



Swiss cows in the wild turn slightly mad



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Geneva: Swiss cows have developed a mean streak since being left alone in the wild under a new rearing technique, raising the risk of attack for the unsuspecting rambler.

The classic Swiss postcard scene picturing a happy, brown cow with a bell around its neck munching grass against a backdrop of Swiss mountains is no longer as idyllic as it seems.

In a bid to be more environmentally-friendly, farmers are letting their cows roam freely in the countryside with their calves and a lone bull, said Philippe Cossy, a councillor at the Service for the Prevention of Farm Accidents (SPAA).

"Inevitably, the cow rediscovers her basic instincts, which are much akin to wild animals," he explained.

"She rebuilds self-defence mechanisms and becomes more distrustful and aggressive towards others, be they human or animals," the specialist said.

In a country where agriculture is the most subsidised industry in the world, the Swiss authorities have played a large part in this return to nature.

Faced with excessive supplies of milk, they encouraged farmers to rear cows for meat instead, meaning herds can be left unattended for longer.

"Times have changed," observed Cossy.

"Before, cows were herded back to the stable every evening to be milked, whereas now they are left more and more to their own devices, only returning to the stable in the winter," he said.

Farmers have also abandoned artificial insemination to produce beef that is deemed to be more natural.

"As a result, you must really be careful when a cow is on heat and the bull is instinctively protecting the herd," said Cossy, noting it was a shame rambler failed to tell when cattle were in the mood to mate.

Those who work with farm animals are invariably the first to feel the wrath of the vindictive cow.

One fifth of all farm accidents are the hands or hoofs of the animals, who tend to kick and buck. Some have even flicked their tails into people's eye causing them to take several days off work.

In 2001, the last statistics available, 501 Swiss farm workers were injured by animals -- including cows -- compared with just 240 the previous year.

At the start of July, near Locarno in the south, a 27-year-old farmhand was badly hurt by a cow who charged at him after he petted her calf.

But the one million or so rambler who flock to the Swiss countryside every year are also in danger, as paths take them straight through grazing pastures.

"There are more and more accidents," admitted Cossy.

It most frequently occurs when someone takes their dog for a walk and it starts to bark, prompting the cow to charge in self defence.

If this happens, Cossy advised, it is best to let go of the leash because dogs can run faster than cows so usually escape.

But the owner is often left rather shaken.

The SPAA offers advice to ramblers about the psychology of the cows.

It is important to remember that because the creature has one eye fixed on either side of its head, it has trouble seeing objects directly in front and evaluating distances.

"They scare easily, if someone stands directly ahead or behind a cow the risk of being hit is heightened," said Cossy.

"It is vital that you are seen by the cow, speak softly to it and avoid running or making sudden movements."

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