



How to Handle Cattle Better

FOR THE FARMER



→ HOW TO HANDLE CATTLE BETTER

Skilled cattle handlers have a really good understanding of how cattle behave and react. They use that knowledge to get cattle to do what they want, quietly, smoothly and safely. If you're in a career involving cattle handling, you need to keep your eyes and ears open, and keep learning.

If you're relatively new to the game, study these guidelines thoroughly. If you're a supervisor, manager or employer, make sure your employees get a copy. (You might like to glance through it yourself as a refresher.)

Cattle control

Cattle have minds of their own, a huge weight advantage and the ability to move surprisingly fast. It takes skill and care to manage them safely.

Nearly one in ten cattle handlers reports some sort of injury every year, and ACC has paid out millions in cattle-related claims. That's not counting the minor kicks and bruises considered to be part of the job.

Brushing up your cattle handling skills will help you, and the farming industry, cut down on injuries. It will also help make your work easier, because with cattle, the safe ways of doing things are usually also the most efficient.

FIVE IMPORTANT TIPS FOR CATTLE CONTROL

- Keep cattle calm.
- Keep an eye on what's going on around you.
- Use your voice.
- Make sure they know who's boss.
- Check the yards before working them.

Keeping cattle calm

When cattle are alarmed or over-excited, they can get dangerous. That's why "keeping cattle calm" is one of the most important rules of good cattle handling.

Giving cattle time to settle down is a particularly good idea after you've just moved them into the yards. After about 30 minutes, they'll be a lot easier, and safer, to work.

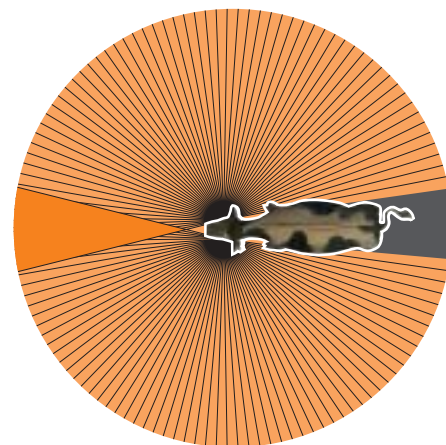
Keeping your eyes open

When you're fronting up to a difficult animal, it's easy to lose track of what the other cattle are doing. You need to keep looking around, so you're aware at all times of what's going on.

Using your voice

Good stock handlers use their voices to soothe and calm, to show authority, and to let the cattle know where the handler is.

This is an especially important point, because cattle's sight is quite different from ours.



Cattle's field of vision

With their eyes on the sides of their heads, they have a wide range of vision to the sides. But they're seeing a view with one eye only, so they can't work out distances well. To the rear, they have a blind area where they can't see at all. So if they detect movement to the side or rear, they're easily alarmed.

If they hear you, and know where you are, they're reassured.

Making sure they know who's boss

Humans are one of three things to cattle – a predator to run away from, a “nobody” to ignore or a dominant figure to be respected. You need to show confidence and authority right from the start, or you’ll have trouble.



Carry a length of alkathene pipe (a “waddy”) or a long stick. It makes you look bigger, as well as giving you more confidence. Standing on raised catwalks or riding on horseback also helps you look bigger.

Stand front-on with your waddy outstretched to look domineering and positive. If you need to take the heat out of the situation and reduce the pressure, turn side-on and put the waddy or stick down.

Be prepared to use your waddy firmly when you need to make your intentions clear, especially on bigger beasts – they’re not pets. If you’re in a tight corner, with a challenging bull for instance, a sharp whack across the nose (avoid the eyes) can work wonders.

Checking the yards before moving cattle in

If you’re not used to the yards, check the layout and how things work before taking cattle in. Remove stray posts, timbers, containers and large stones from pens and the race, to prevent tripping and minimise distractions.



Check the headbail is working smoothly and is adjusted for the size of cattle.



