

Trapper praised by ranchers, takes heat from others

By Gerrit Koepping
Emerald Reporter

Lou Bailey, an Elmira sheep rancher, lost a pregnant ewe to a coyote last Sunday, so he called Jack Spencer to do something about it.

Spencer, the animal damage control specialist for Lane County, is the man some people call when they have trouble with wildlife.

On this chilly morning just south of Elmira, Spencer brings his wooden and plastic coyote calls and crouches at the edge of the nearby woods.

By imitating the coyote sound, Spencer hopes to draw the animal out and kill it. This time the plan doesn't work.

"God, they're smart," he said. "They can smell the scent of the bottom of your boots," Bailey said. "You've got to admire the capabilities of the things," he said. But Bailey tries to accept defeat.

"We can make lots of mistakes," he said. "The coyotes can make none."

Trapping the innocent

Barbara Kelley is a woman who loves animals and the environment. In 1977, she worked to stop herbicide spraying in timber zones. But in the fall of 1978, she found a new cause.

Her longhaired German shepherd, Tasha, had been missing for three days. As Kelley walked into the backyard of her Cottage Grove home, she saw something slowly move under a tarp.

Under the tarp was Tasha. She had stepped into a steel leghold bear trap.

Kelley said the dog injured her shoulder from dragging the leg back. Tasha had a high fever, her paw was badly mangled and she had developed gangrene.

She did not lose her paw, but her leg is permanently disfigured, Kelley said.

Kelley's house is adjacent to Bureau of Land Management property, and she said she believes that's where the trap was set.

"One reason I moved to the forest was so I wouldn't have to confine my great big dog who never hurt anything or anybody," Kelley said.

After this incident, Kelley shifted her efforts to fighting what she sees as the cruel practice of trapping.

"There is no place in our society for this kind of barbarism," Kelley said. "Just imagine getting your finger caught in a car door for a week."

Linda Rudy, a receptionist at the Forest Valley Veterinary Clinic in Cottage Grove, said her office sees six to 10 dogs a year that have been caught in traps.

Protecting the herd

Gary Shepherd is also concerned about animals. Specifically, he's concerned about his cattle and sheep.

About two years ago, Shepherd found two ewes that were killed and two that were seriously injured, victims of what he said was an overnight coyote attack. So like Bailey, Shepherd sought out the help of Spencer.

Spencer set snare and steel leghold traps to catch the animals. The next day Shepherd saw one male coyote stalking his herd; he shot and killed it. Two days later, one of Spencer's snares caught a female coyote; Spencer killed it.

After that, Shepherd said, the livestock predation stopped.

Shepherd said he's glad to be able to call a professional, such as Spencer, when such problems arise.

Spencer is a government employee, whose program gets \$16,000 a year from Lane County and a matching amount from the federal government.

Spencer's jobs have ranged from trapping an opossum in a schoolyard to trapping a bear that was killing a rancher's sheep. There used to be three men doing the same job that Spencer now does, but after budget cuts, he's the only one left.

Predators killed more than \$276,000 worth of livestock in 1990, according to



Jack Spencer, the animal damage control specialist for Lane County, sets up a trap to catch predators of ranchers' livestock. Although ranchers appreciate his efforts, many environmentalists argue against his methods of trapping.



Spencer imitates coyote calls to draw the predator that recently killed a ewe in the nearby woods.

figures provided by Tom Hoffman, the director of animal damage control in Oregon. But Hoffman said the actual number of animals killed "is probably way, way in excess of that." In 1990, his department trapped and killed 8,189 coyotes, and trapped 111 black bears, killing some and relocating others.

Storm of controversy

Spencer was a part of that trapping effort and thus is a man in the midst of a controversy. Environmentalists, like Kelley, say Spencer uses barbaric methods, at taxpayers' expense, to kill animals so ranchers won't have to look after their own livestock.

Spencer hotly disputes this. "I do a lot of work for ranchers, but with opossum and raccoon, it evens out," he said. "Opossums and raccoons alone cause thousands of dollars of damage."

"I get it from both sides," Spencer said. "If I kill a cougar or a coyote, I get it from the environmentalists. If I don't kill the problem animal, I get it from the ranchers."

But when in doubt, Spencer tends to side with the ranchers.

"They're the only people who appreciate me," Spencer said.

He said it is important to remember

that he doesn't want to kill all the predators in the area, just the problem animals.

"Once a coyote starts killing sheep, they keep killing sheep," Spencer said. "We can't reform the animal."

Money problems

Someday, Spencer might not have his job. Each year, the Lane County Board of Commissioners votes on whether to fund Spencer's position. Board Chairman Jack Roberts said planned budget cuts could result in the elimination of Spencer's funding.

That would be fine with Jerry Rust. Since Rust was elected to the commission, he has voted against funding Spencer. He opposes Spencer's program, not for humanitarian reasons, but because he said it only benefits ranchers.

"I'm not opposed to ranchers taking care of their livestock," Rust said. "But I'm opposed to the taxpayers paying for it."

Spencer is not without supporters. Commissioner Ellie Dumdi has voted to fund Spencer's work in each of her four years on the board.

Yet, even Dumdi admits that Spencer's job may eventually be in jeopardy.

"Because of declining revenues, nothing is sacred," she said.

Possible effects

Of course, Spencer is concerned about what will happen if his program is cut; he fears not for himself, but for the area's wildlife, he said.

"A lot of people are going to use whatever means they can to control predators," he said. "Some of those people are going to use poison bait and kill every damn thing around."

One woman, Spencer said, shot a deer and laced its carcass with poison in an attempt to kill coyotes. She killed a couple of foxes and a neighbor's dog, but didn't get a single coyote. Spencer, on the other hand, said he uses methods that are more selective.

Kelley said such incidents could be avoided if a non-profit organization is set up to educate and encourage ranchers to use guard dogs instead of traps and poison.

This way, Kelley said, "with guard dogs they (the ranchers) are forced to care for their own animals." At least, Kelley said, taxpayers would no longer be paying for the steel leghold trap, which have been banned in 64 countries.

But Spencer has more in his arsenal than just his 85 steel leghold traps. Spencer also has a large number of steel snares, sodium-cyanide traps, some live traps, his rifle and a .22-caliber revolver.

The steel snares he places around holes in ranchers' fences that coyotes crawl through. When the coyote passes halfway through the snare, it cinches around its torso. Spencer said the animal does not suffer while it is snared, but once Spencer finds an animal in a snare, he immediately kills it.

Spencer also has around 75 M-44 traps, which when set up are placed flush with the ground with a piece of bait placed over the trap. When the bait is pulled, a sodium-cyanide capsule is shot into the mouth of the animal.

Spencer said it is ironic that with more funds he could develop and trap with more humane methods.

"We have people working in government labs designing traps that get along better with the animals," Spencer said. "About a quarter of animal damage control money goes into research."