

Better Together

Learn strategies to avoid pair problems when moving cattle.

by Heather Smith Thomas

A typical scene during a cattle drive is a mob of separated cow and calf pairs trying desperately to reunite. The sounds of cattle bawling, cowboys yelling and dogs barking fill the atmosphere. Cowboys and dogs charge after a “runback” animal to bring it back to the herd. This environment is accepted as ‘the norm,’ and some cowboys enjoy the action and excitement of chasing cattle.

It is stressful for the cattle, however, and chasing wayward cattle adds more wear and tear on horses and dogs. Additionally, it means the cattle may tire out and quit before reaching the destination — especially if it is a hot day.

As an old cowboy observed long ago, the fastest way to move cattle is to move slowly. Let them go their own pace, quietly and mothered up. That way everything goes smoothly and efficiently, the cattle are not exhausted by the

time they get to the end of the journey, and the move has been low stress for everyone. Cows or calves will not try to quit the herd to go back, and at the end of the day, the cattle settle down to graze, mothered up and content.

A good cowboy makes sure pairs are mothered up before leaving the herd in a new location. If mamas and babies are paired, cattle will not go back to the previous pasture looking for each other. Pairing them up and settling them are simple tasks if most of them are already paired from travelling together.

Steps for low-stress

The first step in a low-stress process is to assure the pairs begin together. Start time is a big influencer on whether the cows have their calves with them. If it is very early morning before sunup, cows may still be on the bedground where they spent the night and nursed their calves, so

the pairs will usually be together. After sunup, they generally head to graze before the heat of the day. A later start time can result in them being scattered out grazing. If it is closer to midday, the cows may have finished their morning graze and come back to a bedground to lie around and chew their cuds. By that time they are usually paired again — but not necessarily. If they are bedded down at the start, it is important to get the cows up and give them plenty of time to find their calves before proceeding.

If a cow does not have her calf at that point, leave her behind. She will find her calf and follow the herd later. All too often cowboys quickly gather cattle in a big pasture and do not pay attention to whether they have pairs or not, which will cause animals to turn back.

After the pairs are together, the next step in a low-stress move is to allow cattle to line out and travel as they would normally. The key is to avoid bunching

them in a tight mob where pairs get jostled and separated. If they get separated, they bawl for one another, creating added stress.

Cattle are smart creatures of habit with fantastic memories. Working with them — instead of against them — can be advantageous in the end. If they know they are being moved to the next pasture, they just need gentle guidance in that direction because cattle are herd animals. Instinctively, they will avoid leaving the herd.

From the expert

In recent years, there have been more individuals embracing the low-stress approach and teaching their methods to other cattlemen. One such man is Bob Kinford, Van Horn, Texas, who shows ranchers how to rotationally graze large pastures or rangeland without using electric fence and without herders — he relies exclusively on herd psychology. Kinford’s approach on low-stress



cattle handling promotes moving large herds without pairs getting separated or cows trying to quit the herd to find their calves.

As a kid, he recalls wondering why goats and sheep act like a herd but cows scatter when people try to handle them.

“Most people took it for granted that cattle scatter, but that’s because of the way they’ve been handled,” he explains. “It took me several decades of experimenting to discover that their natural instinct is to act as a herd – and this only happens when you remove human-induced stress.”

Kinford says if cattle are out on range and semi-wild, they scatter when they see riders and are hard to gather. This situation occurs because every time they see someone on horseback, the riders are trying to get them. Cattle scatter as a defensive tactic, because they know when they are all together they are captive, and it’s a stressful experience.

“One thing some people do wrong is trying to keep cattle all together in a tight bunch as they move,” he notes. “This is how pairs get separated, and if there are stragglers, cowboys chase them up to the rest of the herd. That puts stress on the slow ones and they resist. But if you don’t chase those, after a few times you’ll find that they will come on their own.”

