



# Handling livestock EFFECTIVELY

By Michael Smith

Effective handling of livestock using low-stress methods is fundamental to animal health. It's also a proven way to bring benefits to the owner as healthier animals and utilizing herding techniques for improved pasture and weed management means greater financial returns.

Historically, many livestock were subjected to handling techniques that frequently resulted in injury or reductions in performance. A "new" paradigm of livestock management is now being used by many owners. It's called low stress livestock handling (LSLH). This approach is based on livestock behavior research and field experience to move animals without the stressful experiences they frequently encountered in the past.

LSLH begins with the understanding an animal has a personal space that, once invaded, will cause the animal to attempt to flee – the animal's flight zone. This flight zone is of variable size depending on the animal's prior experience with handlers.

Recognizing this flight zone, a handler can enter this zone to prompt animal movement. They can then retreat to "reward" the animal for moving rather than remaining as a stressor within the flight zone.

Once one animal begins moving, others will begin moving in response, and herd action is initiated.

Fundamental to LSLH is calmness – in handlers, stock dogs, and livestock. Calmly working with an animal or herd allows the stock to gain confidence in the handlers, to subsequently remain calm, and to be ready to do what is needed. Animals are motivated to act because of the handlers entering the animals' flight zone.

A gentle application of more pressure and minimal entry into the flight zone keeps the animal moving yet helps prevent the uncontrolled movement of a stressed animal. Relief from pressure is the reward the animal receives for doing the right thing. A calm animal, gently pressured, followed by release from pressure to reward the action, quickly becomes trained to perform the action when the handler approaches in the right position.

The movement of a herd is maintained by the handler moving in zigzag fashion perpendicular to the direction the herd is expected to move.

For a large herd or where visibility is limited, it's helpful to have a rider on horseback in front of the herd to provide direction and speed control. From behind, moving the zigzag more to the left rear of the herd will generate a turn to the right while the same to the right rear of the herd moves the direction of the herd left. Careful observation of the herd direction is essential to avoid overcorrection.



There is a tendency for livestock handlers riding on four-wheelers or in trucks – versus on horseback or on foot– to push animals faster, and this can add stress to an already stressful situation. Also, wheeled vehicles can be noisy and aren't as "nimble" as horses, which can add additional problems when herding. Keep this in mind when deciding whether to use horses and/or motorized vehicles.

Well trained and behaved stock dogs can help move livestock more effectively. They can take some of the legwork out of moving stock, and they can do what the human does if they are trained to approach then retreat from an animal. Leave untrained dogs, those that try to heel or nose bite, or those that just run around and bark, at home.

Good cow dogs behave similar to good sheep dogs. They are responsive to commands and do not try to pressure stock too hard.

A common practice among some handlers is whistling loudly and yelling

at animals in an effort to keep them moving. This goes against LSLH principles as it adds to stress.

Moving animals during cooler times of the day might prevent tiring young animals. How long and how far a herd can be moved depends on the experience of the herd and handlers and the terrain being traversed.

LSLH can be effectively employed in enclosed pens, feedlots, and rangeland situations to minimize stress to animals and provide control of their movements. LSLH, while it may seem slower, usually is a faster way of getting animals where they are wanted. Under any circumstance, the reduction in stress improves animal health and performance.

On rangelands, even large herds can be easily driven over a variety of terrain to new pastures while calves are allowed to stay mothered-up. Once they arrive in a new location, animals should be given time to settle comfortably into grazing and nursing. They will then stay for desired lengths of time.

Of particular value is that cattle can be trained by placement in uplands not to loaf on riparian zones as

long as water is available. Calves can be weaned with much less stress and illness. The herd instinct can be rekindled allowing for less difficulty with finding the herd and bunch quitters – members of the herd that have learned to avoid stress by staying out of sight. These cattle typically run away when they are approached by handlers, or they have learned to never stay with the herd, which is untypical because the natural tendency of cattle is to stay together in a loose herd.

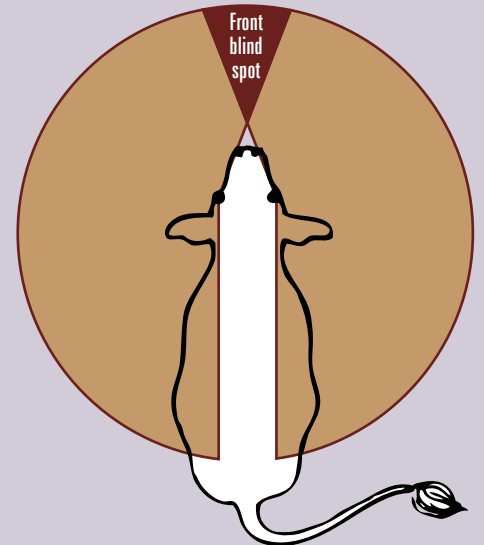
Overall, the control of livestock gained with LSLH permits unprecedented opportunities for management of location, time, and timing of grazing for the benefit of rangeland health.

For additional information, refer to the book *Stockmanship, A powerful tool for grazing lands management*, by Steve Cote. This book provides an excellent description of the LSLH technique and benefits. It can be obtained through <http://landcare.sc.egov.usda.gov/product.asp?ID=466>.

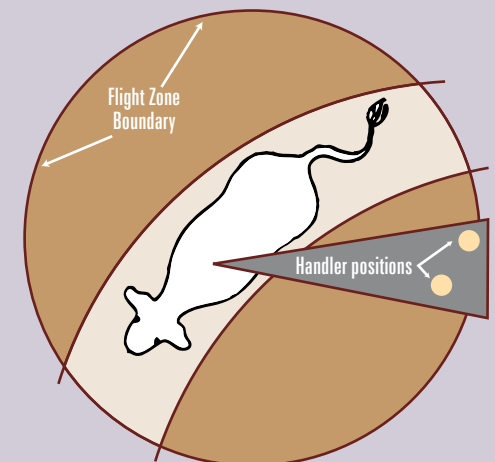
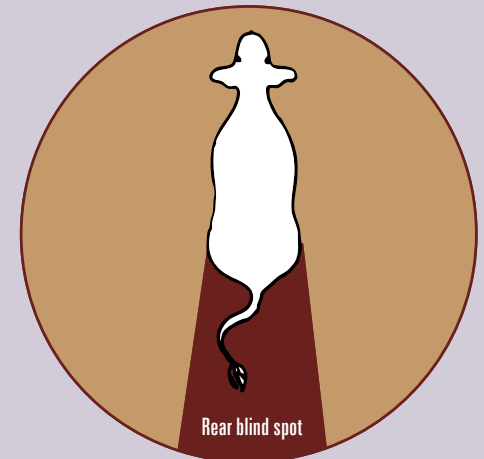
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*Avoid the blind spots directly in front of and behind an animal when moving them.*



*When attempting to move an animal forward in a curved chute, approach from the side and behind the point of balance.*