

SHOULD WE BE SCARED OF COWS?

Cows, horses and deer are normally docile creatures. But their large frames and occasional tempers can make walking through a field of them an intimidating prospect. **Matthew Pike** discovers how to keep the peace

I've never liked cows. Ever since, as a traumatised youngster being dropped off after school, I had to walk through a field of cattle to reach my front door. I would pray the bull – motionless, huge and angry – was well out of my path. Otherwise I'd just wait... and wait.

I was also told to be wary of cows. 'Never stand between a cow and its calf or it might run at you' – a terrifying thing to be told when a cow, to a six-year-old, is the size of an elephant.

These haunting messages were echoed in a far more recent chat to Katie Milne, who's a national board member for Federated Farmers of New Zealand.

She says the vast majority of encounters with livestock will involve them either trying to avoid you or approaching you only out of curiosity. However, this inquisitiveness can lead to problems, especially with groups of young animals.

"Young groups of bullocks or heifers may run up to you because they're inquisitive, but if someone isn't used to this they might run," Milne explains. "If you do this they'll want to run with you so there's a chance you could get trampled." Even if you don't run, people have been known to be inadvertently kicked by playful adolescents. Milne says playful animals sometimes climb on each other, so there's always the possibility you might face the awful prospect of being mounted by a bullock.

Far bigger, and no more predictable, are the bulls. "They're also inquisitive," says Milne. "But they're strong and aggressive and can pound you into the ground." Be particularly alarmed by the sight of several bulls in one field. They could be fighting for dominance and see your presence as a threat.

"Once bulls are into the mating season they become more possessive and aggressive – all animals can be aggressive at this time," explains Milne.

"But this is the extreme end of the scale. Generally, animals are OK so long as you give them space."

If you get too close, bulls may give you a warning. "They might shake their head and roar at you, or paw the ground," says Milne. "But you can't rely on them doing this all the time, so give them as much distance as you can."

It appears the advice I was given about sep-



Docile, so long as you give them space

arating a cow from its young was also sound. "Cows are very protective of their young," explains Milne, "especially old beef cows which can rush you. They can run faster than you think and can chase you a long way."

But it isn't just cows that you need to be wary of. Climbing the deer fence in autumn was a real 'no no' when I was a child. One can only imagine the damage a stag can cause with those antlers. But the hinds can also be aggressive. "A hind can beat you to a pulp if they decide you're a threat to its fawn," warns Milne.

"Don't approach a fawn, calf or lamb. The mother may be feeding in the distance and new fawns may even be tempted to follow you."

Horses are also too big to argue with. But they tend to warn you if they're in a shoddy mood by lifting their head up and pinning their ears flat onto their head. "They'll lash out with their hind legs too," says Milne. "They don't like something standing behind them – they think it's a wolf or a coyote about to attack them and they have a natural instinct to kick."

Even sheep can get aggressive if you stand in the wrong place on the wrong day. "A ram or a ewe with lambs can give you a good knock and take your legs out," explains Milne. "They can weigh 80-100kg so it's like a beer keg being thrown at your legs."

Of course, these incidents are extremely rare – when did you last hear of a trumper's legs being cleaned out by a ram? But Milne feels it's important people are aware of what can happen, saying there are certain precautions to take to reduce the risks.

This starts with contacting the farmer, where possible. "If you ring them up, they can warn you if there's a bull in a paddock with some heifers and give advice," says Milne.

Avoiding a paddock with livestock is ideal but not always possible or feasible. So, failing that: "Head through quietly, making no sudden movements and give the animals a wide berth," advises Milne.

Staying close to a fence is a good idea because it offers a useful escape route and it's also wise to unclip your pack so you can quickly ditch it if necessary.

They say talking to yourself is the first sign of madness, but it may benefit you when traipsing through a livestock-filled paddock. "Talking to yourself or your walking partner allows the animals to hear you coming, so they don't get startled," suggests Milne, who warns not to run if you're approached by curious animals.

If you find yourself in a situation where you're surrounded and feel threatened then, in extreme circumstances, Milne suggests putting your arms over your head to make yourself look bigger and shouting in a strong voice. This will normally disperse the animals but *can* have the opposite effect. "It can make them grumpy in some cases, so this is only a last resort."

Walking with small children increases the risk of livestock becoming aggressive because the animals may mistake the child for a dog – the ultimate predator. Putting the child on your shoulders, suggests Milne, means you know where the child is at all times and will make you look like an even bigger animal that's not to be messed with.

Incidents are rare, and normally involve farmers in close quarters, rather than walkers or trampers in open paddocks. But giving animals plenty of space, passing them calmly and quietly, and staying close to a fence, will reduce the chances of a livestock confrontation to virtually zero. Oh, and if you have a six-year-old, don't make them walk through a bull field on their way home from school – it will traumatise them for life. **cw**

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