

# Nature Note



Agriculture

## Bos Taurus

The so-called "sacred" cows that have been the cause of recent riots, deaths and injuries in India are one of the seven living species of true cattle, called *Bos*, from which may have come the nickname Bossy. Cows are members of the even-toed hoofed mammals or ungulates, an order which includes pigs, deer, giraffes, hippopotamuses, sheep and goats. The principal fea-

ture that unites all these animals into one order is the foot, which has an even number of well-developed digits.

The cow is a member of the Bovidae family—from which the word "bovine" comes—and is a true ruminant or "cud chewer." With a system of four chambers in the one stomach, these relatively defenseless ruminants are able to eat and swallow a large amount of grass in a hurry, and then retire to some quiet spot to regurgitate and digest it more thoroughly.

Ancient origins of the long-domesticated *Bos taurus* are not well known, but the wild auroch may have been one of its ancestors. This auroch was described by Julius Caesar and was once found throughout the forests of North Africa, Europe and southwest Asia.

Because cattle have been the source of many items—milk, cheese, medicines, fertilizers, glue, soap, leather, buttons—they have become as revered as a mother in India. The Hindus believe that slaughtering a cow is as deadly a sin as murdering a human being. That is why they bitterly protest any order permitting cow slaughter—even though most of the 175 million cows wandering unmolested in India no longer give milk, many are diseased and all are food consumers in a land where food is scarce.

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