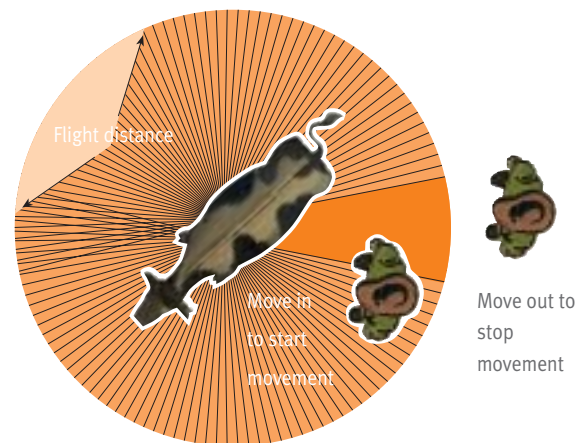
Getting cattle moving

GENTLE HANDLING PAYS OFF

Cattle have good memories. They learn quickly and soon work out who beats them and who treats them well. Beating them doesn’t help. Cattle also learn where the unpleasant things like castration, weaning or first milking happen. Gentle handling during those traumatic times is important, especially for young cattle.

USING THE “FLIGHT DISTANCE”

“Flight distance” is how close cattle let you come before they take flight (move away). It’s different for every animal but it is longer or further away for cattle who are handled less often – eg, if you get within 100 metres of wild beef cattle they’ll start moving, whereas dairy cattle will usually let you come within five metres, or even less.



You can get cattle moving by entering their flight distance. The further in you go, the faster they move away. But don’t move in too close or they may panic and scatter. You can get them to stop by moving out of their flight distance.

USING THE BALANCE LINES

When you're in close quarters with cattle, move through the animals' "balance lines" to get them moving. There are two balance lines. One runs crossways through the animal's shoulders. The other is lengthways down the backbone. Whichever way you move through these lines the animal will go the other way.



→ If you're standing alongside an animal, moving forward encourages it to reverse or turn and go back. Moving back encourages it to go forward.



→ If you're standing in front or behind, moving to one side encourages it to go the other way.

TRY ONE ONTO THE NOSE OR A TWIST OF THE TAIL

A slap on the nose with your waddy or hand is a useful way of moving a beast backwards at the race entrance or in the race.

Bending or twisting the tail of a stubborn beast will encourage it to move forward.

Beating cattle stirs them up, makes them more dangerous and even harder to handle. It bruises the animal's hide and carcass. Beating tail-enders in a mob is particularly futile. The really dominant characters stick to the middle of the mob and won't allow themselves to be pushed about by inferiors behind them. They may even turn and attack them.

Poking at animals already moving in the right direction may stimulate them to kick back at you.

Electric prodders ("hot shots") should be used sparingly if at all. Overuse can stir up cattle badly.

Chasing cattle makes them see you as a predator and start fearing you, which doesn't help for future handling. Cattle should never be chased – particularly young dairy cattle that are going to be handled a lot.

Understanding why cattle stop (or "balk")

There are a number of things that make cattle stop (balk):

- dead ends in a race
- humans or dogs in the road
- flapping clothes or sacking
- moving into bright lights or sun
- certain smells, for instance blood on the ground after dehorning or castrating.

If they're agitated, cattle tend to raise their heads and can't see the ground with both eyes. Then a simple thing like a shadow, a piece of pipe or a step can disturb them and they'll stop moving.

If they're too crowded in the race, they may put their heads down. They can't see anything clearly at the tip of their noses so they may balk at a change in texture in the flooring, at shadows, drains, water or steps.

As part of their self-preservation instinct, cattle like to be together. This can cause baulking. For instance, in the race, cattle will balk if they can't see the animal in front. They may also stop if they see their "mates" in a pen or field alongside. (This sociability can work to your advantage – eg, if an animal breaks away from a mob, it will tend to come back once it calms down.)

