

So You Want to Help

When there is any talk of moving cattle, there are plenty of people who eagerly express their desire to “help”. In most cases the job can be done just as well without you – maybe even better. But if you are invited to participate, bear in mind a few simple rules whose observance will make it much more likely that you will be invited again.

Rules for gathering cattle:

1. Gather the whole field
2. Gather all the cattle
3. Maintain the flow
4. Anticipate
5. Don't “lane” a bunch-quitter
6. Be flexible
7. Don't Crowd
8. Be observant
9. Don't try too hard to help

Gather the **whole** field.

This first rule seems obvious and shouldn't require addressing, yet I've ridden with far too many people who simply ride *into* a field and gather the cattle they see. It's important to ride to **all** of the corners of the field and look into **all** of the brushy draws and **all** of the timber. Ride on top of and behind every hill, and look along **all** of the fenceline in your section of the field. You should be certain that you see into **every** acre of the field between the riders to your left and to your right.

There is every reason to be embarrassed if cattle come wandering in from the direction you have just ridden. We can't gather *part* of the field one day and the rest next day, because in the meantime the cattle will have scattered out and we'd have to recheck the part we gathered from the day before to be sure we had them all. If we're going to ride the field again tomorrow to get the rest of the cows we might as well sit in the shade today, drink beer, and rest.

Gather **all** of the cattle

Again it seems obvious, but again I have ridden with people who think that it is sufficient to gather *most* of the cattle. And again, if we don't get them **all** on this sweep we will have to ride again. As much as I love my horses, I really get grouchy when I have to do a job all over again the second time.

Yes, we want the cattle on the far ridge, and the ones down in that gulch – *everything that is within this fence*. If we leave any behind we may be splitting cow/calf pairs, and we will have to ride the **whole** field again. *Most* of the cattle is not good enough – are you satisfied with 90% of a haircut?

Maintain the flow

Flow is the essence of working cattle efficiently. Once the leaders head out it is fairly easy to throw in more behind them, and it doesn't require much pushing to keep them moving. In most cases one man can bend the herd in the right direction, and another one or two can keep the laggards moving.

And as one man can bend the herd in the *right* direction, one man – or one dog – can destroy the flow. A common occurrence is for a rider to swing around the herd to open a gate. That presence affects the flow in the same way a leaf-blower affects a pile of leaves – far enough away is barely felt, but swinging in front of a herd can cause the cows to turn inside out, requiring the riders to start them up all over again.

Speaking of gates, it is usually better to leave them shut until the herd is gathered and the riders are ready to control the cattle as they spread into the next field. Open them too soon and the leaders are scattered before the

laggards are through the gate. I often push a small bunch of cows past a gate, open it, then circle around the cows and bring them back through. Letting them drift past the gate only requires changing directions once to bring them back through, while circling *ahead* of them to open the gate will turn them inside out, and require you to circle around them and turn them back a *second* time.

Anticipate.

Cattle are drawn to, and repelled from, a number of different things. In order to maintain the flow past a patch of brush you need to anticipate where the cows are about to head and get there *before* they build momentum in that direction. A few horses and dogs cannot *really* force a herd of cows to go anywhere, so you must influence them before the idea is too strong in their heads.

Keep an eye on their attitude and try to understand which direction they are seeking escape – and they are looking for escape. The art of working cattle is in understanding *where to be* in relationship to them in order that their escape from your presence is in a direction that suits your purpose.

Don't "lane" a bunch-quitter

If a critter breaks out of the herd it's generally best to let a single rider from further back in the herd come up and turn him back in. If a second rider joins the chase from the opposite side of the critter he'll have pressure from *both* sides, causing him to run further and faster. He needs pressure only from the outside, with clear space to return to the herd.

Be flexible

The plans that are laid out at the beginning of a gather are based on assumptions of where the cattle are, how they will move, and where you are headed – these assumptions often turn out to be erroneous.

It is important to understand where you want to end up with the cattle, and where the other riders are. But be prepared to change your plans if the cattle are

not where they were expected to be, or if they move out in an unanticipated direction. There may be your cattle on the other side of the fence, or the neighbor's cattle mixed in with yours. They may all be bunched in the corner where only one rider was sent. The cattle may want to brush up, or they may want to run in whatever direction they think you don't want them to be.

Don't Crowd

Pushing cattle down a trail or through a gate is like dumping potato chips out of a small hole in the bag: if you try to dump them all at once they just bridge up and hang there— but if you gently shake the bag you can coax the chips out in a steady stream. Cattle are best handled strung out, with riders along the sides to keep things moving. Pushing too hard from the back just bunches them up, and has little effect on the leaders.

Be observant

What class of cattle are you moving – cows with calves, yearlings, dry cows? Are there bulls in the bunch? What brands are on the cattle – are they all branded the same? Are the cows young, old, mixed ages? Are they mostly one color? Does the odd colored cow have the same brand as the rest? Are the eartags all the same? Is there one dry cow among all the pairs? Is anyone lame, in poor condition, breathing hard? Is there a yearling that doesn't belong in this group of cows and calves?

Is the fence down anywhere? Is the water running nicely into the tank? Is the drain plugged up? Is the pipe leaking? Did the magpies just fly up off a carcass in the brush? Is that animal off by itself in another direction?

Don't try too hard to help

Cattle need space to move out. If you are trying too hard to prove your ability as a "hand" you are likely to crowd the cattle and interrupt the flow.

Working cattle is a lifelong learning experience. You aren't expected to know it all until you've spent years in the business. Your presence in the gather will be much better appreciated if you maintain a "learning" attitude. Remember: It is better to sit on the fence and be suspected a fool than to jump into the corral and remove all doubt.