

TATTOOING CATTLE

FOR PERMANENT IDENTIFICATION

The Society's rules since January 1996, have required that ALL Belted Galloways be tattooed in the left ear (or optionally both ears) before registration or recordation. Proper identification at birth and legible tattoos are essential to maintaining accurate parentage and production records. As a reminder, a readable tattoo is a requirement with the Belted Galloway Society.

Tattooing can be done any time before registering, although it's best done when the animals are young. Twig Mason, director of the Northeast Extension and Research Center and professor of ruminant nutrition for the University of Nebraska, recommends tattooing calves before 3 months of age. "The younger you tattoo a calf, the more legible the tattoo will be," says Twig. "The tattoo will grow as the calf gets older, making it easier to read."

Twig says successful tattooing is a result of proper technique and the completion of a series of steps. Here are some steps that can be taken to help ensure a legible tattoo.

Proper equipment

Success starts with having the necessary tattooing equipment. Before beginning, a breeder should have a complete set of number and letter characters. Sets of tattoo characters have one of each number (0-9) and letter (A-Z), so you may have to purchase more than one set. Tattoo equipment can be purchased from a livestock supply dealer.

Remember that both the farm tattoo code and the tattoo number and year designation need to be tattooed and legible.

There are a variety of different types of tattoo pliers, which use removable digits, on the market. Some pliers have revolving heads and will hold two different tattoos at once. You'll need a rag or a sponge and some rubbing alcohol to clean out the ear before you apply the tattoo.

Tattoo ink, green works best with Belted Galloways, is critical in getting a readable and permanent tattoo. With the aid of a toothbrush, the ink can be worked into a fresh tattoo easily.

A good working chute is also critical to a legible tattoo. The chute

should restrain the animal from making quick head movements. "The only stress on the animal during the tattoo process comes from poor restraint," Twig says. "For a readable tattoo to happen, the animal must hold still and be kept from moving its head."

Ready to begin

Once you have the calf in the working chute, check your records and establish the tattoo that will identify the calf. Place the corresponding digits in your pliers. Twig suggests checking the tattoo on something like a piece of cardboard or an old feed sack. Otherwise, you run the risk of incorrectly tattooing the calf.

Check to make sure that all of your digits make an even perforation. One common mistake breeders make is not throwing away dull, broken or hair-matted characters. Such digits do not allow for deep penetration into the ear tissue.

Cleaning the ear and ridding it of all wax and dirt in the next step. Twig says the key to a good tattoo is a clean ear. "To really do a good job, you need to clean out that ear with alcohol," Twig stresses. "You can't get a tattoo to take with all the wax and dirt that is normally in the ear."

The ear should be dry before moving on to the next step - applying ink. The recommendation is to tattoo the animal in the upper two-thirds of the lobe. Try to ensure that the tattoo is stamped in the center of the ear, close to the head, not the tip or the end of the ear. Tattoos should be placed where the skin is lightest in color and free from hair. Be sure to avoid ribs or cords in the ear, as placing the tattoo in one of these ribs means a poor tattoo as well as an excessive flow of blood.

The Society reminds members that tattoos are recorded on the animal's certificate and needs to accurately reflect which ear tattoos are found in (RE or LE).

Before tattooing the animal, rub the ink in with a toothbrush or your thumb. By doing this, the ink will more likely be carried into the new tattoo.



Establish the tattoo that will identify the calf and place the corresponding digits in your pliers.



Check the tattoo on something like a piece of cardboard or an old feed sack.



Cleaning the ear and ridding it of all wax and dirt is key to a good tattoo.

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When ready to proceed, place the ear between the jaws of the pliers. It's important when clamping the pliers to use the right amount of pressure.

"Close the jaws quickly and firmly and release quickly to avoid tearing the ear," says Twig. "Use enough pressure that it pierces the skin, but don't go so deeply that it bleeds profusely."

The only way to stop an ear from bleeding after the use of too much pressure is to reapply ink. Twig points out. Put on more ink and use that toothbrush to get the ink down in those perforations. The ink helps the blood coagulate.

Make sure that the ink is worked thoroughly into the tattoo to ensure a legible and permanent tattoo mark. When the tattooing princess is finished, clean the characters to remove all hair, dirt and blood. This is also the time when you should throw away and get replacements for the ones that are dull.

When to tattoo

There are advantages and disadvantages to tattooing at birth or the alternative, waiting to tattoo calves as a group. Regardless of your choice, precaution to avoid human error is imperative.

Imperfect tattoos

The Society recommends checking all tattoos at weaning or any other time an animal is in the chute. Tattoos are not always perfect. Two frequent causes of imperfect tattoos are poor technique and, for breeders calving during the cold months, frozen ears. Frozen ears can be minimized through different management practices from using neck warmers, to warming shelters, etc.

Establishing a herd ID system

Before tattooing, an effective and well-planned herd identification system should be established. This system should benefit the producer and make herd recordkeeping easier.

Depending on a breeder's needs, a tattoo can reflect several different things. The tattoo can relate a number in a sequence as to when the calf was born, or refer to the offspring's parents, regardless of that choice the international letter code system must also be used within the tattoo.

The international letter code system, where a letter represents the year a calf was born, has become popular worldwide. P is the letter producers are using to represent 2026. The letter N was used for 2025. With this system the letters I, O, V and Q are not used.

Breeders need to develop a tattoo system that fits their needs, avoids duplications and follows the rules of tattooing with the Society.

Buying and/or selling cattle and tattoos

A reminder that buyers of registered Belted Galloways should be asking about and checking for tattoos. Sellers of registered Belted Galloways should be ensuring tattoos are accurate and legible for buyers to view. Tattoo issues should be brought to the attention of the Executive Director when identified.

Article adapted from Managing Herefords Tattoo Techniques published by the AHA.



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