

# Get a Safe Handle On Your Calves

by Heather Smith Thomas

Producing a successful calf crop each calving season depends on more than just luck. First your cows have to produce live calves. Equally important, however, is keeping calves alive and healthy during those first weeks of life when they are vulnerable to disease and adverse weather conditions. Extra care and attention at this time can pay off in high percentage calf crops and profits.

Applying iodine to the navel, recording birthweight, immunization shots, and ID tagging or tattooing of newborn calves are common production practices in beef operations. And if sickness strikes a young calf — whether it's scours, pneumonia or some other problem — early detection and treatment is vital.

In order to tag or treat calves, you first have to catch them. Some calves are easy, but often the little buggers can be a real challenge to get a hold of. Add an overprotective mama and you have a down-right dilemma.

## Getting Yours Hands on Baby

If a newborn calf is still weak and bull, or very docile, you can generally just quietly walk up and capture it before it moves. If the calf is several hours old and healthy, it may be more flighty.

My husband and I attempt a two-person decoy sneak on these calves before they know what we're about. This usually works once for a calf that hasn't been caught before. After that, most get smart about it and you may have difficulty catching them a second time for any follow-up treatment.

For the two-person decoy sneak, one of us nonchalantly walks out in front of the calf at a distance the calf feels comfortable with and not threatened (its flight zone). That person (the decoy) distracts the calf in whatever manner it takes to keep its attention or arouse its curiosity. Try singing, making funny noises, hopping around . . . I'm sure we've put clown antics to shame in some of our distraction performances.

Meanwhile, the other person sneaks up quietly behind the calf and grabs a hind leg. Then the front person moves in to hold the head and neck. We quickly move into position — one getting a good hold on the calf and the other starting the treatment.

To speed the working process, place medication and tools

in your coat pocket or a fanny pack. Once you master efficiency, you can be done with the task before mamma gets wise. But sometimes a calf will let out a loud bellow when you grab it, and all the cows will come running.

For a calf that's too big, skittish or needle shy to catch this way, we generally try to herd the cow-calf in from the field to a smaller pen. We have a headcatcher chute in the corral next to our calving barn that works well for doctoring big calves. The calving barn and corral are centrally located not

far from our three calving pastures.

Once in a while we have a cow-calf pair in the back pasture. You hate to bring them home if all the calf needs is a single shot or treatment. So instead, we try a backup calf caching trick.

One we've had success with is using a shepherd's crook. We have a standard model, but put a longer handle on it so we can snag a calf's hind leg at a safe distance. The two-person

decoy sneak works well with this trick, too. A small calf that's just a bit too wild to conventionally catch can be easily caught with the shepherd's crook. It takes a bit more strength and finesse to hang onto a big, strong calf with the crook, however, for some manage to kick out of it.

I've also used the shepherd's crook a couple of times when my husband wasn't on hand to help with a problem calving. One time a cow's amnion sac didn't break and the calf was about to suffocate. The mother was standing me off to where I couldn't rescue it. I got a hold of the calf's hind leg with the crook from a safe distance and pulled it closer. Then I tore off that membrane and got the heck out of there.

Another trick to catch an elusive calf out in the field is to make an instant chute. Herd the calf behind the nearest available gate and catch it in the narrow "V" made by the gate and the fence. If no sturdy gate is handy, we've also had success running a calf between a fence and the truck. We strategically park the truck against the fence at an angle, then herd the calf along the fence into the trap.

These methods work best if you are feeding hay and have strung bales along fairly close to the designated gate or fence. A calf is easier to work if it's near its mamma and the herd. A net or woven wire fence works best; a calf can usually shimmy through a barbed-wire fence and get away.



### Watch out for Mama!

We all like our cows to be good mothers, but some take this trait to the extreme. Every once in a while you find a cow so aggressive after calving that she becomes a danger to anyone trying to handle her calf.

A few of the cows we started out with were a real threat to life and limb at calving time. We soon added tractable and trainable to our culling criteria. We calve in the winter and have to move our cows in and out of the barn, so cows have to tolerate our presence and handling of calves.

We have a healthy respect for a protective mother, but we also demand the cow's respect in return. If a cow is smart enough to be trainable—learning respect for the handler and keeping a safe distance—she stays in the herd. Those deemed too dangerous get a one-way ticket to McDonald's.

We find it best to work in pairs when handling newborn calves. This works for several reasons, part of which is pure cow psychology. Most cows are not as aggressive if you have them outnumbered. They aren't sure of the situation when there are two of you and they can also sense your attitude. You have to have a bit of mind control over a cow. If she senses you are afraid, she will quickly take advantage of it. Never take your eyes off that cow. The person handling the critter has to be confident. I know I'm always more confident when there are two of us.

