

Reducing Conflict with Predators A Win for Ranchers!

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A pound of prevention is worth an ounce of cure. Benjamin Franklin may not have been thinking about predators and cattle when he coined the phrase back in 1736 but the phrase is fitting.



This heifer was attacked by a bear and managed to escape. Mother cows can be quite aggressive and will often vigorously defend their own or other calves that bawl when being attacked. This heifer was treated by the producer and made a remarkable recovery however market value with cattle with such injuries will be dramatically reduced. Photo by Blaine Trenholm

Livestock losses are troubling, not only from an economic position but also from an emotional standpoint. What could I have done different? Should I move my cattle? Was this a one off with the predator or predators moving on or have they set up shop? Who should I call? Am I missing more stock? Should I sell out and buy a farm in southern Saskatchewan?

The Livestock Protection Program (LPP) is multi-faceted. Verifying predator conflicts, approving mitigation where appropriate and paying compensation on losses are components of the program that many producers are familiar with. But how about prevention in the first place? Are we doing enough? Are we reactive to predator problems or do we, on our individual operations, take a proactive approach to reducing conflicts in the first place? A proactive approach sheds a favourable light on our industry. If we can do better, than we must. The economics of the business do not allow for many losses. Although compensation for verified losses is fair, our Cattle Loss Surveys indicate that only 10% of predator losses are found and verified.

The Livestock Protection Program's page found on the BC Cattlemen's Association's website provides links to a number of reference sources that discuss ways to reduce wild predator losses. In 2016 our program created a Best Management Practices to Reduce Livestock Predation brochure. Options for the handling and removal of deadstock is discussed and remains a key consideration that all producers must contend with. I still hear about the occasional bone yard or open deadstock pit being in use. Undeniably these sites are also known by the local wolf and bear population. If there is a relatively consistent food source available they will visit that source routinely and their presence may hold the predators in an area. And if they are hanging around, and cattle are nearby, then even the most well-mannered predators may eventually give in to temptation. My wife won't leave a bag of chips on the counter for the same reason. I can only walk by it so many times before the bag gets ripped open. Predators are no different. And when I eat that first chip, the rest of the contents are in jeopardy. The LPP BMP brochure discusses deadstock options such as composting and deep burial. Removal to local landfill may also be an option in some areas; however, a permit from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is required.

As livestock producers the learning curve never flattens. We need to keep an open mind and filter through options that might just fit into our individual

operations. The best source for ideas that work come from producers themselves. Following are some management practices that may be worth considering. Some are home grown from producers that I have had discussions with while others come from sources far and wide. One interesting reference is the Western Landowners Alliance based out of New Mexico. They have created a comprehensive guide titled “Reducing Conflict with Grizzly Bears, Wolves and Elk.” It is an excellent read and a wonderful demonstration of a proactive approach taken by a collective group of ranchers and other landowners as well as land and wildlife managers, researchers, government agencies and non-profit organizations. The alliance recognises the need to share wild, working landscapes in a way that will sustain both people, livestock and wildlife. The guide can be viewed at <https://westernlandowners.org/lp/reducing-conflict-with-grizzly-bears-wolves-elk/>. The list of conflict reduction suggestions that follows is certainly not complete and I am always interested in hearing from producers what works for them and what doesn't. Some of the options discussed may raise eyebrows but all have been used favourably by some operations and if any can be incorporated into your current operation resulting in fewer conflicts, then that's a win.

Sounding and Visual Deterrents

One of the most time honoured deterrents is the old cow bell. Historically used to locate livestock, the unnatural sound of a bell may put predators on edge. I had a run of grizzly bear trouble one year and resorted to attaching a couple bells to some old matriarchs in my herd. I had no further losses that year and enjoyed the added benefit of being able to quickly locate my cattle. I believe wolves too will naturally avoid the unfamiliar clanging of cow bells. A number of other practices have been developed to take advantage of wolves' inherent caution and aversion to unknown items in their habitats. These include fox lights and motion and radio activated guard devices (MAG and RAG, respectively). Fox lights emit varied light patterns at random intervals during

nighttime hours, simulating the presence of a person patrolling pastures or rangelands. MAG and RAG devices activate lights, loud noises or pyrotechnics. MAG devices are activated by strategically placed motion sensors (akin to home security systems), while RAG devices are activated by the presence of radio-collared wolves (obviously not a simple set up for practical use). These devices are nonlethal, short-term deterrents, most commonly used to protect small acreage attractants, such as spring-summer calving, lambing or bedding areas. Fladry is a system that was derived in Europe to drive or capture wolves, which are inherently risk-averse and reluctant to cross under unknown objects. Hanging red ribbon at intervals off the top wires of a fence around calving grounds has proven effective in some cases. Turbo-fladry takes the technique one step further and is used on electric fences. If properly applied, the flagging will offer a repulsive shock to wolves bold enough to test it. The application is labour intensive and is best used for short intervals (two to eight weeks). One of my favourite visual deterrents, as crazy as it may seem, is the inflatable car dealership dancing man. A story circulated a while back about a producer who acquired one with hopes of keeping elk out of a stored feed site. Apparently it worked tremendously. If it worked there perhaps there's an application for toothy predators as well!