Knowing what upsets cattle

Get to know the things that upset cattle. It'll get the job done faster in the long run.

WHAT CAN MAKE CATTLE FLIGHTY?

- Hunger.
- Excessive noise: barking, shouting, motorbikes.
- Beating.
- Electric prodders.
- Painful, new or strange objects.
- Invading their "personal space", especially around the head.
- Being chased.

WHAT CAN CALM CATTLE?

- Familiarity.
- Familiar people.
- Low, dim light.



- Gentle low sounds.
- Stroking.
- Rhythmical sounds.
- Music.
- Silence.

Don't take cattle for granted

Every mob has its docile, flighty, nervous and aggressive animals. Even those that are usually docile can behave unpredictably at different times of the year if they're under stress. And different breeds have different temperaments.

Get to know the individual cattle you're dealing with, and the breed – and never take them for granted, or you're asking for trouble.

Watching for the “rogues”



BULLS

Never trust any bull – particularly the “lonely bull” reared or kept in isolation. Never turn your back on a bull: they can kill. Bulls are more dangerous the older they get.



COWS WITH CALVES

Any cow, but particularly a beef cow, can turn nasty overnight if they feel their calves are threatened. The younger the calf, the more dangerous the mother.

TEST YOUR CATTLE KNOWLEDGE – TRUE OR FALSE?

Beef cows are more flighty than dairy cows	T/F?
Friesian cows are more flighty than Jersey cows	T/F?
European breeds are more flighty than British breeds	T/F?
Dairy bulls are more dangerous than beef bulls	T/F?
Jersey bulls are more dangerous than Friesian bulls	T/F?
Angus cattle move more quickly through yards than Herefords	T/F?
Brahmans are more likely to freeze than other breeds	T/F?
Brahmans are easier to draft out than British breeds	T/F?

(Answers on last page)

Specific cattle handling situations

MUSTERING

- Mustering is best early in the morning or towards nightfall, when temperatures are cooler and cattle have had a long grazing period.
- Prepare the route in advance. Open the gates and be on guard at the places cattle are most likely to break away.
- Use the flight distance to move cattle. Stay at the fringe so they don't scatter.
- Horses are effective, and dogs and stock whips can be helpful. Motorbikes annoy some cattle, particularly beef.
- Cows and calves should be moved slowly. Beware of aggressive mother cows. Avoid mustering beef cows with very young calves.

COWS WITH CALVES

- Give the cows time to pick up their calves before moving.
- If you have to catch a calf, keep it between you and the cow.
- If possible, put a fence or truck between you and the cow.
- Keep the calf quiet by holding its mouth shut.

MOVING BULLS

- Move confidently – it is vital to demonstrate dominance.
- Don't try to move a dangerous bull on foot or alone – bring in a group of steers or cows, or use a tractor or dog.
- Always have a long, strong stick.
- Keep bulls moving at a trot until they're well into the paddock and clear of the gate – keep them a good distance apart.
- Keep well clear of a fighting pair.

DRAFTING

- Draft quiet cattle from more excitable stock, rather than the other way around – ie, cows from bulls, calves from cows, old from young.
- Draft cattle from small mobs of up to 50. The pen should be about half full.
- If you make a mistake, wait until the end of the draft to correct it.
- After drafting make sure the two mobs can still see each other. Keep them next door to each other, separated by a good fence. They will eventually drift away and start to feed.

WORKING CATTLE THROUGH THE RACE

- Give cattle 30 minutes to settle down in the yards.
- Work with a partner if you can.
- Don't overfill the forcing pen – keep to about three quarters full so cattle have room to turn towards the race mouth.
- Pack the race as tightly as possible to prevent cattle moving back and forth.
- Don't get in a race with large cattle – they can roll you along the race wall or crush you against it.
- Don't put your arms, head or legs through race walls – reversing cattle may not see you, or mightn't be able to stop.
- If there's a catwalk, use it.
- To get the cattle to move forward, walk along the catwalk from the front of the race to the back.



