Easy Does It Part II

In our last article in this series, I shared with you that shouting at animals raised blood adrenaline levels higher than any other detrimental handling practice short of using an electric prod. Let’s take some time to discuss how adrenaline enters the bloodstream and how it manifests itself as it is expressed. Adrenaline is produced and released by the adrenal glands that lay in close proximity to the kidneys. A release of adrenaline is by design a “flooding” effect and if you think about it, that makes sense.

If you are a prey species animal like a cow, deer, or rabbit, speed and quickness are very valuable assets. When a predator gives chase, literally those that hesitate are lost! A release of adrenaline protects animals by giving them an almost instantaneous burst of strength and energy. Once the adrenaline is released, there is no holding it back. Its effects on the animal will last several minutes.

That release of energy is where the trouble begins for herd owners. Energy is gained by the cow by eating forages and concentrates…in short, things that have been bought and paid for by the producer. The intent of supplying cattle with energy via feed is for three major needs: Maintenance; Growth; and Reproduction (gestation and lactation). At no points are running, jumping, and kicking part of the plan!

Adrenaline bursts can be expressed by several visual cues; these include animals moving faster than a trot; twitching and nervous behavior upon stopping; kicking; and increased body temperature seen easily this time of year as excited cattle literally steam. Upset cattle will also show you the “whites of their eyes.” Never a good sign especially if you are in the pen with them!

It needs to be said that genetically some breeds and animals within breeds are just more prone to nervous behavior. Calves of nervous animals are naturally imprinted by their mothers to adopt these undesireable behaviors. The problem here is that cattle are herd animals and cattle tend to react negatively in response to nervous herdmates. If you are a calf and herd stampedes, you don’t stand around to find out what’s up. You run like the wind and pray you don’t find out what might be shopping for dinner. Therefore naturally nervous, excitable animals should be considered candidates for culling as they reduce overall herd production.

The first mistake to avoid when analyzing cattle handling is to think about them as having human understanding. Now I am not talking about making animals into Disney characters that wear white three fingered gloves, but I am aware that many errors occur when we expect cows to understand that we mean the best for them, regardless of how we treat them. It may sound crazy to even mention, but cattle are NOT people. The way they see, hear, and interpret information is very different.

First of all, cattle are herd animals. In our first article, you will recall that we identified cattle as a “prey species” who survive by outrunning predators or the unlucky lunch of said predators. Being “singled out” as a prey species is understood by cattle as meaning they are on the menu. The resulting behavior of nervousness, running, kicking, or charging is understandable given their understanding. If you need that one animal to treat for an illness or injury, to separate for breeding or any other procedure, bring them in with a buddy or two. Eventually they will have to be singled out, but the time should be minimized for everyone’s sake…especially yours.

While cattle like to be in a group, they also do not like to be crowded. Have you noticed that cattle tend to consume more feed on the ends of feed troughs? Years ago, I noted that by placing more feed on the ends on my feed bunk, I could get my dairy cows to eat about 300 more pounds of feed and produce about 600 more pounds of milk from the same inputs and effort…simply by placing the feed where the cows wanted to eat it. Human common sense would say that this shouldn’t be; if the feed is spread out evenly, then all the cows had an equal shot at eating their daily ration. Again this is an example of humanizing our animals. That made perfect sense to people, but it flew in the face of what our cows were “saying” they wanted.

Cattle tend to gather at the ends of feed troughs because what I term the “stampede principle.” Cattle have excellent peripheral vision; their ability to judge depth is not so strong however. Their eyes are on the sides of their heads so they can see more of what is around them and therefore, react more swiftly. Now put yourself in the cow’s place. If you are in the middle of a group of cows eating breakfast, you can see only as far as the cows next to you. If you are at the end of the trough, your ability to glance around is improved…thus the stampede principle comes into play. If you are in stampede, you want to be in one of two places: up front, farthest from the threat, where you can SEE where you are going; or in the back where you can stop before the cliff! In the middle is no cows’ land. You can’t see and if you stop, the back of the train runs over you…bad either way. So to avoid this possibility, you generally find cows prefer to eat at the ends of troughs. Every year someone gets trampled putting out grain to cattle. If you keep in mind where they want to go naturally, you may avoid the surge as they try to jockey for position.

An animal’s body language will tell you a good deal if you “think” like them. Cattle have directional hearing; they turn their ears to things that interest or frighten them. For prey species animals, these are usually the same things! More people recognize that when a bull or cow lays their ears back, something bad is about to happen. That animal is as tense as they can be without reacting. Prior to that moment though, animals will flag their ears to judge the situation so if you see an animal trying to “gauge” their situation, the best thing might be to back off and work them later. Head bobbing is another sign. Earlier, we spoke about cattle not being able to see to the front very well. When cattle feel threatened, they lower their head so there is less area directly in front of them. This can signal that they are preparing to come straight at whatever or whoever is in front of them.

As prey species animals, cattle despise change in whatever form it comes. Cattle are the ultimate conservatives. While we humans like a little variety to break the monotony, cattle enjoy eating the same feed, in the same place, with the same herdmates, in the same weather, delivered in the same way, by the same person. We ignore this when we invite every gooseneck, four-wheeler and dog around to show up the morning we expect to work cattle. All of these new sights, smells, and sounds tell cattle two things. First, something out of the ordinary is about to go down; and two, it is probably going to come down on them! It is necessary to work cattle, but introduce chutes and corrals to them as far ahead as possible so they have time to accept them as being part of their world. Ask the helpers to show up after the cattle are corralled and controlled.

Finally it is handy to know that cattle have a tremendous fear of falling. This combined with their poor depth perception is why cattle guards work as well as they do. Cattle can’t really tell if the pit below is six inches, six feet, or six miles deep, so they don’t chance it. This is also why they wear paths on hillsides. For the path to exist, cattle had to have successfully walked that way before, so it must be safe to traverse…much like troops walking through a minefield. This fear can also get you hurt. Many of you I wager have tried to push a cow over to get her to stand in a certain place or in a certain way only to have her lean back on you as hard as she can. She is trying to maintain her balance where she is because upsetting that balance might cause her to fall. Therefore trying to squeeze between cattle in a tight confirmed place is never a good idea.

One thing that I come to understand over the past four decades is that cattle are complex and great creatures. The more I learn about them, the more I realize there is so much more to know; however, taking time to learn more about them always pays dividends. Be safe and take it easy around your animals. Our county needs all the farms and farmers we can get!

Upcoming Events

Aug 26 VQA Steer Take Up

Aug 28 VQA Heifer Take Up

Aug 29 Hay and Forage Field Day, SWVA AREC

Sept 24 September VQA Sale

Sept 26 Smyth Washington Cattleman Meeting

Sept 30 VQA Steer Take Up

Oct 2 VQA Heifer take Up

Oct 9 Ag Field Day for 4th Graders

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at (276) 783-5175/TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.