Electric Fencing

Black and grizzly bears may also be deterred through the use of properly installed and maintained electric fencing. The use of electric fencing is most practical for small areas such as acreages or calving areas. Some producers claim that high voltage perimeter electric fencing will discourage bears from entering pasture land. I have read articles where electric fencing has kept bears out of areas up to 1,000 acres.

Guard Animals

Guardian dogs, donkeys and llamas have all been used with some level of success in deterring predation on livestock. Dogs, of course, are more appropriate for sheep

operations. Donkeys don't generally have protective tendencies towards livestock however they can be extremely aggressive towards unwelcome canids (wolves and coyotes). Often used in combination with electric fencing guardian animals can be quite effective and are on duty 24/7.

Frequent Human Presence

Human presence may be one of the only practical and effective options to reduce predator conflict on range land. There are so many advantages to a frequent human presence and the strategy goes back to livestock management, globally, for centuries. Shepherds and range riders alike have recognised that keeping livestock in herds, finding carcasses, doctoring, removing sick or lame animals, and confronting predators prior to losses all have positive outcomes on conflict reductions. Knowing and understanding herd behaviour can also give clues to predator activity. Nervousness, unnatural groupings and a reluctance for stock to utilize good quality range should all be clues that predators may be nearby. The Livestock Protection Program does allow for mitigation based on harassment. Observing and articulating a change in herd behaviour can be a key to approval as would be other observations such as scat, tracks, and predator sightings. I am often impressed by producers who recognise the need to move cattle based on observations and cattle behaviour, in an attempt to avoid conflict. Predators may also recognise that human presence may be detrimental to their existence. Wolves, in particular, are very intelligent animals and may frequent an area less often when human noise and scent are abundant.

Shortening Your Calving Season

Calves are most vulnerable in the first few weeks of their lives. Most producers agree that the smaller the livestock, the greater the death loss by large carnivores. Most cattle depredation by bears and wolves involves calves, particularly smaller or younger calves. Ravens too, almost exclusively kill calves that are less than a week old. The tighter and less drawn out your calving season, the less opportunity there will be for predators to work the

calving grounds targeting newborns. Also the duration of available afterbirth and other assorted birthing attractions will be minimized. This concept is not unique to the cattle industry. Wildlife managers recognize that bull to cow and buck to doe rations need to be optimum in order to have tight birthing cycles thus reducing predation losses to wild ungulates.

Timing of Calving to Synchronize with Wild Ungulate Birthing

Calving in late May or early June has advantages in terms of warm weather and better conditions all around. This also closely syncs the timing of calving with the natural birth cycle of wild ungulate species. Cattle-calves then become just some of many newborns on the range. Bears, coyotes and wolves may focus on native prey newborns rather than cattle. Producers calving prior to the native birth pulse are more likely to be targeted by predators hoping to get a jump on the long awaited spring bounty.

Turn-out Delay after Processing

Calves can be a little sluggish after enduring a day of whatever processing procedures get thrown at them. Branding, tagging, castrating, vaccinating are all stressors and may produce smells desirable to some predators. Although the temptation is to get the job done and while the help is available to move cattle to range grass, some producers have incorporated a recovery period to allow for healing and energy gain.

Tight Bunching and Pasture Rotation

This, of course, is not generally practical on crown range however concentrating herds on relatively small portions of range at a time can have a positive effect on predation losses. Some predators are intimidated by large cattle groupings. We have all seen how a calf distress bawl motivates the whole herd into action. Some participants in the Western Landowners Alliance believe that cattle can be managed to relearn the survival advantages of remaining in groups and even to actively defend themselves from predators.

Herd Health

Lame and sick animals are vulnerable and a liability. Good husbandry practices are essential, such as providing appropriate mineral supplements and keeping sick, lame or old livestock off the range. Given the vastness of some of our province's range lands, this can be a challenge. It is therefore imperative that proper assessment and consideration be given to each and every animal prior to turnout.

In recent years we have seen a reduction in predator losses across the province. That is good news and although we see fluctuations in the various predator populations I think much of the credit can be given to livestock producers themselves. Change can be a good thing. I am often reminded of a conversation I had a few years back with one of Vanderhoof's

most colourful ranchers. He was in his 80's at the time and had for many years used the same old carcass disposal site. I actually helped him pick it out back when I was a junior Conservation Officer some 30 years ago. Unfortunately, new homes were springing up adjacent to his land and one new resident rightly expressed concerns about grizzly bears passing through his yard to get to the deadstock location. I didn't relish the conversation that needed to be had with my old friend but was so impressed when he exclaimed "Ya know young fella (of which I wasn't), we have gotten away with that pit for years and doggone it you are dang right that it is high time we got rid of it." That very day he contracted a local backhoe operator to come dig a pit and he buried all those stinky old hides and scattered bones. If Hank could make progressive changes then anybody can. Attaboy Hank!

*Further information about the Livestock Protection Program can be found at www.cattlemen.bc.ca/lpp. For incidents of cattle or sheep losses, injury or harassment where wolves, coyotes or birds are suspected please call our toll free number **1-844-852-5788**. For incidents involving other wildlife such as bear and cougar please contact the COS RAPP line at **1-877-952-7277**.*

