



Cattle Handling Tips For Highland Owners

Highland cattle are known among other things for their calm nature and easy going disposition. That being said, there are some techniques and “rules of thumb” that a person will learn as they go through the years with their own herd of cattle. These pages are an attempt to summarize what others have learned and pass it on to the reader.

1. Spend Time With Your Cattle

Highlands are social animals. They know their herd mates and how to interact with them. Become a part of that herd. If possible, walk out among them several times a week, even if only for a few minutes. Let them get to know who you are. The more familiar they are with you, the easier it will be when you need to move or handle them. This time spent with them is also a good time to check for problems such as injuries, or illness. The more familiar you are with them, the easier it is to recognize when something isn't normal with an individual and to investigate whether there is a need for treatment. Like people, each individual in the herd has their own personality and mannerisms. Knowing these mannerisms can make it easier to identify potential health problems.

2. Move Slowly Around Your Cattle

Fast movement indicates to the herd that something is wrong. Even the calmest animal will run the other way if you go running down to the fence or run up to the herd. Take your time when approaching them and let them know that you are therewith both verbal and visual cues. If you want to scratch or comb them, reach for their hind quarters or their back first and start there. Reaching for the head first may cause them to shy away because they don't know what your intentions are yet.

3. Be Aware of the “Comfort Zone”.

Yes, cattle have a comfort zone. Some will allow you to walk right up to them, others will only let you within several feet of them. Respecting that space can make it much easier when working with your herd. If you are moving them between pastures or trying to work them down to the barn, stay just outside of that space, opposite the direction you want to move them in. They will tend to calmly walk in the direction that you want them to go. If you violate their space, they may tend to want to run from you, and not necessarily where you want them to go.

4. Allow Enough Time When Working With Your Cattle

You will find that cattle don't do anything fast (except maybe when there's a feed bucket in sight). If you are going to handle your cattle for any reason, don't get in a hurry. Rounding them up with an ATV may seem like an efficient way to get the job done, but more likely will get them agitated before you get them where you are going (see #2 above). If you accept the fact that it will take a little longer to get a job done if you coax them rather than drive them and allow time accordingly, it will result in much less stress on them and on you. If you are familiar to your animals, sometimes it's easier to call them to where you want them than it is to try to drive them there. If possible, leave a gate open to the area where you want them the night before you intend to handle them.

If loading animals on a trailer, take your time and let them adjust to the idea of getting on. Try to keep it a low stress experience. This can be especially important when loading animals to take to market.

5. Invest in Equipment To Handle Your cattle

We're not necessarily talking a lot of money here. But we are working with large animals with horns, and when performing veterinary procedures like vaccinations, some means of restraint is desirable. It is desirable to insure your safety and that of the animal.

Yes, cattle chutes can be expensive. But you don't necessarily need to have the fanciest chute in the world. You can find used chutes for under \$1000. If that is outside of your budget you can make a chute by putting in a few fence posts and securely attaching a couple of cattle handling panels to them. Head gates are available that you can mount to the front. You will also most likely want a short alley leading into your chute. If a commercial alley is out of your budget, again, you can make one out of cattle handling panels. Even a box stall in the barn can serve as a chute, if necessary. A standard tube gate can be used to squeeze the animal up against one wall of the stall. The point here is that you should have some means of working with your animals safely and efficiently. Sooner or later there may come a time when an animal is injured or having difficulty calving, and it will be necessary to work with that animal. You will also find that your veterinarian is much more willing to come to your farm if he or she feels safe when working around your cattle.

Keeping a few cattle panels on hand is a good idea. Sometimes a temporary pen can be handy for corralling an animal. These panels can be used in a variety of situations where you may want to confine an animal or guide it through an area.



Squeeze Chute With Removable Side Bars



Cattle Panels Set Up For Temporary Run-in

6. Treat New Momma Cows With Respect



Highland cows are very good mothers and can also be very protective. Approach a new calf and its mother with caution until you know how she will react. If you are familiar to the mother (see #1 above), there will most likely be no problem. She may bat her horns at you as a sign that you are too close, but she means no harm, just a warning. Sometimes however, it is necessary to handle a new calf. It could be that it can't figure out where supper is and it needs help getting on a teat. It could be that it has an injury. Some cows will allow you to help, but many would prefer that you keep your distance. This is a time when you need a way to handle that cow. If you have a chute or a stall to put her in you can keep her restrained while you assist the calf. Remember, even if you have a good history with a cow, hormones can change a relationship. Be aware of this and always test the waters when approaching a newborn and its mother.

Some cows will allow you to carry their calf to the barn or pen that you want to move them to. If you need to move the calf, keep it close to the ground. Don't pick it up and carry it, expecting the mother to follow. Once the calf is not on the ground, the cow doesn't always know where it went. You can be standing right in front of her with the calf, but she doesn't understand that. Put the calf back down, and she'll come right to it. Some people keep a sled or wagon that they can put the calf on handy in the barn. Put the calf on the sled and drag it along, and momma will follow behind.

7. Expect Some Commotion When Introducing New Members To The Herd

As mentioned above, cattle are very social animals. They have their own social structure and “pecking order”. When you introduce a new animal to the herd, there will be a certain amount of bellowing, pushing, and shoving. This is normal and will stop once it has been established who is higher on the social ladder. You will even see this among animals from the same herd if you remove one for a few days and then return it to the herd. They just need to re-establish who the dominant animal is. In addition, animals may move up the social ladder as they mature, grow in size, or gain increased confidence.



8. Winter Considerations

Highlands do not require a shelter such as a shed or run-in for the winter. However, some sort of wind-break should be provided. With their thick winter coat, you'll see them walking around with frost or snow on their backs. They really enjoy winter weather. However, very cold weather and the occasional high winds that can accompany it do present the need for the wind-break. If cows will be calving in winter, then some form of shelter might be desirable until the new calf is dried off, on its feet, and eating on its own.



8. When You Have Questions....

There are times when we all have a question about something. It could be about calving, behavior, handling, etc. Your veterinarian can be a good source of information. Another place to turn is one of the regional cattle associations. A list of members in the North Central Highland Association is available on their web site at <http://www.nchca.org>. Many members are more than happy to answer questions or just discuss Highlands in general. If you are unsure about who to contact, feel free to contact one of the people on the Board of Directors, and they can recommend someone in your area to contact. Board members are also listed on the NCHCA web site. The American Highland Cattle Association is also a good place to look for contacts from your region, if you don't happen to be from the upper Midwest. You can find the AHCA members in your area at <http://www.highlandcattleusa.org/memberlist.aspx>.

