chapter two

# Stress

Cattle are very sensitive to how they are handled. Even an hour of rough handling can produce long-term stress and negatively effect their health and productivity.

Modern medicines can't compensate for how badly we handle our animals.

Stress occurs when we place demands on animals that they can't calmly meet or respond to naturally, and failure to meet our demands has undesirable consequences. When stock are stressed, they operate on their instinct for self-preservation. There is no room for this if you want real control—in fact, it's counterproductive to control.

Stress differs from pressure. Well-handled cattle can take a tremendous amount of pressure and stay calm and responsive. But if we apply pressure in a way they don't understand or can't calmly control, they get very stressed very quickly.

Panic follows too much stress, which often results in injuries. Vets tell us to keep stress to a minimum to avoid disease with livestock.

## Look at it from the stock's view

Livestock only do what we prompt them to do. They operate on what they read in us—which way we move, how fast or aggressive. This is all they have to go on.

Few of us understand the difficulties livestock face with traditional, high-stress handling and why it produces such seemingly rotten behavior in them.

For some insight, let's take a common situation on the range that I've seen hundreds of times and look at it from the cow's point of view, based on some known traits.

An association rider who is striving to get more days from a grazing unit and meet riparian standards is under considerable pressure to keep the stock off riparian areas. He rides the riparian areas and moves any stock off the creek into the uplands.

While checking an area, he finds a cow bedded down with a few others near the water. He had just cleaned this creek, but here they were right back.

Cattle need to see what is pressuring them, and they can't see things directly behind them. But this rider doesn't know that. He comes right in at the cow from directly behind, so she jumps up and turns so she can see him. He comes right at her head-on (where she can't see him well either), so she spins and heads off at a trot away from him. Then she turns back in towards the willows to hide.

The rider jumps out and blocks to turn her back and shouts. She turns away from the willows and trots off. The rider trots up right behind her. So she runs off. Then he sics the dog on her for good measure to keep her going up the mountain.

He gathers the other cattle and drives them hard up the mountain, so it takes awhile for the cow to find her calf. She was pushed, then crowded and jammed during the drive up.

That afternoon the rider checks the creek, and she is right back where he found her before. Same spot exactly. Now the battle is on! Well, in some places this goes on all summer long.

Why would cattle do this?

This rider doesn't understand the importance to the cow of **how** she is handled. He could solve the riparian loafing problem by understanding the cause of the problem and how the cow must be handled.

The cow is seeking comfort and security. She associates it with both the place and the situation where she last experienced it.

The rider's horses are no different in this respect.

The cow needs to see what is pressuring her, wants to walk at a comfortable pace without being jammed and crowded, and go in the direction she is facing. She becomes fearful with loud noise and fast movements and desperately wants to know what we want and to get along with us.

This is also true of the horses this rider uses to bust the cows off the creek.

In returning to the creek, she is just being a cow. She went back to the place where she was comfortable **before** the rider stressed her. She was taught, due to the rider's lack of knowledge, that getting up off her bed is rushed and uncomfortable.

He also taught her that "if you walk you get pressured, if you turn you get spun around, if you speed up you get pressured, if you slow down you still get pressured."

Every place she was driven she got unrelenting pressure or noise from someone she couldn't see. She was bumped and crowded by other animals when driven and lost her calf.

The herd got stopped on the uplands, and she left the first chance she got to return to the spot where she last experienced some freedom from stress.

The explanation is simple to the rider, "She did it because her mother was a Saler from Wyoming."

To the cow, it was a matter of survival, self-preservation, and relief from force and trouble. She was just doing what she thought she should, finding safety, comfort, and freedom from stress where she had found it once before.

We just don't see it their way. Some riders don't want to go to the effort. But learning how stock think so you can get high control isn't that difficult and is well worth the effort.

How many times have we shoved cattle across a bridge or crossing from a place in the back and lost when they broke back?

We should have had those cattle working calmly and responsively before trying to cross the bridge or go through the gate. And then, perhaps, we should have been at the front where they **could see us and** where we wanted them to go.

But that just doesn't fit us very well, so we don't want to do it that way. We want to get behind and scare them the right way and right now.

This kind of handling doesn't fit the animals, so they get thoughts of their own and ideas about taking over and saving themselves. They run away, lose weight, get sick, and stop eating. We lose control, time, and money.

To prevent stock from returning and loafing on the creek, or to get cattle over the bridge, into the trailer, etc., we need to gain an understanding of their natural instinct of self-preservation in order to gain their confidence and trust.

Then we can set it up right by using the right techniques, watching and adapting to be where the stock need us to be so our ideas can become theirs. When we do, the stock get calmer and calmer, and then real control comes. It just happens. The cattle are able and willing to do what we want.

