

## Holistic Herding and Planned Grazing Bob Kinford, Van Horn, TX

No matter what system or name you use, every form of high density grazing claims to be mimicking the grazing of large herds of ruminant herbivores by fencing them into small paddocks. When the wild herds come together, thousands of animals graze in the same direction, separated by only a few feet. Have you ever witnessed this grazing behavior in cattle? We think of cattle as being herd animals, yet we consider them spreading out to graze as being their “normal” behavior. Somehow this doesn't seem logical. In order to determine why our cattle appear to have the instinct to spread to graze, we need to change our perspective on why the large herbivores come together as large herds.

The commonly held belief being presently promoted is that the herds come together as a result of predators. Looking at this a little deeper, we realize that these herds come together during the wet season, during which time there is enough feed and water to support the big herds. What is seldom mentioned, yet just as important, is that these herds break apart into small groups when the feed and water sources dry up. Could it be, that rather than being controlled by predators, the act of large herds coming together is dictated by availability of feed and water? There seems to be little thought going into why these large herds break up and scatter.

It is during the stress-filled times of little feed and water that these animals are not only breaking into smaller groups, they are also very selective in their grazing. Beyond selective grazing, we need to also look at the differences between individual animal position between large herds and smaller groups. Other than when predators are actively hunting, the large herds graze within a few feet of each other. There is plenty of feed, plenty of water, and virtually no stress. Conversely, during times of little feed and water, there is a lot of stress. On top of the normal stresses of feed and hunger, there is a greater danger of predication. As a result, the animals spread out to graze, facing in different directions so that predators are more easily spotted.

This would indicate that the grazing behavior of herbivores is dictated as much by availability of feed and water as it is by predator pressure. Having to search for adequate feed and water during the dry season is stressful. The grazing behavior of these large herbivores during the stressful time of the year is *identical* to what we assume is the natural grazing behavior in cattle. Assuming that behavioral instinct is the same within species of herbivores, the instinct to graze as large herds should be the same in cattle as it is in Impalas and Wildebeest.

In 1998 I helped gather over 2,000 bison on the Rocky Mountain Bison Ranch, next to the Sand Dunes National Monument in southern Colorado. They were scattered about the ranch, mainly in groups of five to fifty. These are the same animals who at one time ran in vast herds, numbering in the tens of thousands (and the same animals people use to describe how grasslands are maintained by grazing.) What we don't think about is that it has been less than 160 years since bison roamed in herds numbering in the tens of thousands. It has only taken us two lifetimes to completely change their behavior to mimic that of cattle, which have been domesticated for thousands of years. Why has the “natural” behavior of bison changed so much in such a short time?

It is simply all stress related. Think back to when the wild herds break apart. In times of stress. When do they come back together? In times of low stress (other than the animals on the edge of the herd being eaten). Just like the wild herds, the domestic ones will come together as a herd when they are not stressed. Unfortunately, nearly all of us are stressing our animals in one way or another, often in the name of creating less stress. Let's look at some of the things we are doing that are creating stress.

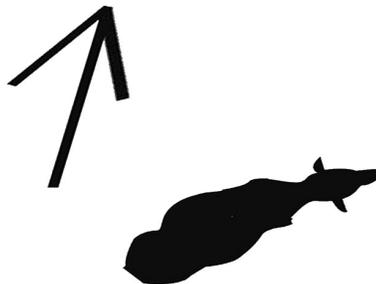
1. Number one in my book is moving cattle with feed. Seems to us like we are not putting stress on the cattle. No one is pushing them, no dogs chasing them, all they are doing is following the feed truck. This would be like having someone come up to us with the chuck wagon, telling us it was time to eat, then slowly driving off. Bet you would be happy with that, wouldn't you?
2. Calling cattle to feed. Same cattle are at the truck first every day. Even if you stop next to a cow which is always last to feed when you start calling, she gets shoved to the back of the line before you feed. This would be similar to being invited to an all-you-can-eat prime rib buffet, only to discover you have to compete with all of the linemen from the NFL who are under instructions to be rude to you. Another stress-free situation for you.
3. Letting your cattle "move themselves" every time you open the gate. When making daily moves out of small paddocks (especially when moving at the same time each day), cattle tend to get anxious about moving. They are having "late for dinner anxiety" even though they have plenty of feed available. There have been ranches where cattle were so anxious for that next move to be over with that they would actually leave newborn calves behind.
4. "Driving" cattle from behind. While starting cattle by going back and forth across the back is accepted as being low stress, most people put on too much pressure and turn it into stress. Think of it as being tailgated in heavy traffic by someone who is honking their horn at every red light trying to get you to move faster.