IN THE CRUSH

- Using a hock bar can be highly dangerous as it can easily be knocked forward, back or up.
- Stand at the end of the bar, not at the side, and keep it at arm's length in case it jerks upwards.



DRENCHING

- With large cattle, consider using a pour-on. Alternatively, secure in a headbail. Approach the head from the side (not the front), run your hand from the neck under the ear and along the jaw bone, then cup the jaw in your hand.
- Smaller cattle may be drenched in the race, but mind their hooves (and your toes and feet)! Pack the cattle in tight, work from front to back, wear boots with toe caps, and keep close to the animal being drenched.
- Try and make the experience as pleasant as possible, or cattle will resist next time.

INJECTING/VACCINATING

- Pack the cattle tightly in the race.
- Don't push the syringe in from a distance – the animal can see the movement and may flinch. But if you lay your hand with the syringe against the neck, then twist your hand and inject, the animal may not even react.

DEHORNING/IMPLANTING GROWTH PROMOTANTS

- Don't do this alone in the race.
- Use a good headbail and a nose bar if you can.
- Stand clear when the animal exits the headbail as it may turn and attack.

LOADING/UNLOADING

- Use all available gates and hock bars to stop cattle reversing.
- Remember that driving the mob from the rear won't speed up loading – dominant cattle in the middle won't be pushed along by tail-enders.
- Walk down the ramp or catwalk to encourage cattle to go up (and vice versa).
- Give cattle time to unload – they will follow each other.



Safety tips for cattle handlers

STANDING WELL BACK OR UP CLOSE

Don't underestimate the speed, reach or accuracy of a beast's kick. Either stand well back and out of range, or, when you're working close to the beast, turn side-on and get right in against it. Space between you and the beast allows a kick to hit you.

WEARING THE GEAR THAT'S RIGHT FOR THE JOB

Leather boots with steel toe caps are best, and vital when working in the yards. Gumboots should have toe caps. A good strong pair of trousers and leggings can reduce the severity of kicking injuries.

Take off your watch or loose jewellery if you're working in the yard and roll your sleeves down in case you're rubbed against fences or timbers.

MINDING YOUR HEAD, ARMS AND LEGS

Never poke your head, arms or legs through the boarding into the race. And don't lean over an animal's head, or bend down over it under a cross tie. If there's a catwalk, use it – to keep you out of harm's way and to make you look bigger for better control.

KNOWING WHAT TO DO IN AN EMERGENCY

In dangerous situations, turn side-on to cattle. It makes you look smaller and less threatening and provides maximum protection for delicate body parts. Always plan your escape route for if there's trouble – eg, over or through a gate, through an escape gate or over (or rolling under) a fence.

If you get cornered by a bull, shout loudly at it and strike it repeatedly on the nose to make it close its eyes. If the bull gets you on the ground, grab it by the nose ring and hold on while you crawl to the fence. To keep a bull away from an injured person, grab and twist the tail and hang on.

MAINTAINING THE YARD

- Hammer nails home and flatten off, and saw off bolts that are too long.
- Fasten down or replace loose or rotten timbers on catwalks or rails.
- Keep gates well oiled and free-swinging.



A lot of the injuries to cattle handlers happen in the yards. Good design and maintenance can help prevent these injuries. To help with these issues we've produced *How to Design Better Cattle Yards*, a special brochure about yard design and maintenance, available on the ACC website, www.acc.co.nz, or by calling 0800 THINKSAFE (0800 844 657). It's a useful guide to what can be done to develop and improve your yards over time, and also what you can do right now.

TEST YOUR CATTLE KNOWLEDGE – ANSWERS

True, for all the questions!



... Further resources for the farmer...

visit → www.acc.co.nz/injury-prevention

or call → 0800 THINKSAFE (0800 844 657)

