

Safety Considerations When Handling Cattle

Our topics for this week are:

- **Defenses of cattle**
- **Cattle breed differences in ability to be handled**
- **Keys to safer handling of 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

Some keys to safer handling of cattle include:

- Accustoming them to handler presence and handling facilities prior to the need to handle them for other purposes
- Respecting their ability to injure handlers
- Recognizing the difference in breed, gender, and seasonal aggressiveness
- Being aware of increased self defensiveness in isolated herd members
- Herding them quietly and slowly using calmly applied pressure and release on their flight zone
- Culling 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.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Efficient, low-stress, handling of cattle requires careful selection of cattle and proper handling techniques.**
- 2. Asian cattle (Brahman) or breeds crossbred with Brahman are more difficult to handle than European breeds of cattle.**
- 3. Bulls and beef cows with nursing calves are the most dangerous individuals in a herd of cattle.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 300 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.