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Observing Steer Behavior



Steers can show you whether they are sick or healthy by the way they act, the sounds they make, and by the consistency of their manure. Learn to watch and listen to your steers because they can show you when they are okay and when they need you to do something for them. Steers under stress or excited can hurt people or themselves. If you understand how steers normally behave and what they like and dislike, they will be easier to handle and you will be less likely to get hurt working with them.

Objectives

After studying the materials and completing the suggested activities for this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe the normal behavior of a steer.
2. Recognize whether your steer is behaving normally when you watch and listen to it.
3. Compare the normal behavior of beef cattle with the behavior of other animals.

How Steers Behave

One of the most interesting things about steers is the way they act. They can be very funny to watch. Unlike people, steers tend to be awake and active during all hours of the day and night. They only “sleep” a couple of times each day, and then only for a few minutes at a time. Sleeping cattle will turn their heads and lay them alongside their bodies. Pigs, on the other hand, tend to sleep at night and be active during the day, like people.

One of the most common behaviors you’ll notice in your steer is its “ruminating” or “cud chewing.” When cattle eat forages like grass and hay, they swallow large pieces. Later, while they are resting, the large pieces come back into the animal’s mouth for chewing. This is called regurgitation. If you watch closely, you will be able to see your steer regurgitate a “bolus.” It will then chew this bolus for a while before swallowing it again.

A steer normally makes a “bawling” sound to call other cattle if it is lonely—or to let you know it’s thirsty or hungry! The other sound you might hear from your steer is a cough. Cattle that cough may be sick, or could have worms.

Steers usually walk when they move around their pens. If they run or jump, they are feeling energetic and happy. Sometimes if your steer is feeling good and has access to loose dirt, it may paw at the ground. Because steers are so heavily muscled and heavy for their size, they are not fast and they do not run as a dog would.

Steers have differing temperaments. Some are curious and approach people out of curiosity. These cattle are normally the easiest to tame and halter break. Other cattle, because of genetics or a previous experience with people, are skittish and easily frightened, and run from people.

Steers normally lie on their stomachs with their legs curled underneath them. They may sleep for a few minutes on their sides with their legs straight out.

Some steers get excited very easily. Equipment and facilities should be designed to keep the animals calm and make them easier to move and handle. For example, loading chutes should have solid sides so that steers will not see things on the outside that could scare them. Cattle move easily around curved passages, but it is often difficult to get them to make sharp turns.

Steers prefer to move toward light and away from darkness. They do not like to walk toward moving objects and loud noises. They prefer not to step over obstacles like a garden hose or a door frame. They are suspicious and frightened of shadows in aisles and walkways.

Learn to recognize normal and abnormal urine and feces (manure) produced by your steers. Urine and feces may look or smell different when the animals are sick. The urine of normal steers is clear and yellow. Steers' feces look different depending on their diet. Feces of steers on a high energy diet are soft, with visible bits of grain. If your steer has loose, watery feces without bits of grain apparent, show your parent or leader. Cattle on high forage diets often have firmer feces. If you notice that your steer's urine or feces do not look right, ask your parent or leader to take a look.

Also learn to recognize general signs that your steer isn't feeling well by observing its behavior. Cattle that are sluggish, lack energy, or don't eat may have health problems. See Section 8 for more information on signs of sick steers.

Words You Should Know

Ethology: The study of animal behavior.

Bolus: Name for the forage that is regurgitated for rumination. Also called "cud."

Regurgitation: Process of bringing a bolus of previously consumed forage back to the mouth for chewing.

Ruminating: Process of chewing previously eaten forages.



Suggested Activities

- Spend time observing steers as they eat and sleep. Point out to your parent or leader the different behavior you see.
- Attend a beef cattle show and observe the animals' behavior.
- Observe other farm animals or house pets and compare their actions to steers' actions.

Ideas for Presentations and Speeches

- Why cattle ruminate.
- How to tell if your steer is acting normally.

Things to Talk About

- How does a steer usually act during a typical day?
- What sounds do steers make and what do these sounds mean?
- What should you do if you think your steers sound or act as if something is wrong?