

Mindful, effective handling for happier herds



In any cow-calf operation, it is necessary to handle cattle to perform routine health and management practices. Getting cattle to do what you want requires knowledge of animal behaviour and proper beef cattle handling techniques. If you handle them right, your herd will be happy to provide you with better returns.

CATTLE EXPERIENCE THE world very differently and sense their environment using their eyes, ears, and nose. Understanding how cattle perceive the world around them is essential for effective handling. Effective beef cattle handling practices will improve the safety of the people working with the animals, enhance animal welfare and reduce stress, and improve on-farm efficiencies.

Vision

Cattle have eyes on the sides of their head, giving them a wide-angled field of vision (Figure 1). However, cattle don't see the world as clearly and in focus as humans see it, and it takes them more time to process what they have seen. Cattle have poor depth perception of nearby objects and have a limited vertical vision field of about 60 degrees, meaning that they need to lower their heads to focus on something on the ground. Therefore, it is advisable to give cattle time to put their heads down to judge flooring during handling. Due to their limitation in vertical vision and their lack of ability to focus quickly, a shadow on the ground may appear to the animal as a deep hole. Cattle can also see most colours, excluding red, and are sensitive to harsh contrasts between light and dark.

Hearing

Cattle can hear extremely well but are less able than humans to pinpoint the exact

location of the source of the sound. Cattle can hear both lower volume and higher frequency sounds better than people and dislike loud, high-pitched sounds. It is advisable to handle cattle as quietly as possible and avoid any unnecessary noise.

Smell

Cattle have a good sense of smell and use it to identify other cattle and for heat detection and breeding activities. Cattle will also smell any new or strange objects in the handling system, causing them to halt or hesitate while being herded. When planning a beef cattle handling facility, take into account the prevailing wind which may carry strange or distracting smells.

Memory

Cattle can remember a bad handling experience over a long term. These memories can be specific and associated with a certain person or object of handling equipment. It is important to make the first interaction with an animal as stress-free as possible. Use calm handling techniques to teach cattle to trust their handlers and allow cattle time to investigate their environment to satisfy their curiosity.

Flight zone and point of balance

Cattle have a flight zone that affects how they react. Understanding this behaviour can

Figure 1 Cattle can see approximately 300 degrees around them, with a blind spot only directly behind their heads.



be very useful in moving animals and can reduce stress and help prevent accidents. The flight zone is the animal's personal space, and it varies depending on how accustomed the cattle are to their current surroundings and people. The flight zone increases when the animal is approached from the head and will also increase when the animal is excited. Approaching the animal slowly from a 45-degree angle (Figure 2) will move the animal away from you in an orderly manner when you enter the flight zone. The best place to be is on the edge of the flight zone, which will cause the animal to move away from you slowly. If you move too rapidly or try to get too close, the animal will start panicking and try to turn back or run away.

The point of balance of an animal is a point relative to the animal where a handler can position himself to make the animal move forward, backward, left, or right. For cattle, the point of balance is typically at the shoulder of the animal. To make the animal move forward,

the handler should stand behind the point of balance. To move the animal backward, the handler stands in front of the point of balance. The animal may try to turn if the handler enters the animal's blind spot. Therefore, don't walk directly behind an animal, but off to the side so you can be seen.

Herd instinct

Cattle are herd animals; they move in groups and follow the leader. The herd mentality can be used to move groups with less stress by focusing on getting the lead animals to move in the desired direction and then allowing the rest of the herd to follow. Avoid isolating individual animals as they are likely to become highly agitated and stressed when they are separated from their herdmates.

Temperament

The temperament of an animal reflects the ease with which an animal responds to handling, treatment, and routine

Figure 2 The flight zone.

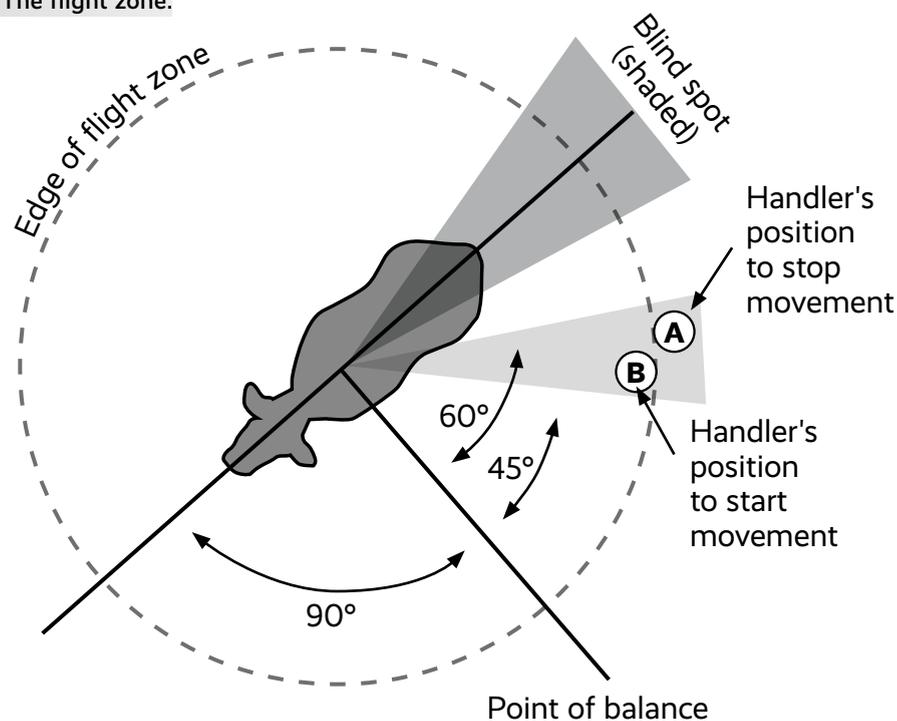


Table 1 Cattle temperament scoring scale and description (source: adapted from *Beef Improvement Federation Guidelines*, 2010)

Temperament score	Temperament classification	Temperament description
1	Docile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mild disposition; gentle and easily handled; stands and moves slowly during processing; generally undisturbed, settled, somewhat dull; does not pull on headgate when in chute; and exits chute calmly.
2	Restless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> quieter than average but may be stubborn during processing; may try to back out of chute or pull back on headgate; exhibits some flicking of the tail; and exits chute promptly.
3	Nervous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> typical temperament is manageable, but nervous and impatient; exhibits a moderate amount of struggling, movement, and tail flicking; repeatedly pulls and pushes on headgate; and exits chute briskly.
4	Flighty, wild	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> jumpy and out of control; quivers and struggles violently; may bellow and froth at the mouth; exhibits continuous tail flicking; defecates and urinates during processing; frantically runs fence line and may jump when penned individually; exhibits a long flight distance; and exits chute wildly.
5	Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> similar to score 4 but with added aggressive behaviour, fearfulness, extreme agitation, and continuous movement, including jumping and bellowing while in chute; and exits chute frantically and may exhibit attack behaviour when handled alone.
6	Very aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> extremely aggressive temperament; and thrashes about or attacks wildly when confined in small, tight places.

management. Most cattle will calm down when they are handled quietly, although a small percentage of them may remain excited. To accurately cull for temperament, the temperament scoring scale (Table 1) can help in assessing which animals should be culled, although more than one evaluation is required to avoid a good animal being culled.

Conclusion

Beef cattle handling can be very stressful and by understanding cattle behaviour, good handling practices can be implemented to reduce the risk of injury to people and animals that will improve overall efficiency of a cow-calf operation. Good handling is better for you and better for your cows. [®]