

# Where To Push

*Understanding an animal's bubble of security, knowing where and how to apply pressure to get cattle to move in the right direction at the right speed, can save wear and tear on cows and cowboys.*

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

**W**hen moving cattle, it helps to know how they will react to various things.

Understanding cattle behavior can help you get the job done with fewer cowboys and less trauma for the cattle. If you are patient, understanding and consistent, you can move cattle with little stress and minimal effort.

Whether moving cattle on horseback or on foot, use their behavior patterns to your advantage, paying particular notice to their flight zone — their bubble of security. Each animal has its own space in which it feels safe and unthreatened. If you come closer than that imaginary boundary, the animal will move away from you.

This bubble is much larger for the wilder, suspicious animal than for a gentle, trusting individual. Wild cattle have a much wider flight zone than tame ones who have been handled frequently and quietly. A wild cow that rarely sees humans may not let you get within 50 yards.

## ■ Watch for signals

Cattle that are excited have a larger flight zone than they do when they are calmer.

If you are trying to move cattle without stressing them, pay close attention to the flight zone and stay in tune with the animals' signals and intentions. Approach quietly and slowly, giving the animal or herd time to see you and to realize you are not a threat.

If the cattle are accustomed to you, speak to them so they know it is you. Cattle that know you may be more relaxed once they recognize you, whereas they might be more upset by strangers.

Cattle have wide-angle vision and can see behind themselves without turning their heads, but they have a blind spot directly behind them and can be startled if you approach them the wrong way. They will be nervous if you go directly behind them where they can't see you.

You'll make better progress moving an individual or a herd if they stay calm. The calm animal is more apt to see the open gate instead of charging past it.

You can direct calm cattle by



CHRISTY COUGH PHOTO

**It is their natural inclination for cattle to follow a leader. When moving cattle a long distance, they will travel better if you let them drift in a long string at their own speed. This will stress them least and will avoid a bunch milling around.**

approaching, but not entering, the bubble of security. One or two people can move a herd or get an individual into a corral using patience and common sense, giving the necessary room for them to move away from you — in the proper direction — while keeping the situation calm and controlled.

Understanding the security bubble is one of the keys to easy handling. When you get too close, the animals move. When you retreat from this personal space, they slow down or stop. To move cattle quietly, walk

or ride on the edge of this flight zone, pressing it to make them move away from you, and easing off to slow or stop them. When they move in the proper direction at the proper speed, ease up as a reward. Press closer only if they stop.

When working cattle in a small space — such as a corral, alleyway or barn — remember that confined animals may become more nervous. Their “bubble” will be larger. If you get too close, they may

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become agitated, especially if you approach them head-on.

If an animal feels cornered, it won't stay calm. If you invade a cow's security space when she feels cornered, she may panic, try to jump the fence or run back over you. If cattle in a corral or sorting alley start to turn back, give them space, back up and get out of their flight zone to allow them to calm down.

If moving a cow forward, approach her

from the rear half of her body, behind the shoulder. If you approach ahead of the shoulder, she will turn away from you or back up, defeating your purpose. To keep a cow moving forward, stay off to the side, at the edge of her security bubble, at a position behind her shoulder.

Don't follow directly behind a cow; you need to be a little to one side so she can see you. If you are in her blind spot, she will want to stop and turn around to face you.

Cattle don't like a possible threat that is out of their sight. They want to know where you are at all times, and they are much more comfortable about your presence if they can see you. If you approach a cow too closely in her blind area, she may kick you.

■ **Tips for moving cattle**

Don't try to move cattle from the rear. They may run away or stop and turn. Move them at a slow walk and concentrate on

## Moving cows and calves

Cattle on large summer pastures are often moved a few times during the course of the grazing season. Moving to new pasture can be traumatic for the calves. In large herds in range country, some calves may inadvertently be weaned unless the stockman pays attention and takes a little extra time and care to make sure pairs are mothered up after the move.

Cows may be eager for new grass and graze ahead of the calves, not worrying about their calves until they have their bellies full. Calves may tire from the drive and lag at the rear of

the herd. If it's a large group and they haven't seen their mothers for a while, they may not realize she's up ahead. When they start looking for her, their first reaction will be to return to where they last saw her. A cow or calf that doesn't know where the other is will always go back to where they last nursed to wait for the missing one to return.

