled. Walking among calves in their first 3 months of life and gentle handling will pay dividends in being able to work with them later as they age. It is good husbandry to socialize calves to humans within a distance that permits cattle movement without undue stress and allows screening inspections for disease or injury. A flight distance no greater than 15 feet should be a goal. Good handlers move cattle with patience and give them limited options where to go and some time to think about it. If stressful procedures are necessary, they should not be performed by the routine handlers and should be done as gently as practical.

Keys to Safer Handling of Cattle

- Accustom them to handler presence and handling facilities prior to the need to handle them for other purposes
- Respect their ability to injure handlers
- Recognize difference in breed, gender, and seasonal aggressiveness
- Beware increased self defensiveness in isolated herd members
- Herd them quietly and slowly using calmly applied pressure and release on their flight zone
- Cull overly aggressive individuals

Handler Safety

Risks to cattle handlers include being knocked down, trampled, crushed against a wall or fence, stepped on, butted, gored with a horn, kicked, bitten by molar teeth when drenching, and being hit by a tail. It is important to use the minimal amount of pressure and restraint required to move, sort, or treat.

Cattle Defenses and Offenses

If restrained, cattle will thrash their heads to the side to butt. Adequate head restraint of cattle during handling is critical. Cattle kick one leg at a time with a sweep to the outside and down

(*cow kick*). Calves may kick with both hind legs at once. A danger zone from a kick backward is within 8 feet from the base of the tail. They have no upper incisors, just a dental pad. A cow's tail is heavy and can inflict pain to any part of the handler's body it hits. A tail can also cause serious injury to eyes. Cattle do not care where they step and will make no attempt to avoid stepping on handlers' feet or running over a downed person. Bulls, cows with nursing calves, injured cattle, or previously mistreated cattle may charge a handler with an attempt to butt and crush. Individual bulls or cows that have aggressive behaviors which endanger other cattle or handlers should be culled. One-third of the farm fatalities involving cattle in the Midwestern U.S. are caused by cattle that have exhibited aggressive behavior in the past.

Breed Variations

Temperament of cattle is affected by type and breeds. *Dairy cattle* are selected primarily for their ability to produce milk. *Beef cattle* are selected for mothering ability. Beef cows are more prone to maternal aggression. Beef cows are typically more difficult to handle than dairy cattle because beef cattle are not selectively bred for their ability to be handled, and they are handled little. When they are handled, it is usually for frightening and uncomfortable or painful procedures. Among beef cattle, *Asian cattle* (Brahman) are more excitable, sullen, and aggressive than *European cattle* breeds. Brahman or Brahman crosses are more likely to lie down in an alley if stressed. They are also more difficult to sort because they more strongly resist being isolated. Large European mainland beef breeds are more excitable than British breeds. Angus are more excitable than Herefords. All these differences are generalizations and can vary widely among individual cattle and can be markedly altered by good or bad handling.

There are also general differences in dominance aggression between members of breeds. Angus and Brahmans are usually dominant to Herefords and Shorthorns. Ayrshires are dominant to Holsteins which are dominant to Jerseys.

Gender Variations

Bulls are unpredictable and can be exceedingly dangerous. When they are yearlings, they are aggressively playful. As they age beyond 2 years, they can become territorial and more dangerous, particularly during a breeding season or if pastured with other bulls. Territorial aggression is demonstrated by pawing, bellowing, tossing its head, and standing broadside to the intruder. Handlers should never try to make a pet of a young bull and never handle a bull alone. Groups of bulls can be maintained without serious fighting if rotation grazing is used, but new members or groups should not be added. Bulls should not be raised alone, they should be moved regularly to reduce the risk of territorial aggression and have a companion, at least one steer or dry cow. Moving bulls should not be done by a handler on foot and is best done if moved along with a small group of steers or cows. Well-trained dogs can be helpful. A long, strong stick should be at hand, and an emergency escape route should be identified in advance of need. Handlers should be careful of approaching any group of cattle since a bull could be mingling with them and overlooked until it becomes aggressive. If moving bulls into a pen, they should be moved at a trot until well inside or they may stop inside the gate and begin fighting because their individual zone has been invaded by competitors. Handlers should not attempt to interfere with bulls that are fighting. Bulls that will be handled often should have a nose ring and when being led, their heads should be held up by the nose lead.

