



Tattooing Your Beef Project

By Dr. Bryan Reiling, UNL Animal Science & Ashley Benes, Nebraska Extension

Why do we tattoo beef animals?

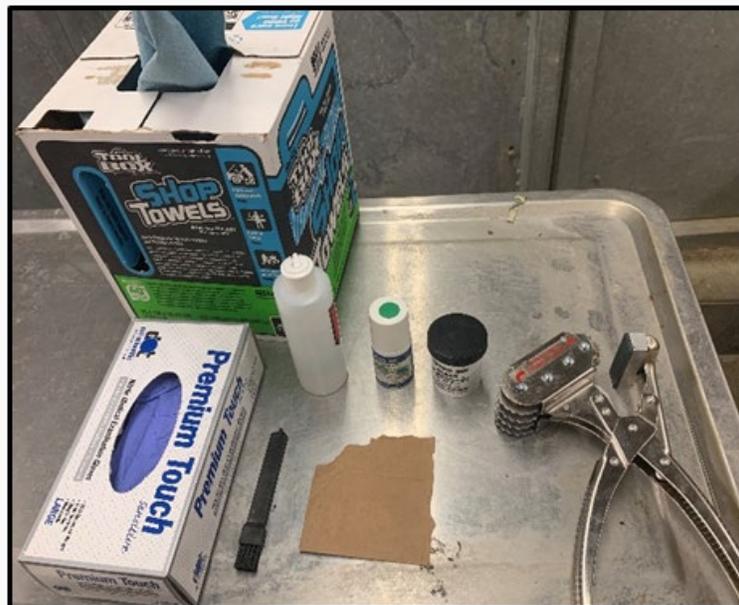
Most breed associations require a tattoo for registration of the animal. Tattoos are a permanent identification and can also be utilized to maintain accurate parentage, health and production records. Tags can fall out or be removed but a well-done tattoo will remain readable for the lifetime of the animal. Additionally, 4-H registered breeding heifers and British breed steers require a tattoo for proper identification and nomination.

We will go through the equipment needed and the tattoo process step by step. For a video of this process, go to <https://go.unl.edu/beeftattoo>

Supplies Needed

There are a simple set of supplies needed to tattoo your animal:

- Proper set of tattoo numbers (0-9) and letters (A-Z). You may need more than one set to ensure you can accommodate all the number and letter variations.
- Tattoo pliers. There are more than one kind so become familiar prior to purchasing.
- Rags and alcohol for wiping out the ear prior to tattooing.
- Tattoo ink in either green or black. You might want a toothbrush to work the ink better into the tattoo. You may also use your fingers.
- A good working chute where you can easily and safely catch the animals head to secure while you tattoo.





The Tattoo Process

Step 1: Put the animal in a working chute or somewhere with a head catch that you can safely secure the animal. You may still want to utilize a halter to hold the head still and get an accurate tattoo.



Step 2: Check your records and establish the tattoo that will identify the calf.

Step 3: Place the correct digits in your pliers and check the tattoo by clamping the pliers on something like a piece of cardboard or paper. Does this match the identification you planned to use? If not, readjust your digits until correct. Issues we often see are backwards or upside-down digits. This helps alleviate these issues. Do all the digits make an even perforation? Tattoo digits need to remain sharp to get a clean tattoo. One common mistake made is not throwing away dull, broken or hair-matted digits, these issues do not allow for deep penetration into the ear tissue.



Step 4: Next you should thoroughly clean the ear. Alcohol can help in getting the ear really clean. You cannot get a tattoo to take with all the wax and dirt that is normally in the ear. You also do not want to risk infection or abscess from pushing dirt into the tattoo. Make sure the ear is dry before placing the tattoo.



Step 5: Now consider where to place the tattoo. It is recommended to tattoo the animal in the upper two-thirds of the lobe, reserving the lower third of the right ear lobe for the Bangs tattoo that a heifer will receive when getting a brucellosis vaccination. Make sure 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.

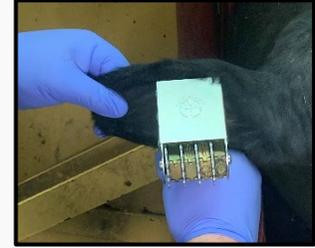


Step 6: Before tattooing the animal, rub the ink in with a toothbrush or your thumb. By doing this, the ink will more likely be carried into the new tattoo.





Step 7: When ready to proceed, place the ear between the jaws of the pliers. It is 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. Use enough pressure that it pierces the skin, but do not go so deeply that it bleeds profusely.



Step 8: After applying the tattoo with the pliers, put on more ink and use that toothbrush, your fingers or a roller ball if your ink has that option, to get the ink down in those perforations. The ink also helps the blood to coagulate. Make sure that the ink is worked thoroughly into the tattoo to ensure a legible and permanent tattoo mark.



Step 9: When the tattooing process 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 should I tattoo my animal?

Tattooing is typically when the animal is still a calf, usually prior to three months of age. This helps the tattoo to remain legible; as the calf grows the tattoo enlarges with the animal.

It is a best practice to check all tattoos at weaning time or when you have access to animal in a chute, or prior to attending cattle shows. Tattoos do not always come out perfect and there are a variety of reasons for this. Two frequent causes of imperfect tattoos are poor technique and, for breeders calving during the cold months of January and February, frozen ears.



How do the most common imperfections happen?

- Not applying enough pressure with tattoo pliers to make a good enough imprint.
- Not applying enough ink into the fresh imprint.
- Tattooing animals at an older age which results in smaller, hard to read tattoos.
- Accuracy of letters and numbers loaded in tattoo pliers. This is vital, so you should always double check. Some producers have their veterinarian tattoo their animals. Keep in mind that you still need to check their work as a follow up on the timeline suggested above. Do not assume it was done accurately.

For those that have purchased a calf with registration papers, you should check your animal for a legible tattoo that matches their registration. If you cannot find one, it is possible the tattoo did not take or that it did not have a tattoo at all. In this instance, you should follow the same procedure to tattoo that animal with proper identification. Keep in mind the timeline of the next show you plan to attend. Fresh ink, or when you wipe out the ear and see a lot of green or blue ink come away, is not allowed at the Nebraska State Fair or some other shows that check tattoos on breed animals. Give yourself enough time to allow the tattoo to set and heal.