It is our misunderstanding of the importance to animals of how they are handled that causes their fear and lack of confidence that we can so readily gain, given some knowledge.

## What stress produces

Three cows died of exhaustion last fall in one local gather. They kept running away because riders stressed them out in the first place and then kept chasing them.

If they had just quit chasing them, they would have quit running away. But three cows died, and many more made sick. Today these riders are still chasing cows (other people's cows).

Many riders seriously overwork their horses each year trying to control riparian loafing animals and others that quit the herd. Some riders use six or eight saddle horses apiece. Even so, these horses commonly lose hundreds of pounds or just give out. Some die.

On one ranch, three cows had to be put down due to broken backs from rearing in the chute. More were injured seriously going over the chute wall and through fences. One calf was crushed. Many more were bruised or injured.

A few signs of past stressful handling (and stressed stock) include:

* Range stock that are found far away from the main herd, hiding in their favorite places
* Mother cows that leave their calves when pressured by the handler
* Cattle that take side trails when driven or run ahead of the herd
* Groups of cattle that wander all over a new pasture
* Bawling and milling of calves around the pen
* Stock that persist in hanging around a riparian area

* Cattle trying to fight the handler

* Stock that are afraid to go past the handler

* Sick animals

None of this has to happen. Good handling can correct all of these behaviors and conditions. All you need to do is learn a little about how cattle needed to be handled.

Your horses won't need to be worked so hard either, because the cattle will work easily for you. They will be comfortable where you put them and go where you take them. Comfortable cattle don't push fences, either.

A number of scientific studies and trials show that it really does matter how livestock are handled. Handling can be the key to improving animal performance and reducing disease, especially in the U.S. and other countries where nutritional requirements are generally at or close to an animal's genetic potential to gain.

Studies in the Western U.S. show an increase in milk production in dairy cattle with lower-stress handling One study showed an increase of 6,000 pounds of milk per day ($1,200) just from switching to low-stress handling.

In England, piglets handled with lower stress increased their rate of gain by seven percent. Other studies show an increase in farrowing rates of almost 19 percent.

In Hawaii, studies on heifers showed that shrink (loss of weight from not eating and increased metabolism) is proportional to the level of stress in handling.

Moderate handling stress can cause shrinkage in excess of six percent, and light stress about four percent. Average daily gain after handling trials was affected by the level of handling stress for at least 44 days. The unstressed animals gained 25 pounds, lightly stressed gained 20 pounds, and the moderately stressed gained 16 pounds.

A number of studies and personal communications with dairy and feedlot managers shows that changes in either the handler or the handler's **attitude** can dramatically affect livestock production and performance. Even a mood change in the same handler on dairies, going through the same routine, can affect milk production from one to three percent.

The National Cattlemen's Association sponsored a study called the National Beef Quality Audit that showed for every animal marketed, one dollar was lost due to bruises. Five percent of beef carcasses are dark cutters. Proposals for addressing this range from injecting the carcasses with chemicals or salt to gene splicing and cloning.

Drugs, fancy facilities, or supplements are attempts to correct symptoms. Good handling addresses the root of behavior problems.

Stress is a major contributor to livestock health problems and to the difficulty we have in controlling stock. We cause most of this stress through high-stress handling methods. Stress has an effect on both livestock behavior and health.

Maximizing herd health and control means using good stockmanship principles, techniques, and cattle knowledge. This means using a little feel and timing to accommodate the nature of livestock in everything we do. Livestock will then turn remarkable control over to us. Most of the sickness and behavior problems will disappear.

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of good stockmanship is the sense of accomplishment that comes with working **for** the animals, not from beating them at the game. You can clearly understand why a handling or sickness problem is happening and address the root cause of it instead of correcting just the symptoms.

Know that you can get any animal to handle well if you persist. I have yet to see an exception to this.

Long ago, cowboys drove stock from Texas to Kansas under very difficult conditions without losing control. Although little has ever been written about **how** they were handled, enough stories and sketches exist that lead me to believe handling methods were very different.

Stories are told about men who used to gather wild stock, put them in a canyon, go get another 200 head half-a-day's ride away, and return to the canyon to find the stock still there. These cowboys understood a few things about cattle, or the ones in the canyon would have been long gone when they came back.

Stock will clearly show you some of the effects your handling is having on them. When handling stock, you should be looking for their behavior to change and problems to disappear. How drastic a change depends on what your herd is like to start with and how effective you are.

We need to stop relying on better facilities, tougher dogs, faster horses, or gimmicks to control stock. All we will ever need is knowledge about what stresses stock and some skill in handling that fits the animals.