

Low-stress animal handling techniques on pasture/range

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Some of you may be wondering how stockmanship ties into grazing. We producers have been asked to share our thoughts on the matter. I feel like the only aspect in ranching that outweighs the rest is people. Without people there is no one to operate a ranch. In order to be efficient, those people have to look at the whole picture. As ranchers you can not just focus on finances, cattle, land or people – you have to be able to manage them all in harmony in order to be as efficient and profitable as possible. Everyone is here to learn what they can about pasture management, what pasture management paradigm might work best for their operation, how to manage forbs, and so on. What about cattle handling, how can it affect your bottom line? Better yet – what does it have to do with pasture management and grazing efficiency?

I was born and raised a rancher and horseman. I could get it done with the best of them. I went to work for the Rex Ranch south of Ashby in March of 2005. I was responsible for running the camp I was on, including grazing and herd management. Nebraska was in the middle of a drought and every blade of grass counted. When I started on my summer grazing rotation, my wife (Jamie) and I were struggling to move about 580 pair every day or two. Neither one of us had ever had to handle numbers like that alone. After each move we never seemed to have 100% of our herd content; they would run into the next pasture, leaving calves behind and a mess for us to straighten out. Cows were spending half the time they had to graze looking for their calf or anticipating the next wreck when they were moved again. We were living the dream; we were cowboying every day and loving it!

In June the ranch sent me to a Bud Williams stockmanship school. That school was one of the most important life-changing experiences I ever had. Like I said, I thought I could get it done with the best of them; was I ever wrong! Once I started to concentrate more on my stockmanship, life began to simplify. Our moves from pasture to pasture took way less time; as we gained some experience, cattle were more content, and we had more time to concentrate on getting other things done on the ranch.

All of this was just the beginning. Once I had begun to learn to handle cattle properly, they began to settle in the pastures right away, contently grazing instead of running around looking for a calf or anticipating the next move. I had more time to evaluate my grazing situation and how my pastures were being utilized. In many of my pastures cattle were not spreading out and grazing certain areas, most of the time hanging on the flats and not grazing rough hills at all. I began placing my herd in areas that were not being utilized. Once I started placing cattle, they began to naturally spread out and utilize pastures more evenly. Pasture uniformity began to increase greatly, forb density decreased on flats, and areas around wells did not seem to have as much impact.

The following year the Sandhills remained in a drought. During that year I felt that, due to the change in cow herd behavior, I was leaving more standing forage in my pastures after each move, my well sites did not show as much disturbance, and my herd health had increased tremendously. Not only had I improved conditions on the ranch, my life became less stressful. I was able to move my cattle with confidence, knowing that I could handle any situation that presented itself, instead of feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand. I had more time to complete other tasks on the ranch and focus on other important management concerns. In order to improve my stockmanship, I had to become aware of all of my surroundings and how my actions affected each animal in a herd individually.

That sort of focus also brought my attention to how my stockmanship was affecting the pasture being grazed as well as the bottom line of my overall production. Personally, it gave me a confidence that allowed me to be much more enjoyable to be around – both at work and home. That confidence came from “buying in” to the best of my ability and not just practicing stockmanship when it was convenient.

If you take the time to handle your cattle correctly every time in every situation, the benefits will far outweigh the time you feel you do not have to learn something different.