(Audience participation demonstrating stress in normal methods of handling. Approximately five minutes.)

Rebooting the herd instinct in cattle is actually fairly simple. All we have to do is take away the stress and give them the idea to come together as a herd. This means having an adequate water supply so that the whole herd can drink at one water point with a minimum of competition, and handling them in a way which allows them to start up and move as if it were their idea.

The first step to rebooting herd instinct is to remove as much handling stress as possible. Nearly all of us have been taught to turn cattle by applying direct pressure. Somewhere along the way we have come up with the idea that working cattle in straight lines means being parallel to the cow until we are ready to apply pressure on the head. In reality, cattle will react more calmly and turn easier if we take an angle away from the cow. When utilizing this kind of turn, it is important to use some lateral movement with our horse so that it remains focused on the cow. Once the cow has turned and headed in the direction we want, let the cow go back to the herd at its own pace rather than stressing it by chasing it back to the herd. If timed right, a cow will often stop its turn to leave if you turn with the cow, but "over turn" by two steps to take the pressure off.

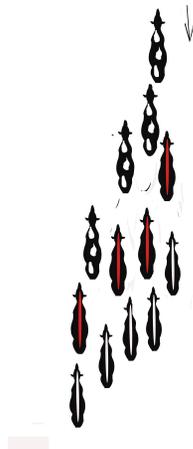
### **Fade Turn**



The second method of turning a cow is a hip turn. This is easily accomplished by riding across a cow's hip at roughly a 45° angle. As the cow turns to look at you, she will follow you around. When she is pointing in the direction you want, simply back your horse up and let it go by you.



We also need to think about how cattle come into water, and how they go back out to graze. Do they travel as a mob, or do they string out when their lead cow decides it is time to go? What do we do when we decide to move a group of cattle off of water? We ride back and forth across one side to push the whole group in the direction we want them to go. Instead of doing this, you pick the side on the direction you are going, and ride against them, the cattle will naturally line out and travel in that direction. As this is their natural way to start, when starting cattle off of water, start them from the side which is in the direction you are wanting to go by riding past them so that the cattle on the front become the lead, and the cattle on the back follow (which also gives time for cows to get paired up.)



As the cattle may initially be facing in different directions, you will need to be able to adjust your position as you are going up the side of the herd. This is where having a little advanced horsemanship comes in handy. While cattle will pick up and go as you ride past them, the direction they head will be determined by the angle of your horse in relationship to the cattle.

1. Gather your cattle to water so they all drink at the same time.

2. When the first cattle are ready to go back to grazing, take them all to where you want them to graze.
3. Start cattle from the front and have them go past you in the direction you want them to go.
4. Turn your cattle with indirect pressure. You can do this in two ways, either using their instinct to go around you, or at an angle to where they are wanting to go which will turn them as well.
5. Once started, keep getting motion from the side by riding against them.
6. Once cattle start going, don't push them to other cattle. Instead, let them go at their own speed without pressuring them.
7. Give cattle the idea to go to water at the same time.
8. Hold cattle on water until they are showing signs they want to graze, then gradually start them out in the same direction as naturally as possible.
9. When you get to where you want to graze, slow down the front until they begin to graze, and leave them alone once they are all grazing. Do not force them to come to a complete stop.

By doing these few things, your cattle will begin acting as a herd, usually within a few days, eliminating the need to fence small paddocks to control them. The largest herd this has been done with was in Queensland, Australia where 3,500 head of mixed cattle began acting as a herd in only eight days, with only three people handling them.

One small rancher in Ohio stopped subdividing his twenty-acre paddocks for his herd of fifty pair and actually increased his animal impact per acre over fences. Rather than being spread out across a five-acre paddock, they had compacted themselves into a grazing mob covering 0.18 acres.

By making these few changes, you will be able to keep your cattle grazing where you want. Once you do that, you will have something to do with your time other than to play “recreational fencer.”