

Introduction to the Veterinary Profession

VETS30030 / VETS90122



Module: Care and welfare of domestic animals

Large Animal Behaviour

Cattle

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Cattle behaviour

- Ancestor of our current cattle breeds is the Auroch (*Bos primigenius*, last one died in 1627)
- They had large horns and particularly the males were very aggressive.



Cattle breeds

- About 9,000 year ago domestication of two sub-species occurred, zebu cattle (*Bos indicus*) in South Asia and European cattle (*Bos taurus*) in Eurasia.
- Most *Bos Indicus* cattle in Australia are crossbreeds with *Bos Taurus* (e.g., Brahman, Brangus, Belmont Red)



Cattle breeds

- Beef (e.g., Angus, Hereford, Charolais) and dairy (e.g., Holstein, Jersey) breeds
- General temperament: Bos indicus cattle > beef cattle > dairy cattle (although dairy bulls are considered more aggressive than beef bulls)
- Breed affects temperament but so does age and previous experience



Herd behaviour



- Living in a herd provides safety in numbers
- Also a good strategy to find food, water and shelter
- Cattle are not territorial, but have a 'home range'.
- Naturally herds consist of females and their offspring
- Adult males live in bachelor groups
- Strong social structure, complex hierarchy, little aggression
- Affiliative behaviour and special bonds between individuals

Grazing behaviour



- Grazing in the morning and late afternoon
- Spent 10-14hrs lying (resting and ruminating)
- Behavioural synchronisation
- Time budget of dairy cows is driven by twice daily milking

Sensing the world

- Eyes on the side of the head means wide field of vision (300 degrees)
- Sensitive to movement and contrast, can cause escape response
- Ears rotate to the direction of sound
- Smell and vocalisation important for social communication
- Most social communication through body language
- Ear, head, tail, body position and movement are used for communication
- Facial expressions may indicate emotion, look for wrinkling under the eye, the white of the eye, drooping ears

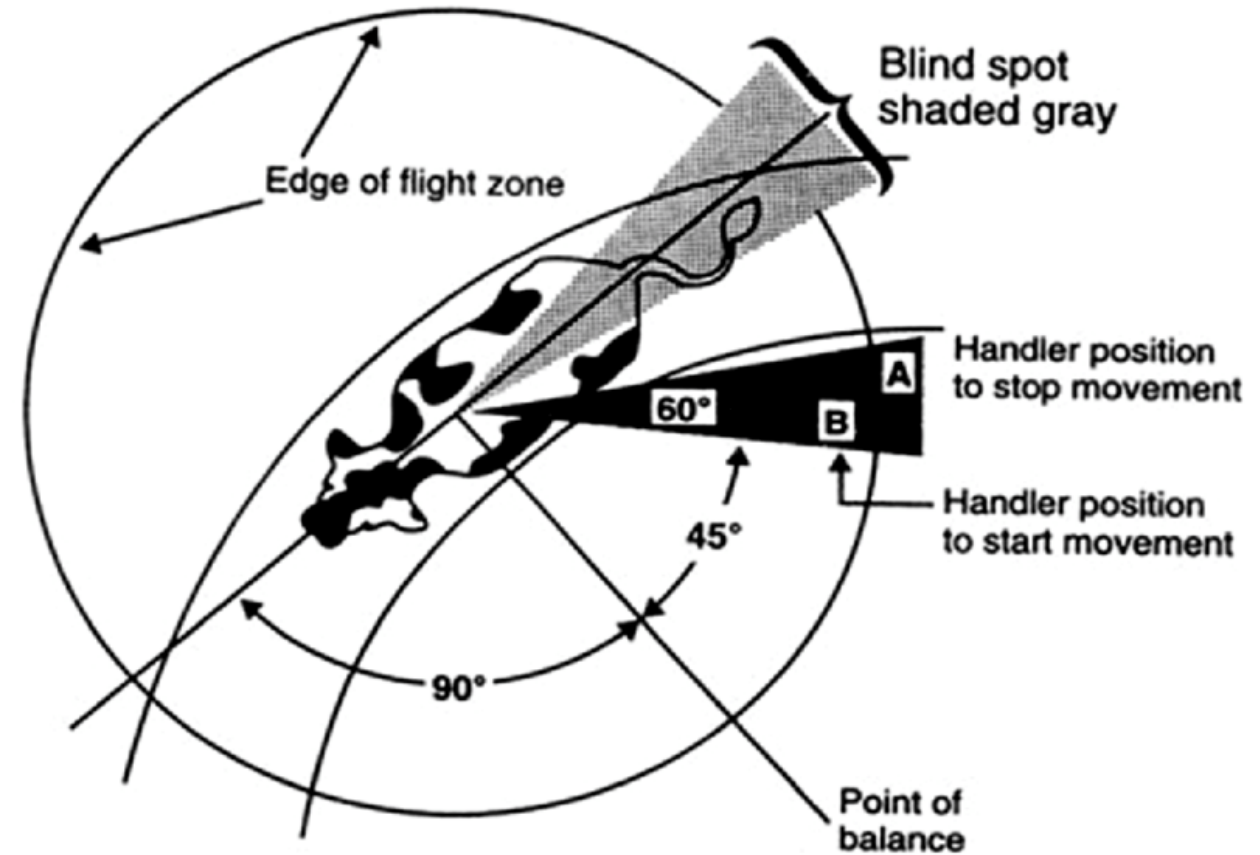
Show of aggression



- Mostly use of threats (stare, head tossing, foot stamping)
- Aggression mainly head butting, can be deadly particularly with horned cattle (sometimes charging)
- May charge when they perceive a threat (for example dog)
- Kicking or striking, can be either aggressive or defensive
- Escape attempts when fearful, can be dangerous both to the animal and to humans

Handling of cattle

- Be aware of point of balance
- Move animals in groups
- Use as little pressure as possible, give them time
- Food can help to move animals
- Watch their body language and look out for fear and threats



Natural behaviour of cattle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7B2-M14YAs>

Communication of cattle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2pb4Vbrz2c>

Aggressive cow

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/L9WQaxr3lrA>