The big idea is to do things in ways that make sense to the cow and to trust she is going to respond. An example Kinford



Making sure pairs begin together is a first step in creating a low-stress move.

provides is taking cattle through brush. Most people are afraid the cattle will try to scatter through the brush and get away, so cowboys tend to bunch them up and make them go faster to get through – or send the dogs after them. With this kind of stress, one calf bawling quickly escalates to all calves bawling while the cows try to find their calves. At that point, dust is flying and the cows are more worried about their calves than going the right way.

The calves, because of the added pressure, want to run back because they no longer know where their mothers are. “If you can go to the front and let the cattle stay real loose, they won’t go scattering out into that brush to begin with, and you won’t have a problem,” Kinford says.

When Kinford starts moving a group and some are lying down, he first makes sure the calves are up, then goes to the front end and walks halfway along the cattle a few times until they start moving.

“The ones in the back just stand there and keep grazing until the cattle in front of them start to move,” he explains. “It’s like waiting at a red light, and when it turns green we can go now. They just follow the others once they have room to move.”

With this quiet, gentle start, they have found their calves and are moving as pairs.

Some of the best low-stress handling is accomplished without dogs, but one cowboy and a good dog can move a lot of cattle without much trouble. The dog has to be quiet and always under the control and direction of the person moving the cattle. A good dog travels at his rider’s heels, only going after an animal when sent – and often by a hand signal rather than verbal command.

Well-trained, obedient and quiet dogs may be helpful in some cases, but all too often a cattle drive is a social event with many riders, and everyone brings their dog. The result is a pack of dogs

forcing the cows ahead too quickly, separating them from their calves. As a whole, it is generally less stressful for cattle if helpers leave their dogs at home.

Firsthand experience

For 35 years my daughter and I moved large herds of cattle on our range by making sure we had pairs as we gathered them and then letting them line out. One of us would go ahead of the herd and call them, and the other would bring up the rear just to encourage stragglers. The cattle would be strung out in a long line for a mile or more through the timber or trudging up a steep hill on a hot day at their own pace.

Moving cattle in this low-key manner proves to be quicker with

fewer people. As a bonus, the cattle are not worn out, and they are all present and accounted for in the end. We always moved the herd more efficiently by employing this technique. Cattle will do anything if it is their own idea, but will resist when forced.

Once the herd gets started, it will tend to keep moving, especially if the cattle string out and follow the leaders. One of the most important things is to go “cow speed” and never try to push the herd any faster than the cattle want to travel. People on four-wheelers often push cattle too fast since a four-wheeler can go as fast as the driver wants. Even on horseback, it is important to be cognizant of speed since horses

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A good cowboy makes sure pairs are mothered up before leaving the herd in its new location.



On a hot day, allowing the cattle a break can be beneficial.

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walk faster than cattle. Some horses readily pace themselves behind a herd of cattle and walk more slowly, but many will not, so riding in a zigzag pattern behind the cows is beneficial.

Do not crowd the cattle and try to be where they can see you. Cattle can see approximately 270 degrees around both sides of their head, except for directly behind them. When something is directly behind them, they will stop and turn around to see what it is. This instinct is another reason to ride a zigzag pattern behind the herd, so you are never right behind one cow for very long.

When moving cows with calves, pay attention to the calves' pace and stress levels. If the speed is too fast or the distance too far for young calves to travel without wearing out or overheating, stopping for breaks may be necessary. If calves start drooling or breathing with their mouths open on a hot day, these are signs they are tired and overheated. Let the herd rest and get mothered up before continuing.

The destination

Most importantly, after reaching the destination, do not drop the herd and ride home. Spend time settling the cattle and making sure everyone is mothered up. Often the cows are so interested in the new grass they start grazing, not paying attention to where their calves are. In that time, the calves may lose track of the cows and try to go back to where they came.

