

# Reducing Predator Loss at Calving Time

## TIPS FROM MOTHER NATURE

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Puddles, mud, cantankerous cows and sleepless nights. Ahhh, calving season. Something most ranchers look forward to ... until about day three. Most of us have often pondered why a cow with the option of calving in a nice clean dry pile of shavings or straw would chose to sneak off to some secluded willow patch to calve...

Her thinking may not be all wrong and might just be throwback survival instinct that has served her wild relatives well for time immemorial.

In the natural world most ungulates will seek seclusion to give birth and there are a number of theories as to why this occurs. Bonding between the newborn and the dam is strengthened without interference from others of their kind however the most commonly held belief is that it is an anti-predator strategy. Wild ungulate calves and fawns are born scentless and their mothers will take great care in keeping the birthing area clean and free of any attractant. They will eat the placenta and afterbirth and even consume their offspring's urine and feces. They don't spend a lot of time hanging out with their newborns, preferring to slip in periodically to nurse and clean the area. Mom knows that even their own scent could draw in a predator so until the little gaffers are agile enough to travel well, isolation seems to be the best option. We often see those same traits in our

domestic livestock and it's interesting to consider the evolutionary history for those actions. Ravens, in particular will generally hang out around the calving yards were most of the action is. Coyotes too, like to slip in, often under the cover of darkness, and seek out tasty little tidbits. Raven, coyotes and wolves may not notice the solitary calf hunkered down behind that willow bush well away from the crowd. I am often amused by that lone mother cow who wonders around several hundred meters away from her hidden calf, acting all nonchalant but never taking her eyes off me. I think I worry more about that hidden little calf than she does. Fortunately, in most of the province, bears are not yet too active at calving time. Their strategy in May and June, when wild ungulates are giving birth, is to rely on luck and knowledge gained from previous years of where they are most likely to encounter stashed baby calves or fawns. They will patrol an area with hopes of stumbling on to a meal. Some



Armed Guard



Raven Damage



Wolf Kill on Newborn

researchers have found that when the natural birth pulse declines, bears will change strategies from opportunistic encounters to that of seeking out adult females as a way to locate their young. Not all bears however have living prey on their minds, in fact most have a diet composed primarily of vegetative matter. As with wolves and coyotes, targeted removal of the actual offenders can be a challenge.

With more modern calving facilities, ranchers typically don't experience the high numbers of predator losses to very young calves that our forefathers in the industry once did. The availability of dry, clean bedding in the form of shavings or straw is an option that they simply didn't have. Crowded maternity areas would quickly become a quagmire so pasture calving or calving in larger areas was often the best option. Of course larger calving grounds came with the problem of increased odds of interactions with predators. As with wild ungulates, natural selection likely played a bigger role in offspring survival back then. Those mothers with intelligence and/or a genetic based response to predator avoidance where the cows you wanted to go on and propagate the herd. Today, such considerations are rarely a part of a producer's herd development. Body structure, milk production, good feet, weight gain and good temperaments seem to trump anti-predator strategies.

Another evolutionary adaption that has historically benefited wildlife of nearly all species is birth synchrony, which is where the majority of adult females of a species give birth during a focused period of time. There are several reasons why synchronised birthing is advantageous to a population. Timing birth cycles with the most favourable environment conditions such as weather and an abundance of fresh nutrient rich forage are important. To accomplish synchronized birthing a population must have an abundance of sires and doing so ensures genetic variability and

viability. However, the most commonly held theory for birth synchrony in wild populations is that of minimizing newborn loss to predation. Some studies of free roaming wild bison populations have shown that up to 95% of calves are born in a 40 day period. Such prey saturation on the land base results in predators having access to the more young and vulnerable component of the population for only a short period of time. Again, there are lessons here that can be applied to our own farming and ranching operations. Most producers strive to have tight calving seasons but for reasons unrelated to predation. A tight calving window allows for a shorter period for when calves are most vulnerable collectively. This can be a significant consideration particularly where coyotes are concerned and perhaps even more so with the increased number of losses we are seeing to ravens. Once calving is wrapped up, these predators will generally move on to other potential food sources. On my own place I have noticed how coyotes start coming in closer to my calving area days and even weeks before calving starts. Even ravens start showing up in anticipation of some easy feasting and although I have never lost calves to either the opportunity to would be greater the longer the calving season stretches on for.

Timing spring calving with the natural birthing cycle of the surrounding wild ungulate populations is a consideration that some producers, particularly those who live in predator abundant areas, have found beneficial. If wild and domestic calves are born at around the same time then predators may remain focused on their natural wild prey. Mid May to early June is typically when the moose, deer and elk drop their offspring. This creates a flood of feeding opportunities for wolves, coyotes and bears and their travel patterns may keep them away from targeted or opportunistic encounters

with cattle herds. Many producers have found that warmer weather, green grass and less mud or snow has other survival benefits for calves as well and is less labour intensive for themselves. A downside of later calving, of course is the size and mobility of calves at turnout. I am always amazed though, at how vigorous those late calves are at birth. It seems that when they land on warm dry ground they just bounce on to their feed and their weight gains seem to quickly catch up to their pasture mates.

So this late winter/early spring remember, we are not the only ones looking forward to calving season. Although we have modern technology on our side we can't forget that Mother Nature has a few tricks up her sleeve as well.

*Further information about the Livestock Protection Program can be found at [www.cattlemen.bc.ca/lpp.htm](http://www.cattlemen.bc.ca/lpp.htm)*

*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.*

