

## **Animal Management and Animal Welfare at the Snake River Farm PART 3**

This letter is part of a series.

If you did not see the earlier letters, you can find them easily on Sarah's blog.

[www.sandhillfarmsarah.wordpress.com](http://www.sandhillfarmsarah.wordpress.com)

### **In this letter, I will write about calming and moving animals.**

By "moving" animals, I mean moving herds from pasture to pasture or into trailers for transport.

Some years ago, I attended a three day course in South Dakota on this subject. The teachers were the daughter and son-in-law of Bud Williams. Bud, now deceased, was a leading expert on moving animals using low stress methods. Bud moved animals primarily by driving herds while on foot. You can learn more about his methods, books and teachings by simply doing an internet search of his name.

I enjoyed the workshop. I learned some things. I gained some useful insight. Nevertheless, the course was only marginally useful to me for two reasons.

#### **First, I found that I already knew the methods Bud was teaching.**

Every farm boy who brings the cows home for milking or brings the heifers home from the neighbor's cornfield learns the basics of these techniques naturally.

All the animals I am focusing on with these letters, bison, horses, cattle, hogs, sheep and goats, are prey animals. Prey animals have what is called a flight zone. The flight zone defines how close a predator can get to the animals or the herd before they move away. To untrained animals, we are predators.

The flight zone varies with different species and with different individuals. It is also highly variable in different situations and at different times.

In the simplest sense, understanding the anxiety that we cause in animals by our role as predators is the key to driving animals. Anxiety comes before fear. A skilled animal handler uses natural anxiety to move animals while keeping them relatively calm. Calm in this situation usually means movement at a walking pace. If the handler causes too much anxiety, the animals become fearful. Short term anxiety is relatively low stress and does no harm to the animals. Fear causes animals to panic. Fear and panic lead to violent efforts at escape. That can result in injuries and future handling difficulties.

If the herd is repeatedly moved in a calm way, driving becomes a learned response and anxiety is eliminated.

#### **The second reason the course was not particularly useful to me is that I very seldom drive animals.**

It is my belief that farmers are obligated to give animals as good a life as we reasonably can.

That means, among other things, that I should minimize stress in their lives.

#### ***Whenever possible, I lead animals or I set things up so they can move themselves.***

The first requirement is to reduce the animal's natural fear of me as a predator. The technique for doing so is not novel or special.

I visit the animals in their pastures or pens daily. Checking the animals to see that their needs are met and that they are healthy is just good farming. It is animal husbandry.

By the way, I like the ancient word "husbandry." It ranks right in there with land "stewardship".

Husbandry and stewardship as the two prime obligations of farmers. Land stewardship is in revival in recent years. Unfortunately, animal husbandry as a phrase and as a practice has fallen into disuse.

Animal husbandry does not exist in a CAFO.

### **Key precepts for low stress animal handling.**

1. Always be calm. Animals are very sensitive to fearful emotions in others. If you are in an anxious state, you cannot hide that from the animals.
2. Never raise your voice or vocalize in an excited manner. Animals have keener hearing than we do. Loud noises, especially emotional vocalizations are distressful to them.
3. Move slowly and in the open. Vision in prey animals is tuned to detect rapid movements.
4. Minimize your predator behaviors. More than anything else that means, do not stare at individuals until they are accustomed to you. Gaze downward when approaching fearful animals.
5. Take care of their needs.
6. Spend time with the animals. Walk among them.

My goal is to reach the point where I can walk through the animal herd and have them essentially ignore me.

That requires two things. One that they lose their fear of me and two that they expect nothing from me unless I call them.

The second point is important. If you provide food or something positive every time you visit the animals, they will crowd around you. Horses will get pushy, cattle will get bossy, bison will get dangerously close and hogs will eat your pants off.

I train animals to come, but only when I call. I train them to ignore me if I do not call. If I am close, I call in a quiet voice. If I am far across the pasture, I call in a loud voice. Calling does not qualify as yelling. Calling is a vocalization known to them in a positive way.

By the way, because bison are wild, I get close to them but either keep a fence between us or ride among them on a tractor. Otherwise, calming is similar. I get them used to having me hang around with them but not on foot. It would not be a fair fight if one of them decided to test where I fit in the herd hierarchy.

Domestication and taming do not change animal nature. This statement is true for all species that I am familiar with including dogs. The sweetest, friendliest, tiniest dog has both the desire and the knowhow to grab a chicken by the neck and kill it instantly. I have seen it many times.

Humans select animals for specific traits such as size or docility, but their underlying nature appears unchanged.

### ***Here is one example of a docile Jersey steer behaving as a prey animal.***

Some years ago, two of my brothers were with me to butcher a Jersey steer. Jerseys are known for docile behavior. The fact that this was a steer made the animal even calmer.

In preparation, I had closed three steers in a small corral that was a part of their pasture. The animals had lived in the same pasture since they were calves. None of them had ever challenged a fence or broken out of their pasture. I fed them occasionally in this corral. They had not been handled otherwise. My brothers and I were casually talking as we approached. One of us was carrying a gun. I do not believe these animals had ever seen a gun before, so that fact is probably of no relevance.

As we walked toward the corral, we were discussing which animal to kill. In hindsight, that was perfectly typical predator behavior.

The animal that we decided on went from calm, to alert to frenzied in seconds.

Before the gun was pointed or any overt action was taken, that steer broke through the corral fence. It ran across the lawn dragging part of the corral and broke through another fence back into its pasture. The whole event took a few seconds.

I am now more attentive to the nature of my animals.

I will give more details on moving the different species of animals in alter letters. Each species is unique. For example, moving bison is different from moving horses.

Although the general concepts and taming methods apply to pigs as well as the other species, pigs are difficult to herd. In most situations, I set things up so pigs can move themselves. More in a later letter.

I will try to write the next segment within a week.

Your feedback is welcome and helpful.

Best regards.

Tom