

By Steve Werblow

# A gentle touch

Tips on low-stress handling  
that's good for you and your animals



**Photo:** Understanding what makes animals feel safe enriches their lives—and yours.



**Top:** Sheep have a strong herding instinct. Instead of chasing stragglers, let them simply rejoin the flock. **Above:** Mary Ann Simonds uses horses' sense of space to build strong, safe relationships.

**U**nderstanding how your animals see the world helps you lead them where you want them to go—and helps them want to go there, too. A little time spent thinking about what makes a herd animal feel secure can make moving livestock and horses a gentler, safer, and more fulfilling experience.

Gentle handling revolves around every animal's need for personal space.

Most farm animals have an instinctive need to keep a little distance between themselves and predators, called a flight zone. If a creature that could be a threat—whether it's a mountain lion or a person—enters that flight zone, the animal or entire herd starts to move.

Flight zones are easy to observe in curious, cautious animals like cattle or sheep.

"If the cattle are turning and looking at you, you're outside the flight zone. If they're moving away from you, you're inside the flight zone," notes world-renowned Colorado State University animal handling expert Temple Grandin. If you rush too far into an animal's flight zone, she may turn to confront you—a reaction that is alarming to both you and her.

**Gentle pressure.** Troy Michaels uses flight zones to gently herd cattle and sheep on the farm he operates with his wife Holly near Days Creek, Ore. Michaels and his hired man, Leroy Moore, walk quietly towards a group of cattle, who shoulder past toward an open gate. As the lead animals enter the pen, Michaels and Moore step outside of the flight

zone, allowing the cattle to exercise their herd instinct and follow their leaders into the corral.

Michaels grew up herding animals calmly, with a minimum of hooting and yelling. Then he attended a workshop led by gentle handling guru Bud Williams, where he learned the fine points of applying gentle pressure by repeatedly walking into the flight zone, then backing off, nudging the animals to saunter calmly to their destination.

"When we hire people to help us, we have to be careful to get people who aren't prone to yelling and hitting," notes Holly Michaels.

Stress goes right to the bottom line, affecting meat quality. Michaels compared meat from a steer that was slaughtered after a stressful episode with one harvested under calm circumstances. "It was a totally different kind of meat," she says.

**Stress hormones.** Grandin explains that stress causes animals to release cortisol, a hormone that puts the animal's body on high alert. Research shows that a beef cow worked roughly releases a higher concentration of cortisol than a deer caught in a net or shot with a tranquilizer dart. High levels of cortisol have been shown to make meat dark, tough and unpleasant, and they certainly don't make the animal much fun to work with, either.

Worse, stress for animals is not just sparked by rough treatment.

Prey animals are tuned to notice anything out of the ordinary. So a stray piece of trash flapping on a barbed wire fence, a coat hang-