Cows with calves can be dangerous. When catching a calf with the mother nearby, the

calf should be kept between the handler and the cow, and the handler should hold the calf's mouth shut. A long, stout stick should be at hand as an emergency deterrent to the cow. If moving cows with calves, the handler should start the move slowly, allowing time for each cow and calf to find one another. Herding dogs should not be used to move cows with calves.

Handling Facilities Risks to Humans

Cattle handling facilities have at least a holding pen, a crowding tub, a narrow alley, and a chute with a headgate. In each area, all surfaces should be free of sharp or rough edges. Nails should be hammered in flat and bolts that are too long should be sawn off. Loose fitting clothes and rolled up long sleeves that can get caught on fences and restraint equipment should be avoided. Catwalks and walkways, more than 2 feet high, should have handrails. Catwalks should be 18 inches wide and 36 to 42 inches below the top of the fencing, which is slightly higher than waist height when standing on the catwalk. All catwalks should be non-slip.

Cattle should never be handled between rails of an alleyway due to the risk of injury to a handler's head or fractured hands and arms. Children should not be allowed around livestock yards due to danger from the animals and their handling facilities.

Exit Strategies and Fending Off Attacks

Cattle handlers must always have a predetermined, feasible emergency exit from a pen or pasture. The most common emergency exit for cattle handlers is to scramble over or under a fence. The need for a rapid escape is most likely if handling a bull, cow with a calf, or otherwise aggressive cow. Possible escapes in a pasture other than fences can be climbing nearby trees or farm or ranch equipment.

Usually cattle display advance signs of pending attack or group panic. When cattle are not grazing but relaxed, they hold their head at shoulder height. A head held higher than their shoulders is a sign of fear. A steady stare can be a sign of aggression. More definite signs of aggression are slinging of the head or a lowered head with a fixed stare. The proper response by a handler to signs of aggression is to stand erect, face toward the cow, spread both arms out, and stare at it. Most will move away. Unlike horses that will jump to the side without looking, cattle first look in the direction they plan to move.

Cattle can outrun a human. Handlers must not try to escape by outrunning an aggressive cow or bull. If a cow showing signs of aggression does not eventual retreat, the handler should walk slowly backward. He should not look away or run. He should seek a safe location and later cull the cow from the herd.

A bull that paws the ground with a broadside display is body language for impending charge. If challenged by a bull, the handler should turn his side to it and walk away on a diagonal path. There should be no attempt to run in a straight line away from it. Alternatively, an evasion action can be to run at a right angle to a charge and force the bull to turn in circles. If in a pen with a bull, a handler is already within their flight zone and a charge will may occur without prior indication. If a handler is knocked down by a cow or bull, he should not try to stand. It is safer to crawl or roll to safety. Handlers should not work a bull alone. Another handler should be present to distract the bull, if the primary handler is trapped or down.

If the possibility of aggressive cattle is expected, the handler should carry a 5 or 6 ft stick. Just holding a stick up increases the handler's profile and height which makes him look more dominant. With sufficient practice, stock whips can be made to make a loud crack that will

encourage cattle to move or discourage a challenge to a handler's personal space. However, proper use of a stockwhip is a learned skill. Without sufficient experience in their use, stockwhips can be dangerous to handlers, especially the risk of eye injuries. Sticks and whips should not be used to strike a cow, except when a handler believes a charge is imminent or has begun.

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Cattle are the most dangerous of all livestock**
- 2. Handlers should never take their eyes of a bull in the same enclosure as the handler and should never handle a bull alone**
- 3. Safe handling facilities are essential to handling cattle**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.