

Gail posted a video in late April on facebook, Snake River Farm Minnesota. It got 2400 viewers. Incredible.

There was one comment that made me think I should write at least a little about animal handling. You cannot see it but I am struggling with how to start this topic.

I think I will just jump in.

I have been handling animals all of my life.

My earliest recollections are of doing farm chores. I have always enjoyed farming.

I cannot say that I have never been rough with animals but I can say that I have treated animals with great care for decades.

One of our goals is to humanely raise and harvest our animals.

We work hard to give our animals the best reasonable life and a painless, stress free death.

A good life in my opinion means that the animals have a healthy diet, shelter as needed, protection from predators, a low stress existence and a satisfying social life.

Each species of animal has different needs in each of those categories.

For example, our bison have no use for shelter nor do they need protection from predators. But bison social needs are high. It is well known that a lone bison will not prosper.

Poultry need both shelter and protection from predators and their social structure is well defined. Think, "pecking order".

I intend to explain many of those differences and how we try to satisfy them. I will do so in a series of letters.

For now, I will give you the abbreviated form.

We do not yell at our animals.

I can imagine the need to yell in a dangerous situation but I cannot recall such a situation in recent years.

We handle and work with all of our animals calmly, gently, and courteously.

Animals that are treated calmly are themselves calm. You will see that when you visit the farm.

Providing a low stress life for the animals has many benefits.

Calm animals are easier to handle, easier to care for.

It is easier for me to work with calm animals.

Calm animals are healthier and grow better.

Whether I am working with horses, cattle, buffalo, hogs, sheep, or smaller animals, every interaction is a training experience. The animals either learn new behaviors, behaviors that I want from them, or they learn to be edgy and wary.

I used the word courteous above. I know that seems like an odd choice in this context. I do not believe it is out of place.

For example, when I am traveling through the animal's pastures, whether on foot or on a tractor, I take care to give them time to move away. Or, I walk around the animals so they do not have to scatter before me.

It might seem odd but they, especially the senior animals have their own sense of dignity. To make them scatter to let me through shames them within their family or social group.

Humiliate a bison matriarch and she will never forgive you.

Animals remember such things.

We brought home 110 little pigs a couple weeks ago.

Since then I have been in their pen several times a day to bring them feed to water them and to check on their health.

I walk slowly and talk to them as I move around. They are very active, but they are not afraid. They have learned to be comfortable with my presence.

In fact, one measure of success is when I reach the point where I need to tell individual animals that I am there because none sounded an alarm.

I like it when they feel comfortable ignoring me.

We brought the piglets home in a stock trailer.

The first week I used that stock trailer as their temporary sleeping room. Casey posted a nice photo on our facebook page of the pigs sleeping in the trailer.

One of the reasons I use the trailer for their first shelter is because I will use the same stock trailer to move them to pastures. In the fall, I will use that trailer again to transport them to Quality Meats. They have good memories of that trailer and they will readily walk into it whenever I need them to.

No yelling, no shocking, no hitting required.

I move the bison and beef herds by leading them. I have attended some excellent workshops on driving cattle and bison. I find however, that training them to follow me when I call works much better. Leading eliminates the crowding and stress that comes from driving.

I can easily lead the cattle herd from the far end of the farm, through many turns, gates and even across the township road to get them to a specific pasture.

A walk in the park.

In case you are wondering, I lead the bison but then get out of their way when they stampede, as they always do.

It is their nature.

Hogs cannot be lead. They are not herd animals but rather family animals. I will explain that in a future letter. Pigs will only go where they want to go and they will not stick together.

It is a subject for yet another letter but I also train the animals for the day when I will harvest them.

The goal is an instant, pain free death with no anticipation of danger.

If this letter raises questions for you, please ask.

Best regards.

Tom