



ADVICE FOR THE PUBLIC WHEN ENCOUNTERING GRAZING CATTLE ON FOOTPATHS & OPEN MOORLAND ON DARTMOOR

It is inevitable that walking, picnicking or enjoying recreation on areas of open land such as Dartmoor, that you might come into contact with grazing animals that could pose a risk to your safety, notably cattle.

It is important to recognise that they were here before you, and that you have entered their 'home'.

It is also important to acknowledge that it is mostly down to their grazing and treading that the moorland is kept open and accessible to the public in the first place. Without them, unless mechanical flails are constantly at work, it would be difficult to penetrate the vegetation more than a few yards from car parks and roadsides.

The cattle themselves

Most of the cattle you will see will be 'beef sucklers', which means that are 'mother cows', who rear their own calves. They tend to live in extended matriarchies, where mothers and their sisters and daughters graze together as a herd. The extensive system you see on Dartmoor is very close to how cattle would graze in nature.

Bulls

It is forbidden to graze bulls on Dartmoor's commons, although you may very well encounter a bull on 'newtakes' with public access, and on footpaths* across enclosed land (*Dairy breed bulls are forbidden to be on footpaths).

As a rule, beef breed bulls are very docile, unless you bother them, they will have no interest in you. They are unlikely to be horned, and may or may not have a metal ring in their nose.

They are usually easily spotted though, with thickset shoulders and neck, often with thick curly hair on the head and neck. They may be heard grumbling and bellowing, but this is usually no more than a warning to other bulls in the vicinity.

The risks of cattle attack

Thankfully, there are very few actual attacks, given the number of cattle and people who meet on Dartmoor. Many of the cattle herds see so many people that they seldom give humans much attention.

The highest risk is from mother cows anxious to defend their calves from a perceived threat. The newer the calf, the more this natural tendency is likely to manifest itself. As they are herd animals, other cows might come to the aid of a cow who feels threatened.

Almost without exception, cow attacks have happened when a dog is present, or has lately been amongst the cattle.

Occasionally, groups of young cattle (yearlings) might be encountered, and can be boisterous and inquisitive. While they may very well pose a risk by inadvertently bowling you over or standing on you, it is extremely unlikely that they will mean to harm you, or follow through with a deliberate attack.

Best practise generally

- As a rule, give cattle as wide a berth as you practically can
- If they are blocking your route, can you walk around them?
- If you have a dog with you, keep it on a short lead and quiet. Give any cows a wider berth still.
- If you have a dog and encounter cows with very young calves, consider finding an alternative route.
- If you yourself are infirm or not very mobile, and you have a dog, and go amongst cows with calves, you are taking a much higher risk.
- Assess the circumstances for yourself and plan accordingly.

Danger signs and what to do should the worst happen

It is almost impossible to anticipate every scenario, but here are some points that may help you –

- Cows peacefully grazing or sat chewing the cud are generally going to be contented and relaxed.
- Cows who become agitated are likely to hold their heads high, moving them from side to side. They will have flared nostrils and an alarmed look. Their lowing (calls) will not sound like a relaxed moo.

- As their mood deteriorates, they might well hold their heads down with snouts tilted back toward their chest. They may snort, bellow and throw clods of earth up with their front feet.
- If you encounter this behaviour, and you hardly need to be an expert to recognise it, you should retire as deftly as you can. Speak calmly to the cow.
- Should a cow/s actually attack you, and you have your dog on the lead, let the dog go. It is possible the cow will focus her interest on the dog.
- Many cattle farmers carry a stick when handling cattle, and will swat an aggressive cow across her snout should she give trouble. This won't harm the cow other than smarting a bit, but critically release endorphins which calm her.

What are farmers doing?

Farmers on Dartmoor, as elsewhere, have been mindful that public safety should be considered. They work at breeding quieter cattle, both with the breeds they keep and by selecting better natured replacements. Likewise, handling and working methods are analysed to ensure the herds you see are kept as docile as possible.

Advice Note prepared and adopted by Dartmoor Commoners' Council

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