

March 6, 2021

Tales From The Tale End

It seems that humans give animals a lot of credit as weather predictors. I read once in an old farmer's almanac that said, "When rabbits are fat in October and November, expect a long, cold winter." I think every animal's desire is to have a full stomach. It sure is that way on my farm. When it comes feeding time there are several mouths telling me it is time to eat. Even the cats with food in front of them will be yowling around for more. Their desire to be fat is not a product of the weather it is just natural for all animals.

Another predictor said, "If the bull leads the cows to pasture, expect rain; if the cows precede the bull, the weather will be uncertain." I never have seen my bull be the first in the pasture in 25 years. He is always following the cows. That's what bulls do.

However, there are several hands-down signals animals give us that can be interpreted easily. Several of them come from the southbound end of a northbound animal. That is right, the rear end. The direction of the wind is an easy one to read. Horses seem to be the best at telling you which way the wind is from. On a somewhat windy day, all the horses will be facing the same way with their rears to the wind. They will also give you some indication of the wind chill. The closer the tail is tucked to the body the lower the wind chill value. It is not being tucked to protect it, but to serve as an insulator for the rump. Here are some other signals the horsetail will give you: High: they are alert or excited; Low: it is a sign of exhaustion, fear, pain or submission; Held high over its back: (as seen in most foals) they are playful or are very alarmed; Swishing: they are irritated.

Flies are usually an irritant to animals. For all animals, tails are a major weapon in fly discouragement. Watching animals stand around in groups with tails a flying means flies. Lots of money and time are spent in trying to discourage flies on livestock. Flies on cattle could cost a producer \$50 or more in lost production and make the animals' life miserable. If there is no tail swishing, then winter has arrived. The back end of an animal can also tell you how green the grass is. That could also be a type of weather indicator. Lush, wet spring grass comes out the back end in watery squirts. One thing you learn on a farm is not to stand behind a cow on a green pasture. Especially if they have a cough. That quadruples the range of the manure deposit.

Finally, there is one thing I have seen on cattle in winter, an abundance of frozen manure on the tail. You can even find this in the summer where dried manure balls are intertwined in the hairs of the tail. All that weight cuts down on the tail swishing. Once that happens they are no longer swatting but throwing a wrecking ball at summer flies. Not very effective, so it is up to the owner to remove it via soaking or cutting the hairs. When you start working with the rear end of an animal you are working with the dangerous part. I know of no study where a radar gun recorded the speed of a cow kick. I am sure they more than match the speed of any big-league baseball fastball pitcher. From my personal experience, they are much more powerful and unforgettable.

Mark Kepler

Extension Educator- Agriculture and Natural
Resources Purdue Cooperative Extension Service-
Fulton County 1009 West Third Street
Rochester IN 46975

574 223 3397 <http://www.ag.purdue.edu/counties/fulton/pages/default.aspx>

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