

# Calf Watchers

*Through mud, rain, wind or snow, dedicated Illinois students help bring live calves into the world.*

*by Susan Shoup*

**A**wary, black Angus cow eyes a stranger and walks slowly through the knee-deep straw to position herself between the intruder and her two-day-old calf, never dropping her stare.

The new mother is one of 120 cows at the University of Illinois beef farms. The intruder is one of a group of students making nightly checks on cows during calving season. Named Calf Watch, the program offers student volunteers a chance to spend some late nights contending with sometimes hostile cows and adverse weather in exchange for one hour of college credit and the gratification of bringing a new life into the world.

Doug Parrett, animal sciences professor, started the program five years ago as a hands-on learning experience for students. He also wanted to take some pressure off of farm management during the heavy calving season from February until April.

Each season, about 10 senior students prepare for their Calf Watch excursion with Parrett's crash course taught on cow herd management at calving time and the calving process. Students are then assigned calf watch once a week.

They visit the farm at least twice a night, at 10 p.m. and at 2 a.m. During the first two weeks, calf watchers go in pairs. Then, they go it alone.

"Student involvement

might involve cleaning a calf's air passage to help it start breathing, observing that the calf gets up and nurses, or notifying the farm manager if there's a problem," Parrett says.

Indeed, students have encountered problems. Nearly every one has a Calf Watch tale to tell. Roommates Mike Miller and Matt Maxwell remember one night in particular

"One night we'd had a lot of cows calving," says Miller. "A first-calf heifer had started calving and only the front legs were out when we left her at 10 p.m. We came back to check her at midnight and nothing had happened. She hadn't attempted to do anything."

To make matters worse, the heifer was flighty and nervous. The two notified the farm manager who decided to transport her to the nearby

vet-med complex with facilities to handle the anxious mother-to-be.

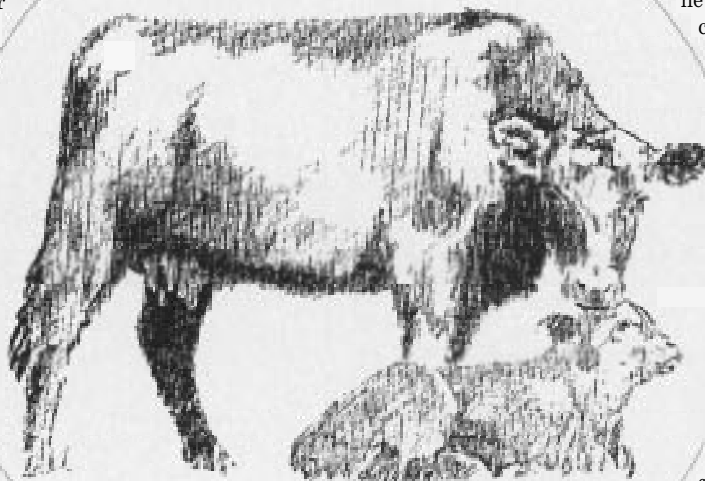
The three men, with an average weight of 220 pounds, could not pull the calf even though it was in the correct position for birth, Miller says. The next attempt was to use the leverage of a "come-along" by attaching a cable to the calf's legs and turning a crank to try to ease the calf out. That also failed.

Meanwhile, the heifer was becoming more uptight and anxious. As a last resort, vet students prepared her for a Caesarean section by scrubbing her and shaving her side where an incision was to be made. The surgery yielded a good, live 120-pound calf with no problems. The roommates arrived home at 4:30 a.m., feeling a sense of accomplishment.

"We felt proud of ourselves for delivering a live calf," Miller says. "That's our goal for Calf Watch."

Doug Geppert, an animal sciences senior from Oakdale, Ill., echoes the Calf Watch goal by saying he tries to "make sure the cow calving has a live calf," and that isn't always easy. In the course of this year's Calf Watch, he has seen a prolapsed uterus and has pulled a cow's second twin calf that was delivered breech.

He remembers the Valentine's Day ice storm that left in one of the barns, like much of the city. "The only light I had was a flashlight," Geppert says. "A calf was born but



wouldn't nurse, so I had to milk the cow out and feed the calf from a bottle. Doing all of that with a flashlight made it a little tougher."

Calf Watch may seem like a lot of trouble and an inconvenience to many. To the 10 or so students who take part in the program, however, it's just what they're looking for.

Geppert grew up on a beef farm and took Calf Watch for more experience with cows and calving.

Like Geppert, Maxwell has beef cattle experience. He was raised on a livestock farm with purebred and commercial cows near Valparaiso, Ind. He says Calf Watch gave him a chance to be "on the farm" while he was at college and away from his family's home farm.

Parrett says the majority of Calf Watch students have a farm background. One-third, however, have no cattle background but may aspire to go back to a farm or on to vet school. They are looking for animal experience.

Miller, who grew up on a grain and swine farm near Chatsworth, Ill., had no cattle experience. He wanted to take Calf Watch for the excitement, he says. "It may not seem exciting when you're checking at 2 in the morning, but it is fun bringing new animals into the world and seeing a calf get up and nurse."

Miller sees a big difference in the birthing of cattle and pigs. "With pigs, you have a whole litter. If you lose one or two, you're not out that much," he explains. "But with cattle, it's a one-shot deal; calving percentage is the bottom line of profit."

Parrett doesn't think the Calf Watch program has increased calving percentages at the farms. The percentage had been relatively high before the program started. "But it does give students experience and take pressure off of the farm manager during the busy calving season," he says.

"We have found that one-third of first-calf heifers require assistance at calving," Parrett says. "Students involved have been able to save nearly 100 percent of first-calf heifers' calves."

Through mud, rain, wind and snow, one of these calf watchers treads through cow pastures and paddocks each night. Equipped with a flashlight and their crash-course knowledge, they inspect the cows and their calves and try to eye trouble before it's too late. Calf watchers feel successful when a live calf stands next to its mom. Only then can they go home for a short night of peaceful sleep with the satisfaction of bringing a new life into the world.