When gathering and moving cattle, make sure you have pairs. After the move, stick around as long as it takes to make sure the pairs are matched before leaving them in the new place. Otherwise, a few calves may try to go back to the last pasture, even crawling through the fence to get there. The calves may head back to the old pasture before their mothers eat their fill and come back to find them.

Often all that is necessary is to ride herd on the cows for a short while after the move, letting them scatter to graze but not letting the leaders advance far into the new pasture until the calves can find

their mothers. If the lead cows are heading over a hill or around a canyon corner, they should be doubled back and made to stay in the general vicinity of the tired straggler calves until they are all paired.

Pay special attention to any calf bawling and looking for its mama, and be sure to find its mother before you leave. It only takes a few minutes to ride herd on a large group, and those few minutes could save hours or even days of riding later. All the calf has to do is realize its mother is there, and it'll stay with the herd instead of trying to go back to the old pasture.

After a major move, return the next day and check on the group. Occasionally a calf will still be confused (if it didn't nurse its mother in the new pasture) and leave the area, or a cow will not pay enough attention to her calf while she's busy eating the new feed, and they will end up separated some distance. A calf may travel off with a different group of cows or a group of wandering yearlings and end up far from mama. Most will bawl and locate each other, but some may be so widely separated (especially in mountainous terrain) that they won't get back together, and the calf will be weaned inadvertently.

A ride through the area the next day is often worthwhile. Any bawling calf or cow with a full udder should be assisted in finding its partner. By the second day of separation, some will stop bawling and the chances of getting back together become poorer.

Cattle summered on rangelands often have a few calves accidentally weaned with each major move unless stockmen take care to prevent this problem with a little extra riding at the time of the move.



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ANGIE STUMP DENTON PHOTOS





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It's easy to move cattle if they are trained to come when you call and to follow you. Two people can round up and move a large herd a long way, even through difficult terrain, if the cattle know and trust you and realize you are moving them to new pasture.



CHRISTY COUCH PHOTO

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moving the leaders. Where they go, the others will follow.

Get the herd moving, then you can steer them in a certain direction. Approach at an angle to start them in the direction you wish them to go. Once the leaders are moving, move with them, just behind the leader's shoulder to keep her moving. The herd will tend to stay together if you work

quietly. If not alarmed and upset, the tailenders usually follow the rest.

#### ■ A two-person job

Two people can move a large herd efficiently; one can go alongside the leaders while the other moves alongside the main herd in a position where cattle won't try to go between the front and rear person. Move up on them to encourage them to go forward in the proper direction. Keep the proper distance to get the proper response.

If the herd slows too much, move closer so they will start moving again, then veer off at an angle to relieve the pressure on their security bubble so they'll be at ease and won't move too fast.

Flighty cattle require more "playing room" than gentle cattle. You can't press too close or they may spook, causing the herd to split or stragglers to break off and go another direction. If working cattle in a corral or through a gate, use body position to keep the herd movement under control and traveling at a sensible speed.

Cattle should be trained to respond to your movements so you are always in control (see "Be the Boss," page 343).

#### ■ Follow the leader

If moving cattle a long way, they will travel better if you let them drift in a long

## Avoid stress

Minimize stress as much as possible when moving and working cattle. Stress reduces the ability to fight disease, decreases weight gain, inhibits proper rumen function and increases shrink, which can be important factors when gathering or working cattle to sell.

To avoid bruising, don't ram cattle through gates or beat on them. Stressful situations make cattle harder to handle next time, so minimize excitement, agitation and use of electric prods.

Your corral design can also be a factor in whether or not your cattle are easy to work. Corrals should be designed so cattle "flow" through them readily and can easily see their way.

Move cattle quietly. The people doing the moving are often the reason a herd won't move or runs the wrong way. Too much yelling, chasing and using aggressive dogs can excite cattle. They usually don't fear people, but noise and movement can quickly change that.

If cattle can be moved at a walk, with no yelling and running, they will be more receptive to whatever you are trying to do. Once they start running, however, they're in an entirely different frame of mind. Worry and panic assume control. The cattle become extremely defensive and evasive, looking for an escape route and trying to avoid being corralled.