Spend some time watching to see if there are any cows or calves having trouble locating their other half and help them get together. If a cow's calf is not with the herd, let her go back to look for it. When she finds it, she will generally bring it back to the herd. This is one reason most cowboys leave the gates open after a move — so any split-up pairs can go back, get together and then come on their own. Someone can go back the next day to make sure all pairs are reunited, and then shut the gates. **HW**

Al Fenton's training tips for easy cattle handling

The economic benefits of low-stress handling are well documented, and many ranchers have adopted consistent, nonconfrontational methods so cattle are comfortable being gathered, herded and sorted.

Longtime Hereford breeder Al Fenton of Fenton Herefords, Irma, Alberta, has raised thousands of replacement heifers on the ranch his parents started in 1946. Fenton ensures his cattle have good dispositions by pairing genetic selection with patient training techniques. Here are some of his most successful strategies:

Consistent handling. "We gather and hold them in a group and teach them to be held. When heifer calves are with their mothers, they are held that way, for sorting. When we handle them as yearlings, they are held that way. When we head them out and trail to pasture several miles away, they line out and know what we want. It takes fewer riders as the heifers get older — it becomes easier and easier."

Set an example. "I always choose a cow or heifer that I think will stay calm, take her about 200 yards away and stop her. I let her sit there, and a rider stays and holds her. The next one we bring out, we take to her. Once you have several in that little group, they are easy to hold as you bring more out of the herd to put with them."

Get settled. "When we hold a group, we make them stay. If a heifer wants to take off, we don't chase her. A rider circles around her, [and] usually they won't run far. We just let them stand a minute, and then a rider can walk right around to put them back in the bunch and continue to hold until all of them are settled. We never move cattle until they settle."

Slower is faster. "If you make sure cattle understand what you want — giving them time to figure it out — it teaches them to think and to wait and look for your instruction rather than seeking the first way out. They look to you for guidance rather than explosively reacting as if you were a predator. Everything works better, and this saves time."

Keep the same groups. "They like to stay in their familiar groups. When you settle that bunch as a group, they'll be content and learn to stay in that group. When we are gathering, we often have two or three riders hold the group while the others bring more [cattle] out of the bush, and a lot of those cattle will head for the group that's being held. You're giving them an opportunity and a reason to win."

Sort large groups into groups of 30. "Once we get to 30 and feel comfortable with that group...we move them to a spot where we can place and hold them and start sorting again. This way we don't have the turmoil and stress of sorting in a tight area like a corral. Move [smaller groups] a little farther away from the main herd and stop them, then a little farther away again and stop them. Then you can get your bunches sorted fairly easily."

Assistant trainers. "We handle all our cattle on horses. We use very little noise — just the body language of your horse can teach your cattle. Cattle will often respond to the horse's body language. If you've taught your horses the right way, with a calm effect, it transfers to the cattle. They respond better and do what you want when sorting and moving them. It also teaches your horses the right things."

Set yourself up to win. "The more you can [let cattle] think for themselves and have them flow in the right direction, the more you will win — with a lot less stress on everybody. Know where your areas are where you can win, and set yourself up to win. You can then teach your cattle. When it's their idea, you will win every time."

Be patient. "It's just like training a horse — make the right thing easy and the wrong thing harder... If you do it the right way, the cattle will do a lot of the gathering and sorting for you. It takes patience. I wish I'd had more patience when I was younger, but sometimes that has to come with experience."

The payoff. "We hold a group and sort out pairs we want and take them the direction we want. We'll have one or two riders moving quietly through the group. The cattle won't scatter because they've been taught not to scatter. They are content and feel secure in that group. When you go in to pull a pair out, you can quietly bump that pair to the outside edge — They don't become alarmed or upset."

Final thoughts. "Our way of life, and the cattle industry in general, is impacted by how easily you can make things flow on your ranch. Even if you can't afford to have facilities set up properly, it doesn't take a fancy set-up — it just takes some planning and forethought on how to handle cattle with what you do have." **HW**



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