

A Bloated but Lucky Heifer

Last Sunday, I spent a few hours doing chores.

I got into the house around ten and decided that I would rest until mid-afternoon.

The week had been fuller than normal and besides, this is my 75th growing season.

After a couple of hours, the thoughts of undone tasks drove me back to work.

I was repairing a flat front tire on a tractor when I heard an animal breathing heavily.

At first it seemed like a hog snoring, but then, not so much.

I decided to investigate.

There was a black heifer on her side down near the river.

She was bloated up like a huge black ball, gasping for breath.

When I got to her, she was lying on her side, with her head thrown back and her eyeballs rolled almost out of sight.

She was blown-up like a cartoon character.

All four legs were sticking straight out because her entire body was tight as a balloon.

My guess was that she had bloated on a Red Clover hay.

Cattle can do that.

They are ruminants.

They have a huge, multi-compartment stomach wherein countless microorganisms help them digest course material, like grass, leaves and stems.

Different microbe populations are needed to digest different plant material.

Stomach gases are a natural by-product of rumination.

Sometimes, especially if with high quality forages, the organisms produce gas too fast.

That gas can cause the stomach to expand to incredible size.

The gas pressure can close off the trachea and quickly kill the animal by suffocation.

That was happening to this otherwise healthy heifer.

I have seen it before, although seldom with hay.

Bloat happens most commonly when cattle are turned into lush spring pastures.

Livestock farmers know to watch for, and avoid pasture bloat. Hay bloat like this is quite rare.

The heifer was almost dead.

She would be in just a few more minutes.

I went quickly to the shop where I keep a filet knife.

Since gas rises, the highest point on the heifer's belly was her gas-filled rumen.



I plunged the knife straight in, knowing I would stab through her hide and the stomach wall. I then immediately rotated the knife blade 90 degrees so it would hold the slit open. She deflated to about half her former size in seconds. In one minute, her breathing was back to normal. I held the wound open. Every few seconds a different stomach compartment would send its gas to the rumen where the gas could vent. By minute three, the heifer stood up on wobbly legs. I pulled the blade out as she got up. She seemed to feel poorly for a couple hours but was back at the hay bunk by morning. I have attached a photo that I took two days later. You can see a reddish splotch on her side a bit over half way up. That was caused by the bloody foam that escaped from the stab wound. The wound itself is of no more consequence to her than a bee sting. The filet knife has a very sharp tip and a thin blade. That wound heals very quickly. In fact, the two punctures of the skin and the stomach, although lined up when the knife was in place, will shift relative to each other once the animal stands up. The result is a very minor wound that saved her life instantly. Tom. 2020



Red Holstein Cow and Calf. I just bought her because she was pretty.