When you work in pairs, it's also easier to doctor or tag the calf. One person catches and holds the calf (and fends off mama) while the other person concentrates on doctoring or

tagging it quickly, efficiently and safely. The person fending off the cow must be prepared to take action, if necessary, to keep her from charging over the top of all of you.

Some producers like to place the calf in the back of their pickup, where they are safely out of reach. If your pickup is not available, another wise defense is to carry a weapon. Cows are smarter than you think. They know when you are defenseless and when you are prepared to hold your ground with something convincing like a stout stick. Most cows will stop if you have a weapon they respect.

The sensitive nose is a good target if you have to defend yourself. The bridge of the nose is best if you have a stout stick. Don't ever hit a cow hard over the top of the head, as you may seriously injure her.

Another vulnerable area is the cow's ears. If a cow is really getting at you she'll often back off if you can grab an ear and twist it hard; those ears are sensitive.

Still, the best insurance is to not let a cow get that close. And the cardinal rule when working with newborn calves is NO DOGS! Even the presence of a dog in your pickup, barking or not, can upset some mothers enough to get them riled before you get close.

Doctoring calves can be quite a challenge. With a little experience and perhaps a few of these calf catching tips, you can outsmart the little buggers. Best of all, you can safely get the job done without getting stampeded, stomped on or snorted at by mad mama.



## Prevention Program Can Corral Calf Illness

Keeping calves healthy is a two-stage job for breeders. The first part is early detection of sickness and the second is safe, effective treatment.

You have to have a knowledge and good feel for various types of illness in calves and know what you are dealing with, so you can call the veterinarian or administer your own treatment to aid in recovery. Here's a summary of the most common calf illnesses:

### SCOURS

One of the most common calf ailments, but caused by a variety of different organisms, such as bacteria, viruses and protozoa. There are 100 different strains of E coli bacteria alone.

Organisms surface once the ground thaws out or the weather is wet and sloppy. Calves ingest them by eating dirt or drinking surface water. Cattle confined to small areas are more susceptible. Scours can hit calves soon after birth or affect calves several weeks old. Any type of scours in a calf less than two weeks old should be considered an emergency. It can be fatal if not promptly treated.

**Symptoms** — First stage: off cow's milk or feed, diarrhea; Serious stage: dehydration, kicking at belly, bloat, extreme gut pain, colic, throwing themselves to ground, staggering.

**Treatment**—The earlier the better is the rule with scours. Before you can effectively treat scours, it's important to first have your veterinarian take a sample and conduct a lab test to detect the specific organism.

The next step is to give calf fluids and gut-soothers to slow down diarrhea and help it absorb more fluid and nutrients. Kaopectate, mixed with a quart of warm water and electrolytes, is a proven treatment recipe.

For bacteria-caused scours, add a liquid oral antibiotic, such as neomycin sulfate, to the mix.

To prevent viral scours, vaccinate cow herd before calving and follow with a booster a few weeks later. Immunities gained through colostrum will usually protect calf up to three weeks.

If intestinal infection is caused by protozoa, such as coccidiosis

(symptoms are severe diarrhea with brown or blood-stained feces and straining when passing it), immediately separate affected calves from the herd and consult your veterinarian for treatment.

### PNEUMONIA

The stress of adverse weather or other environmental factors can lower a calf's resistance to respiratory disease.

**Symptoms**—First stage: dullness, off milk or feed, standing around humped up, ears down, lethargy, fast-pace breathing, coughing, nasal discharge, fever. Severe stage: shock, subnormal temperature.

**Treatment**—Consult your veterinarian. Antibiotic shot for older calves. If calf is young or weak, bring cow-calf pair in from field and give calf some shelter. A warm, dry place where you can give him intensive care is best. Give antibiotics twice daily and fluids if it's not nursing.

If calf is having trouble breathing, give injections of expectorant (a decongestant).

### DIPHTHERIA

Another respiratory problem caused by a bacteria organism. The bacteria may be confined to the mouth area (less serious), or may affect the throat and cause swelling that shuts off the windpipe and suffocates the calf. At first glance, you may think calf has pneumonia, but on closer inspection you can see it's having trouble drawing air in.

**Symptoms** — Mouth area: slobbering, trouble eating; throat area: high fever, grunting and wheezing.

**Treatment**—Antibiotics; warm, dry shelter and diligent care.

Good management practices, such as a herd health program, clean bedding areas and warm shelter, can prevent a lot of calfhood sickness. Diligent checking when calves are young, and catching and doctoring any calves that turn up sick can make the difference between having a good calf crop and a poor one.