

Cow calls

It's not easy being weaned

by Suzanne Robicheau

On a cold, clear night in late November I stood in the dark yard behind our house —one hand in my pocket and the other clamped firmly around the handle of the retractable leash that prevents my Golden Retriever, Jake, from propelling himself into the compost heap.

In the distance, I could hear the repetitive call of a Barred owl, and the faint scrabble of a car's tires on gravel. Then there was another sound, and as I listened it grew louder and louder until it filled the air. It was a sound I had heard before, but it had never been so plaintive and it had never been at night, and suddenly the woods behind the house looked darker and more ominous.

Jake isn't exactly the sensitive type, but even he seemed uneasy, and when he gave a tug on his leash, I was more than ready to bolt up the steps behind him and into the kitchen where my husband sat forlornly trying to crack the last few pistachios in a bowl.

"What time do cows go to bed," I asked without preamble.

To my husband's credit he didn't miss a beat. "Week nights or weekends?" he asked.

I thought for a second. It was a Monday night. "Week nights," I replied.

"Don't know," he said.

"Oh, alright," I conceded, "weekends."

"Still don't know," said my husband. "Why?"

"Because the cows on the farm down the road are still awake," I told him, "and they're making quite a racket. Just poke your head out the door and you'll see what I mean."

My husband walked to the back door,

That night I woke several times to the bawling of cows, and when it continued the following morning, I ignored my husband's advice and called the farm.

The farmer's wife answered on the first ring and I introduced myself. "I'm the woman who buys your pickles and eggs," I said by way of clarification.

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"I bring you empty jam jars and egg cartons and once I picked up your sign when the wind blew it over," I added.

Still nothing.

"I live in the old Hastie House," I explained, reverting to the standard way my husband and I have learned to identify ourselves since moving to Nova Scotia.

"Oh hello," said the farmer's wife.

"I'm calling about the cows that were making so much noise last night," I told her.

There was another silence.

"I'm not calling to complain," I said in a rush. "The noise didn't bother us. It's just that I've never heard your cows at night before and I was worried."

"It was an awful racket," she said.

"What was it?" I asked her.

She explained that once a year in the fall they separate the cows from their calves.

"We did it last night," she said, "and the sound you heard was the sound of mommies missing their babies and babies missing their mommies."



(Brian McKibbin illustration)

poked his head out and listened. Then he returned to his chair at the kitchen table and resumed his examination of pistachio shells.

"Well," I said impatiently. "What do you think?"

"It's definitely cows," he replied.

"But do you think they're in trouble?" I asked. "Do you think there's something after them? Do you think I should call the farmer to warn him?"

"No, no, and definitely no," said my husband.

The Weaning Two-Step

“That’s terrible,” I said. “Were the bulls crying too?” My question was sparked by the movie “March of the Penguins,” and the heart-wrenching attachment the male penguins have for their offspring.

The farmer’s wife laughed.

“There were two bulls in the field last night,” she said, “but you wouldn’t have heard them. They don’t care about any of that.”

I thanked her and hung up, forgetting all about cows until a few nights later when I heard the same plaintive bawling. It was too late to call the farm so instead I went to the Internet, where after wading through some unfortunate information about body piercing, I discovered an article called “Weaning Two-Step.”

Although it may sound like a lively country dance move, the weaning two-step – or two-step weaning – is actually a method for reducing the stress that calves and cows experience at weaning time. The first step is for farmers to fit their ready-to-be-weaned calves with reusable nose flaps that allow the calves to drink and graze, but prevent them from sucking. The second step is to separate the calves from their mothers a few days later, eliminating the dramatic behavioral changes that result from traditional cold turkey weaning practices.

The next morning I went straight to the farm, and arrived as the farmer’s wife was handing a flat of eggs to a customer.

“Have you come to check on our cows?” she laughed, turning to explain to her visitor that I was the one who had called a few days earlier to inquire about the herd.

“I heard them again last night,” I said.

“You heard cows,” she said, “but they weren’t our cows. The farm down the road usually separates its calves out a few days later than we do. We should get together next year to have all the racket over at once.”

“There’s another way to stop the racket,” I said enthusiastically. “Has anyone around here ever put weaning rings in the calves’ noses for a few days before separating them from their mothers?”

“Weaning rings in their noses,” she repeated, shaking her head. “I don’t think so.”

Derek Haley has been writing and talking about the benefits of two-step weaning since 2001 when research for his PhD at the University of Saskatchewan revealed a surprising fact: the stress that calves experience at weaning time is more about missing their mothers than it is about missing their mother’s milk.

In traditional weaning, the cow and calf pair exhibit dramatic behavioral changes when they are physically separated. They bawl more, eat less, and search for each other. Some calves even get sick. What Haley discovered was that the cow-calf pair can be separated with little fuss at all by using a two-step weaning method in which the calves are left with their mothers for a few days after being fitted with nose flaps that prevent sucking.

“The use of some kind of device to prevent nursing is not new,” says Haley, who is now an Assistant Professor of Applied Animal Behavior at the University of Alberta, “but everyone has been under the impression that artificial weaning is stressful. This discovery says otherwise.”

According to Haley, five days is a sufficient length of time for calves to wear the weaning flaps before they are separated from their mothers.

“The benefit is gained quickly,” he says, “so there’s no need to keep the flaps on a long time.”

As well, when wearing the nose flaps for a shorter time, the calf is less likely to experience irritation and redness. ●

“Never heard tell of them,” said her customer.

“Where did you see them?” asked the farmer’s wife.

“I didn’t see them,” I confessed. “I read about them last night.”

“You can learn a lot from reading,” she said. “Last year I read that it’s better to raise piglets in outside pens.”

She told us she kept after her husband until he built her an outdoor pen for their pigs. “It was beside a pond,” she said, “and there was a water container so the little piglets could drink from a nipple. They were so happy, running and rolling in the mud.”

Then the little pigs started to dig because that’s what pigs do.

“They dug to the bottom of the electric fence,” she said, “and right underneath and then they ran off.”

After that her husband spent hours digging a deeper trench for the electric wire and then more time shoring up the pen, and when the piglets went back into the pen they didn’t seem to care that they could no longer dig their way out.

“They kept right on playing until it was time to go inside to be weighed,” she said, “and then guess what? Because of all that wonderful exercise they were much smaller than the pigs we raised the year before in the barn, and even after we fed them for a few days, the average weight was still down and we lost close to \$300.”

“I guess you’ll keep them inside next year,” I said.

“I guess we will,” she replied.

“But they must have had fun,” I told her.

“They did have fun,” she said, “and I had almost as much fun watching them.”

That night at dinner I tried to explain the fine points of calf weaning to my husband. I told him about a study in which calves were separated from their mothers and then paired with other mothers.

“And they still bawled for days,” I said, “so it’s not about missing the milk.”

“I’m still not sure I get it,” said my husband.

“Think of it this way,” I told him. “Each night we have some wine with dinner.”

He nodded happily, reaching for his glass.

“How would you feel if you were taken to another house for dinner and I wasn’t there and there was no wine?”

“I wouldn’t like it,” he said promptly.

“But, what if there was another woman in the new house and she offered you a glass of wine?” I asked.

“I still wouldn’t like it,” he protested, although with less conviction.

“Good answer,” I told him. “Cheers.”

(Suzanne Robicheau lives in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.) ●