

The Story Of... Cattle

The most **emblematic** livestock animal of the all-conquering Eurasian agricultural package, the modern cow is descended from an ancient wild ancestor that was native throughout Europe, Asia and North Africa at the end of the Ice Age, and domesticated by the earliest Neolithic farmers around 8000 years ago.

Cattle were not the first large mammals to be domesticated by humans – they were probably beaten to the punch by goats and sheep – but it is the humble cow, and her partner, the ox, who have made the greatest impact on agricultural productivity around the world.

Cattle are the most **versatile** domesticated animals on the planet. When killed for meat, their carcass yields oil, fat, bone, twine and other useful materials, while their hides give us leather for clothes, shoes and shelter. During their lifespan they provide milk, which can be turned into cream, butter, cheese and yogurt; they can bear heavy loads, or pull plows and carts; they tolerate being tethered to other animals and improve their load-bearing capacity as a result; they provide tons of nutritious fertilizer and consume some of the by-products of **arable** farming. Before the industrial revolution, beasts of burden like the humble cow were the most powerful machines on the planet.

So how did they ever become domesticated, and placed under human control?

As Jared Diamond observes in his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* – Domesticable animals are all alike [but] every undomesticable animal is undomesticable in its own way. Incredibly, of the millions of species of animals that exist in our world, only 14 large mammals have ever been domesticated. That's because they were the only 14 to fulfill all four basic criteria for domestication. And none fulfilled them as magnificently as the cow.

What do you look for in a domesticated animal?

1. Size

Domesticated animals have got to be large, to be worth the effort of human control. Their primary purpose, after all, is to provide their owners with a steady and reliable source of meat – and there's not much meat on a mouse, or a monkey. Livestock might also be required to bear heavy weights – including human riders – or pull a heavy load, so, by default, most Domesticated mammals tend to weigh over 100 pounds. Modern cattle can weigh anywhere between 800 and 4000 pounds, whilst their ancestor, the aurochs (*Bos Primigenius*), was even larger, standing more than 6 feet tall at the shoulder.

Symbolic

Able to adapt or be adapted

Growing crops in fields, which have usually been ploughed before planting.

2. Temperament

It's no good trying to catch and domesticate a large load-bearing mammal, if it's got a nasty temper! Any animal weighing over 100 pounds is capable of killing a man with a single kick – so the earliest farmers deliberately targeted those species that tended towards docility amongst humans, and a predictable, herd mentality. Species they ruled out included solitary predators like large wild cats; gazelle, whose tendency to panic and bolt made them impractical to catch and pen; and even relatives of the aurochs, such as the ancestors of modern day bison – unpredictable giant mammals with a habit of stampeding without **provocation**. By contrast, the modern cow is famous for her sweet-natured temperament, content to graze in heavily managed herds, chewing cud and watching the world go by.

Action or speech that makes someone annoyed or angry

3. Growth rate

Large, generally **docile** mammals who then take years to mature, can also be ruled out. To be economically **viable**, domesticated animals should grow quickly and reach their full potential within a few years. This criteria rules out elephants, for example, who can take up to fifteen years to reach adult size. At heart, domestication has an economic incentive, and some propositions are better than others. Cattle take just two or three years to mature.

Submissive

Capable of working successfully

4. Diet

Finally, it's simply a waste of time and effort to feed, raise or capture one animal, only to have to then feed it to another. The best animals for domestication are herbivores, or at a push, omnivores – and the cow will happily eat only grass. She'll also consume a huge proportion of the inedible by-products of arable farming – wheat, barley and rice hay – doing humans an additional favor along the way.

So, what is the wannabe farmer left with?

He must capture a large, docile herbivore, weighing over 100 pounds, content to be part of a herd under human control. Of the fourteen mammals which have ever wholly conformed to this profile, nine of them are still confined to limited parts of the world. Only five have become **ubiquitous** farmyard animals across our planet. Those five are the goat, the sheep, the pig, the horse, and – our champion – the cow. Their ability to provide meat, dairy and draft while reproducing themselves and eating nothing but grass, has made cows a source of wonder throughout human history – objects of worship, even – to which European civilization may owe its very existence.

Appearing, or found everywhere