

January 13, 2012

Sadly, it takes a lot for me to sit down and write a letter, but I feel I must.

I read Gretchen Smith's letter in the winter 2011 issue of Range that characterized wolf impacts for last year in total at 75 head of cattle, and that this loss was compensated for through the reimbursement program. I also read in Western Ag Reporter of Carter Niemeyer's position that adverse affects of wolf harassment are minimal on livestock & wildlife.

If these points were true I think we stockmen, sportsman, and people like us who simply enjoy all wildlife and not just predators would be overjoyed.

Here has been my experience over the last 15 years:

The record snowfall year of '96 – '97 severely impacted wildlife, especially deer herds, here in northwest Montana. But by 2000 on our Plum Creek Timber grazing allotments, deer and moose numbers were strong. Elk herds seemed stable with a good percentage of calves to the rest of the herd.

From 2002 to 2005 we saw a negative change in wildlife numbers. Deer, elk, and moose numbers were dramatically declining. The only wildlife numbers on the increase were wolves.

During this time, wolf depredation and harassment incidents against our cattle increased seemingly, coinciding with the decrease in wildlife. New packs began to squeeze into our area, one in 2008 started hitting our cattle in September. Another new pack in 2011 targeted our livestock within 10 days of our June 1 turnout date & stayed active until we left in mid October. So where there were two packs in our area between 2000 & 2005, they having a very negative effect on wildlife, now we have four packs.

We've been very active with government trappers, state wolf biologists, we've called our state legislators, and we've spent a lot of time & expense running trap-lines for the Feds to collar individual wolves in each pack to monitor & help with removal. This year between the state, Feds, & the ranch under state authority, we killed 8 wolves. We know through trail camera photos, that between just two of the four packs, they had a total of 14 pups.

At our home place 2 years ago, we tried deterrents like flaggery & hot fence. Within two nights 2 wolves went through the flaggery & hot fence and hit our yearlings again. They did not kill any that night but went across the fence & killed one of the neighbor's cows.

One reads of hiring range riders to show a greater presence to deter wolf depredations. We have a cattle & guest ranch and spent on average 5 out of every seven days with our cattle; a luxury most stockmen cannot afford. I do believe our presence on our allotments helped in the early years.

As per the low number of confirmed kills compared to the total death loss, I think one experience of ours might be enlightening. We had a 500+ lb. calf killed, we thought by wolves, in October 2010 in the middle of a hay meadow within 300 yards of a neighbor's house. It was covered up with a blue tarp following government protocol for examination by the government representative the next day. He determined that it was not a wolf kill. The evening of the examination wolves came in, pulled the calf carcass out from under the tarp, and consumed the rest of it.

The wolf behavior that has the greatest impact that I've not heard talked of is the harassment of the livestock & wildlife that the wolves do not kill. I've seen wolves terrorize cattle & elk to where they move in a cluster like a flock of birds on the wing. The wolves might be in them for a short period of time but the effects may last for weeks before the cattle or elk relax & disperse. With that stress, calves gain less weight, cows do not breed, and some abort their calves. I've seen these same effects on the elk in our area with as few as one calf remaining in twenty cows by August 1. The elk, like our cows, are running in large groups in mid summer; this I've not seen in years past.

The only comparable experience of mine was in the late seventies with grizzly bears hitting cattle in northwest Wyoming, southeast of Cooke City, Montana where I lost 35 calves out of 200 pairs in one remote wilderness Forest Service allotment. Only 2 calves were lost out of the remaining 700 pairs in the other Forest Service allotments. These harassed cattle also moved in large groups, and were very difficult to keep in the high country. They traveled constantly, always ill at ease.

Those are my observations, here are my statistics:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Cattle numbers</u>	<u>Weaning Weights (Steers)</u>	<u>Open Cows (unbred)</u>	<u>Death Loss</u>
2000 To 2004	at least 300 pairs		+ 4%	less than .5 % of calves
2005	300 + pairs	715 lbs.	7%	2 calves
2006	same	747 lbs.	8%	3 calves
2007	same	720 lbs.	13%	5 calves
2008	same	668 lbs.	18%	7 calves
2009	same	637 lbs.	23%	11 calves
2010	same	624 lbs.	29%	12 calves 2 cows
2011	198 pairs	585 lbs.	26%	20 calves
	40 yearling replacement Heifers		42%	2 yearlings
	50 dry cows		4%	0

June 1 of 2011 we put 40 yearling replacement heifers in about 400 acres of mixed timber & grass to finish bulling. Those heifers were in excellent shape coming in. Two were killed by wolves. By July 1st, I turned them out with the older cows for relief. 16 came in unbred, most of these were determined by the vet to having aborted their calves; of the 22 bred, 6 were determined to be late calvers. 5% death loss, 42% open in this group of cattle.

In 2011 most of the first calf heifers (2 year olds) with calves by their side, came in open. Most of them were determined by the vet to never having cycled.

Out of the 198 pairs turned out in 2011, 10% of the calves died, 8 were confirmed kills by wolves. 1% of the cows died - no confirmed kills. 26 % of the cows came in open. Out of 50 older dry cows turned out in 2011, no death loss, 4% were open.

If you take the calf death loss with the open cow percentage, true loss comes to 1 in 3 calves in the 12 month period from June 1, 2010 to June 1, 2011, and another 1 in 3 calf loss from June 1, 2011 till now.

Stockmen experience some death loss and infertility in the best of circumstances. Our norm was 4% - 5% unbred cows with a low death loss under 1% before wolves were a factor. Now our negative cattle trends mirror the negative wildlife trends in our area. In my experience these negative wildlife and cattle trends directly relate to the increase in wolf numbers, the increase in wolf encounters with cattle & wildlife, and the increase in wolf depredations.

The Fish, Wildlife, & Parks of Montana just reported a poor game harvest, fewer animals available, fewer hunters afield, a lower hunter success ratio for the hunting season just ended, and for the first time unsold big game tags. I know personally of non-resident hunters that used to hunt on the ranch with great success in the early 2000's, now go to other states. This grazing season for me was the worst on record even though it was a banner grass year. The wolf population though is doing quite well.

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