



Halter Training Calves

From very young to older calves

For small farms like ours, the best investment you can make is to halter train your animals. Once they are halter trained, they will never forget it. Highlands are known to be very smart and easily trained, and our experience has proven that to be true. Sue Dyke from Almosta Farm showed us that she leaves neck straps on all her animals. She can walk up to any of them, including her bulls that tend to outgrow halters, and lead them to where she needs them to go with the collars. We have found that this works well on our farm. They don't outgrow collars near as fast as they do halters!

For the easiest time halter training your calves, handle them starting immediately after they are born (or as soon as the mother will allow you to). This just means lots of scratching and rubbing, without a halter. This way they are not afraid of you. That makes training a million times easier.

Normally by 6-8 weeks of age we put halters on them and begin walking around with them. At first we just want them to feel like they can walk with you so we follow where they want to go. Slowly, over days or weeks (depending on the animal), we start to influence where they go. If they stop and refuse, either applying pressure on the lead while running the lead rope through your hands, or jiggling the rope will generally get them moving again. We never want to get into a fight with them by pulling on the rope and playing tug-of-war with them. Once they get to a certain age, they will win every time. If you can make it their idea to move because the bouncing rope or rhythmic pressure from you pulling the rope through your hand is annoying to them, you have gotten what you wanted/needed without them feeling like you made them do something. There is a big difference between asking an animal to do something, and making them do something.

We have started three calves born on our place and they were all very different animals that needed different things – but this is always where we start. Even with older animals we start here and progress as needed in their training. No two animals will ever be the same.

Another important part of this is just learning to be tied up. We will tie up animals who are not used to it while we are outside working, or doing chores. Often we will also feed them a special treat (like alfalfa hay) so they begin to look forward to it. This helps with both leading and tying. Be sure to use something sturdy when starting out so that they understand that when they are tied up they need to stand there. Pulling will get them nowhere.

If you get an older animal, you can still halter train them. The oldest we have worked with has been about 9 months old and about 600 lbs. If animals are used to being handled, you generally shouldn't have too much trouble training them. Most times, they have come from a larger herd where they have not been handled. Your first job is to earn their trust. This may take anywhere from a few days to a few

weeks. The number one tool you have is a small pen. Ours is 14'x14'. They will eventually figure out you aren't so bad. Especially when you feed them twice a day. We go in the pen with them as soon as we feel it is safe to do so. You don't need to do anything – let them approach you. You need to talk to them in a calm manner so they get used to your voice. At first don't move, just let them sniff and lick if they want. Soon you will be able to slowly reach out and scratch them. Move slowly and steadily. Their neck is a favorite spot for scratching. Highlands in general don't like their heads or horns touched, as their hairy dossen blocks their vision and they will only see the motion and not your hand and probably shy away.

Getting the actual halter on them can be problematic. Mark generally does this and it isn't an easy task if you don't have a headgate. They can object quite strongly to something going over their muzzle. We generally use a control halter when they are untrained so they understand that they need to stop.

**Caution – calves grow very fast and you must check this every day or 2 to make sure that it is not too tight.* Once you can, tie the animal up as discussed above. This is a wonderful tool that will help you in your training.

Sometimes an animal can be strong enough, or scared enough, that they drag you around. If tying doesn't stop this, you may need to move up to the next tool – a motorized vehicle. You basically tie them up to the back of a Gator or some other utility vehicle and drive around very slowly. Safety for you and the animal are the most important, so make sure that there is nothing for the animal to get caught on or cut on when they are tied to the vehicle. Make sure they cannot climb over the vehicle and get to you or get hurt themselves. Slow and steady wins here, too. You want them to understand they can't get away. We have only done this with one animal that was bigger and just would not stop running away. The other two animals we have brought home who haven't been used to people were easily trained by just going slowly with them.

The general key is to preserve the animal's dignity. That helps them build trust in you.

Remember that animals survive by reading body language. The cattle around our feeder know when the boss cow is headed their way and they need to move, or when she is just passing by, because they read her body language. If they don't – they get pushed out of the way with her horns. If you, as a person, are uptight or full of energy, chances are the cattle will read that and be a little wound up, too. The key is understanding what your energy does to the animal. Knowing that will make your job a little easier.

Try to end all sessions on a positive note, however, if you or the animal are frustrated and tired, stop before things get worse.

Happy Training!!