Use of dogs can be counter-productive, especially when sorting cattle. Dogs may distract or upset the animals so much that they are totally uncooperative. Well-trained dogs can be useful when moving cattle in large pastures, through brush or difficult terrain where it is hard for horse or human to go; but dogs in a small area can cause a lot more problems than they solve.

Dogs worry cattle and put them "on the fight," especially cows with calves. Some cows will spend a lot more energy chasing a dog than heading for the gate. And in the corral, a dog may cause a cow to run over you.

string at their own speed. It is their natural inclination to follow a leader, single file. This will stress them least and avoid the problem of a big bunch milling around in a trail or roadway without leaders.

It is easy to move cattle if they are trained to come when you call and to follow you. One or two people can round up and move a large herd a long way, even through difficult terrain, if the cattle know and trust you and realize you are moving them to new pasture.

Allowed to go their own speed, and knowing they are going to a new pasture, cattle will climb a steep mountain willingly without the yelling and chasing that wears out cowboys, horses and cattle.

With one person going ahead of them, calling, and one person behind to herd the stragglers, two people can move a lot of cattle easily. My daughter and I can move our whole herd (more than 300 animals, including cows and calves) several miles up a steep mountain through heavy timber when gathering them off the range in the fall or taking them to the next range pasture.

One of us is positioned ahead of the herd, calling them. They trust us and know that every time we call them they are going to better pasture or home to the green fields. Cows that trust you will follow much more readily and eagerly than they will drive, with a lot less energy expended by both them and you.

The best way to move cows is patiently and slowly, especially with calves in the group or fat ones that tire easily. Never hurry them on a hot day. Allowed to go their own speed, and knowing they are going to new pasture, they'll climb a steep mountain willingly without the yelling and chasing that wears out cowboys, horses and cattle.

There's a lot of truth in the old cowboy saying that the fastest way to move cows is slowly. If you pace cattle to their abilities,

## Handling facilities help reduce farm accidents

The agricultural community has seen more than its fair share of fatalities due to livestock injuries. Dozens of other accidents resulting in bumps, bruises and broken bones to humans and animals are a common occurrence around livestock operations.

"If you get into a shoving match with a 1,400-pound (lb.) heifer who is separated from her calf or [with] a skittish steer, you know who is going to lose," says Larry Piercy, Kentucky Extension safety and health specialist.

"The most dangerous times are when producers are trying to load cattle on trucks or attempting to treat animals . . . especially if they don't have the right facilities," Piercy warns.

The best way to reduce or eliminate this safety problem is to invest in a well-planned cattle-handling facility.

"One of the worst mistakes that a producer can make is to have no working facility at all," says Larry Turner, Kentucky Extension agricultural engineer. "That is both an economic mistake and a safety mistake and one that they shouldn't be making."

Turner notes that, at any level of production, some sort of cattle-handling facility is a good investment.

A producer with a cow-calf operation of just 30 head can still afford to invest in a head gate, squeeze chute and some form of gated corral fencing to funnel the animals to the facility. With a basic system, a producer can easily carry out such cost-effective procedures as worming, dehorning, injections, castration and other health-maintenance measures.

The payback is a safe and efficient work environment and healthier, more productive animals that bring better returns at sale time.

"Almost all the components of the working facility can be built on the farm. The only exception to that would be the head catch, which should be purchased commercially," Turner says. "The rest of a facility can be made from materials that are usually available at local hardware and lumber stores or even on the farmstead, such as wood posts, plywood and metal poles or pipe."

A variety of head catches are available. They range in price from \$250 to \$500. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

The basic handling system also should include solid-sided chutes, which keep cattle from getting distracted by side views that may spook them into striking out and injuring a handler or hurting themselves.

The chute also should be narrow enough so cattle cannot turn and block the pathway, which might force the producer to get in the pen and work at dangerously close quarters with the animals. The system becomes even more producer-friendly if there are features the producer can use to avoid coming into direct contact with the animal.

Cooperative Extension Service agricultural agents have access to fact sheets, blueprints and videotapes that can help individual producers design and construct a safe livestock-handling facility.

"While the main concern may be with adults who are working with farm animals, let's not forget the kids," Piercy says. "Ensure that these young people learn to respect the power of the larger animals, and insist that they learn some basic handling techniques before they are allowed to carry out chores on their own."

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you get there faster and with much less stress than if you try to hurry them and they wear out and quit.

