

## **Cows and drinking water**

### **Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group May 2006**

We are putting together a plan to get Studland Heath grazed using old shepherding techniques. We will have a shepherd (or rather cowherd) guiding cattle around different parts of this huge (750ha) site. Does anyone have any thoughts on how frequently cattle should have water to drink, whilst still maintaining good welfare standards? This could have big effect on the grazing "route" taken by the shepherd, and of course on the structure of the days grazing.

David Hodd  
Countryside Manager, Purbeck Estate

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Hi David -

Interesting project -- I'd be interested to come and see it.

They will drink quite often, but if they have to walk a bit to the water I think they manage with once a day or so.

Will your herdperson have a dog? Are the cattle trained to follow?

Richard Collingridge

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One factor would be whether the cows were lactating or not - obviously if they are being suckled/milked the need for water goes up sharply.

Henry Campbell-Ricketts

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Just from my past experience on the Ribble Marshes NNR (1000 acres), cattle need access to a water supply at all times. On the marsh they came to the troughs regularly and on hot days almost the entire herd of nearly 1000 beasts were in the vicinity of the troughs after having drunk. I think I recall the 'scorelooker' or Marsh Herd used the daily water trip as part of his daily checking routine it also alerted him to animals not coming in for whatever reason. On a salt marsh they had to come to the troughs for water anyway and the troughs were located close to the nearest available water supply. So yes I would think that where the water troughs or any other water supplies are located is important and will help to dictate how the animals use the site and the Herdsmans routine. Hope that helps.

Frank Mawby

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As far as I'm concerned cattle should always have access to water.

We use a big bowser on wheels which can be towed by a landy on the flat or tractor on slopes.

We find this quite an easy system to manage on two 300ha sites. If the stockman is with the stock anyway then this should be even easier to organise.

Rob Havard  
Conservation Officer  
Malvern Hills Conservators

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Cattle drink a vast amount of water. We have several bowzers and the largest, which I think is 1000gal, needs refilling weekly to keep 7 8-month old calves or 4 2year old steers supplied.

Years ago I worked on a farm where the cattle were housed in an old-fashioned byre on tethers, and were allowed out once a day to drink, and they were perfectly healthy, but I can't imagine anything other than an ad lib supply being acceptable these days.

Cathy

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Hi -

There's a difference between what water is needed for health and comfort, and what cattle will do if given water ad lib.

I agree that where cattle have easy access to water all the time they will drink quite often. However, this does not mean that they need to do so, nor that we have to go to a lot of trouble to make sure they do.

I agree that milking cattle do need more, particularly dairy animals -- after all they use several gallons of liquid just for the milk.

I think watering once or twice a day is probably adequate for dry animals. I think "always" having access to water is probably unnecessary for extensive stock.

How far are these cattle likely to be from water on a 750 ha site? 500 m? 1 km? Even that's only 20 minutes' walk, so I'd have thought one watering point on the site was ample -- or once on the way out and once on the way back, if they're herded from a base each day. Anyway, I the herdsman would soon know if the cattle thought they were thirsty.

Another consideration is size of water trough. If stock have constant access, a small trough will do fine as it has plenty of time between animals to refill. However, if you have a bunch all drinking at once, it needs to be a good bit bigger -- apparently a cow will drink up to 10 l or so in one go, and needs half a metre of trough space to do it.

Cathy -- Could your bowser be 1000 litres rather than 1000 gallons? This would work out at about 35 litres a day each for the steers, which I think is much what our cattle use when in the yard ( and seems to be similar to published figures).

An interesting article (though as always written from an intensive farming point of view, and of course not about herded stock):  
<http://www.noble.org/Ag/Livestock/WaterConcerns/index.html>.

Regards,

Richard

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In Africa on the advice of the Samburu I watered cattle once every three days but these were not lactating. The Samburu said that this could be stretched to once every five days. This was using the humped boran cattle, on 45,000 acres with 1000 out of 3.5K on this regime I am pretty sure that cattle water every day on the King Ranch in Texas using their Santa Getrudas hybrid, but that is neatly fenced into square mile blocks.-if they drill too deep black stuff comes up and not water, so they do their sums a bit differently and only drill depending on the state of their oil deletion allowance. !

If you can give the cattle water once a day that seems okay for UK breeds but when they do get to water they need ready access to ensure none gets bullied and so do not get to the water. It is possible that some breeds are more water dependent than others but once a day is sure to be okay.

In very dry times you will see cattle drinking each other's urine. This increases the urea in the gut increasing digestion of dry coarse grass and so may not indicate being desperately thirsty.

If you could organise a large tanker and take the water to them it prevents the water sites being hammered. Old milk tankers go quite cheap I am told. You rig up half a dozen water bowls on the tanker. If you want a second hand Unimog to pull it let me know . This would mean you only need a ring fence

This allows selection of where gets grazed, and when, as the cattle follow the water tanker. The larger the tanker the better as you can take several days supply but 44 tons of water weighs a bit and then you get stuck. If your water supply is only a trickle then the tanker will not fill up over night. Then you need a tank to fill the tanker and life gets difficult and expensive

Maybe you can toot your horn when they are watering and so attract them to new locations of the tanker. Cattle in Africa can smell water for several miles but I would not bet on that here.

Be prepared to cull any cow that tries to be a dog in the manger and stop others watering.

website [www.allspeeds.co.uk](http://www.allspeeds.co.uk) seems to be advertising a series of companies that specialise in water engineering.I get hydram valves from Blakes but they do not go in for anything modern like credit cards as they did not use them 100 years ago and see no reason to start now. Given the fiddles and frauds that seems quite a good idea !

Regards  
Richard

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David. will the cattle be able to use the emergency water supplies?. I remember there are a few around so that the daily walk could include a few opportunities to drink during the day?  
graham

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Some good points here to consider.

The cows will be old cows, no longer breeding ("The Studland retirement home for Gentle Red Devons"). There will be about 15 of them. As you say Graham, there are some emergency water supplies that they can draw from (but not drain, as they are part of the fire prevention measures on the site) - and of course Littlesea will be a valuable drinking hole. Bowsering water will be tricky as much of the ground is not even quad bikeable - too hummocky. One of the challenges will also be ensuring the cattle can cross the ferry road safely. The road cuts the heath in half along its length, and has either cars bombing down to catch the Sandbanks ferry, or queues of cars waiting for it. Watering holes, particularly on the west side of the road are few and far between.

Oh yes, and we will need to maintain the Freedom Foods accreditation they currently enjoy - which is why I want to see what others can advise.

David Hodd  
Countryside Manager, Purbeck Estate

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Hi David,  
Durwyn just brought my attention to your message. I'd be happy to check my phd data on the cattle at Hartland and Arne for frequency of drinking etc, as habitat and weather etc would be similar. Give me a call if you are interested. Can also show you the cattle routes between grazing/resting/drinking/shade areas etc on the map info files or aerals too which might give you some ideas for designing herding routes.

Cheers, Sophie

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I agree with other correspondents who say that cattle should ideally have access to water at all times. Apart from anything else, I think we have to be very careful not to add to an impression in some peoples minds that 'extensive' or 'conservation' grazing necessarily equates to lower standards of animal health than grazing improved grasslands. Whether or not cattle can remain healthy with access to water only once or twice a day, the fact is that they will suffer discomfort if they have to do so, and this could be particularly severe in hot weather. We should avoid knowingly inflicting discomfort on livestock - severe or otherwise.

Francis

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