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A Lancaster County legend debunked: You can't really tip a cow, researchers find



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Sep 9, 2013



As drunken hijinks go, cow tipping would seem to be a Lancaster County specialty.

Everyone's heard the story. A hapless city slicker or maybe a college student, invariably with a few wine coolers or beers in his belly, slips stealthily over a fence into a farmer's field. Quietly approaching a dozing cow, he heaves against the poor animal's broad side, toppling it udders over teacups into the muck as the merry prankster and his admiring pals scamper away, giggling as they run.

Well, bullocks.

Cow tipping, it turns out, is about as real as the Loch Ness monster or Sasquatch.

(Maybe even less real, if you believe in the Loch Ness monster and Sasquatch.)

"It's like snipe hunting," says Greg Martin, an animal welfare educator at the Penn State Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County. "You hand a kid a gunnysack and a flashlight, and you say, 'Go out and catch a snipe.' ... It's just an urban legend."

Or, in this case, a rural legend.

(And, in case you're wondering, snipes are about as real — and, again, maybe less so — than the Jersey devil and chupacabra.)

"You have to consider who's talking," Martin says. "Usually you hear kids talking about it. But that's just crazy.

"Anybody who's had dairy cattle knows a grown person cannot push over a grown cow. A 1,200-pound cow vs. you — it's not going to happen."

Jake Swearingen, an editor for Modern Farmer, an online agricultural magazine based in Hudson, N.Y., is even more dismissive of the tales.

"Cow tipping, at least as popularly imagined, does not exist," he wrote in an article posted last Wednesday at modernfarmer.com.

"While in the history of the world there have surely been a few unlucky cows shoved to their side by boozed-up morons, we feel confident in saying this happens at a rate roughly equivalent to the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series."

Besides maligning the good name of a plucky Major League team, Swearingen turns to hard science to support his claim.

There is the major fallacy, to begin with, that cows sleep standing up.

They don't. That's horses.

Cows also are skittish critters, Swearingen notes — when they sleep in a pasture, they typically lie down but keep an eye out for predators or, presumably, drunks.

If a stranger comes stumbling up toward a cow that's placidly chewing her cud, or even dozing lightly on her feet, she's almost certainly going to break into a trot before anyone can lay a hand on her.

But let's assume a wannabe cow tipper makes it over the fence, past the angry bull and through the mud to a dozing cow's side — without startling her into a run, of course — what then?

"In 2005, University of British Columbia student Tracy Boechler and doctor of zoology Margo Lillie ran the numbers on cow tipping," Swearingen helpfully reveals. "Their findings? There's no way one person could tip a cow. Two people? Maybe — but not in

real world conditions."

According to Lillie's study, two aggressive tippers could potentially tip a cow if the cow didn't resist. But cows, she says, will resist, and their four-legged stance will make the task a challenging one.

Throw in some physics, such as Newton's Second Law ("force equals mass times acceleration"), and Lillie says it would realistically take five or six strong tippers to push that cow down.

"It just makes the physics of it all, in my opinion, impossible," she says.

Lillie tells Swearingen that someone in Texas called her and said you can tip a cow if you run at the cow while a cohort squats on the other side of the beast so she can't brace herself — in short, tripping the cow rather than tipping the cow.

"So that's cheating, but that's a way of doing it," says Lillie. "Of course, the guy on the other side of the cow has to move very quickly to get out of the way, which is a stupid thing to do.

"But the whole thing is just a stupid thing to do from the get-go."

"The physics is there," says Dan McFarland, also with the Penn State extension. "The big question is why someone would want to do it."

Swearingen notes that, when farm veterinarians want a cow on her side, they employ a complex system of ropes and the brawn of several cattle-savvy workers to accomplish the deed.

"And yet, ask a room full of nonfarmers about cow tipping and you'll still find plenty of believers," he says.

"Part of this, of course, is that the closest many people come to a cow is seeing a Holstein along the interstate. Glimpsed at 65 miles per hour, it's possible to imagine a docile bovine easily overturned by a blacked-out college bro. Approach a cow on foot and you'll quickly realize how difficult the task of tipping would be."

Swearingen also points out that, if cow tipping was a thing, you'd find irrefutable evidence of the fact on YouTube — which, he says, "fails to deliver one single actual cow-tipping video."

Martin warns that attempts to tip a cow can be dangerous — but more for the would-be tipper than the future tenderloin cutlet.

"The cow could turn around and just head-butt you," he says. "If that cow recently gave birth to a calf, she'll be on the defensive and eat you alive. Or if there's a bull — and in Lancaster County, that's a good possibility."

A startled cow might start running, Martin adds — and either the tipper or a bystander could be trampled.

"We like to keep our cows comfortable and sedate. You try to keep as calm as possible around cows," he says.

"Just for safety's sake, you don't want to bother a cow. ... If you don't have any business in a cow pasture, stay out of the cow pasture."

Cows along a stream in Lancaster County.

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