How to Keep Livestock Calm During Handling

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Horse Vision Diagram

Blind Spot

Area covered by the horse's right eye

Area covered by both the horse's eyes

Area covered by the horse's left eye

Credit: Darley Stud Management
Calm Animals are Easier to Handle

20 to 30 minutes is required for an agitated animal to calm down
Signs of Being Calm

- Soft, brown eyes on all livestock
- Cattle chews cud
- Ears are forward
- Head is down
Calm Horse With Ears Forward
Signs of Fear and Anxiety

- Tail Swishing – Speed increases as fear increases
- Head up – Vigilant looking around
- Sweating – When there has been little exertion (horses only)
- Defecation
- Skin Quivering
- Whites of the eye show
- Ears pinned back
Are These Cattle Calm?
A steer rapidly switches his tail before he starts vigorous struggling.
The whites of the eyes show in a fearful animal.
Frightened Horse

Credit: Raymond Jordan
Ears Pinned Back Either Frightened or Aggressive
Animals also “watch” with their ears for potential danger.

The horse has an ear pointed at both the photographer and the zebra.
Understanding the behavioral indicators of fear will help you stay safe. The animal will warn you that it is getting upset.
You need to prevent situations that frighten animals or cause them to become agitated.
Pig stopping at a change in flooring. Allow the animal to stop and put its head down to investigate.
Tie up loose chain ends that scare animals
Animals going into the slaughter plant are afraid of little things people do not notice.
A piece of cardboard placed on the back half of the chute will facilitate entry into the squeeze chute, and reduce balking.
Cow’s eye view into a squeeze chute with louver sides

Lighted head opening attracts the animals, but no people are visible through the sides
Non-Slip Flooring is Essential

- Animals get agitated when they slip
- Squeeze chutes, stocks, scales, unloading ramps
The fear of falling makes an animal panic
Rapid movement makes the dog chase and it makes grazing animals run away.
The slow, steady fluid motion of this remote-controlled camera is ignored by the cattle.
No yelling or whistling. Use a calm voice

Loud sounds from people raise the heart rate more than noise from equipment

Yelling raises cortisol levels in cattle
Never Surprise an Animal

- Let it know you are there before touching it
- Touch the animal with firm strokes
- No light tickle touches
- Hard pats may be interpreted as hitting
- Both cattle and horses kick to the rear
- Cattle can kick forward and to the side

Fact Sheet, Working Safely with Livestock, Ohio State University
There is an optimal pressure for holding an animal that is not too tight or too loose.
Tame Animals are Led

Never wrap a lead rope around your hand

Credit: Academic Art of Riding
The Flight Zone Is The Animal’s Safety Zone

Calm animals will have a smaller flight zone and Tame animals will have no flight zone.
Handlers should learn the principle of pressure and release on the flight zone.
Point of Balance Principles

- It is at the shoulder when the handler is close to cattle in chutes.
- It is usually just past the eye when the handler is further away.
- To make an animal move forward, the handler must be behind the point of balance.
If an animal rears, back up and get out of its flight zone.
If the handler gets too close, the animals will turn back.

The handler should back away.
Dogs around the chutes stress cattle because they cannot move away. They may also teach cattle to kick.
Handler Movement Pattern to Keep Cattle Moving Into a Squeeze Chute or Restrainer

Return path leaving flight zone.

Path to move animals forward.

Cattle will move forward when the handler passes the point of balance at the shoulder of each animal. The handler walks in the opposite direction along side the single file race.
The crowd pen should be filled half full with cattle or pigs
Movement Principles

- Use following behavior
- Cattle want to go back to where they came from
- Livestock are herd animals and get frightened when separated from the herd
Sheep handling is a continuous flow
Animals will stay calmer if they have a companion.
Beware of the lone animal. It is often the most dangerous animal.
An electric prod should never be a person’s primary driving tool.

After it has been used to move a stubborn animal – Put it away.
Use a flag to move livestock
Sudden Novelty is Frightening

- Animals with flighty genetics are more likely to become agitated in a new place.
- Animals that have never seen many new things are more likely to become agitated at auctions and other new places.
- It is good to gently acclimate animals to new experiences.
- New things are attractive if the animal is allowed to voluntarily approach and sniff it.
A sudden novel stimulus, such as an umbrella suddenly opening, frightens many animals unless they have low fear genetics.
First experiences with new people, places or equipment should be positive to prevent fear memories.

Quietly walking cattle or sheep through a handling facility can help acclimate them and make them calmer and easier to handle in the future when procedures have to be done.
This horse is afraid of black cowboy hats because he was abused by a person wearing a black hat.

White hats cause no reaction.
Animal fears are very specific.
Animals Memories Are Sensory Based

- In pictures – Examples: Man with beards; bad

- Specific sounds – Example: Gas powered vehicles are safe; diesel vehicles dangerous

- Touch sensations – Example: One piece horse bit safe; jointed snaffle bad
The movie crew forgot to train their heifer to tolerate reflector boards. She almost jumped on top of me when a white 4’ x 8’ panel was suddenly moved.
Reflector boards are large objects that make sudden erratic silent movements.

Credit: Thomas Barnes
Animal memories are specific

The heifer was accustomed to trucks so the movie crew assumed that she would not react to reflector boards

Trucks make a familiar sound that warns the animal
Cattle do not forget bars slammed on their head

The next time they are worked they may balk at the head gate
Cattle perceive a man on a horse and a man on foot as two different things. They need to be habituated to both.
Cattle that have been handled exclusively on horseback may become very agitated when you go on foot into a small pen with them.
Bulls are number one cause of fatalities with livestock

Credit: Gretz Warren, NREL
Bull Safety

- Never turn your back on a bull
- **Most Dangerous:** Hand reared bull calves that are imprinted to people
- Aggression may start at 18- to 24-months when he becomes sexually mature
Broadside Threat Display

- Turns sideways to show his size
- Broadside threat occurs before he charges
- Bulls that threaten people should be culled immediately
Bull calves raised on a cow in a social group are less likely to attack people

Credit: Northeastern Corner Farm
Mother animals become protective when they have newborns

When you work on a calf, let her see it
After weaning, raising dairy bull calves in groups reduces aggression toward people.
Handling Measurements

- 75% cattle walk or trot out of the squeeze
- 5% or less vocalize when caught in the squeeze chute
- 10% or less moved with electric prod
- 1% or less fall in the handling facility