



Wheeler County Sheriff's Office/Contributed Photo

Rancher David Hunt found this cow dead and mutilated Thursday, July 23, 2020, with her tongue, genitals and reproductive organs cut out — and she was in an upright position. Investigators in Crook County are looking into an ongoing case of “unnatural” deaths of cattle there. There have been recent cases of bull mutilations in Harney, Wheeler and Umatilla counties in Eastern Oregon.

MYSTERY

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ranch with his two sons, reported no predators or birds had touched the cow. There were no tracks, and no blood surrounding it. The cow’s left cheek, tongue and three of its teats had been cut away cleanly. But the eyes, usually the first body part to be scavenged after death, were untouched. There were no bullet holes and a scan of the cow by a metal detector turned up none.

The cow was about 200 yards from the road, near the edge of a field and some juniper trees. There were no vehicle tracks near the dead animal, no footprints of any kind.

The mystery deepened a few days later. On March 4, Casey Thomas, manager of the GI Ranch on Lister Road in Paulina, reported that one of his herd of around 5,000 appeared to have suffered a strange death.

Crook County detective Javier Sanchez arrived to find a deceased Black Angus cow lying on its side. Hair had been removed near the stomach. All four udders were cut off and its left cheek, tongue and sex organs removed. Between the front legs an uneven patch of hair was missing and in the middle was a prick mark, Sanchez wrote in his report.

The next day, Crook County’s Sgt. Timothy Durheim was dispatched to a report of a wolf kill at the McCormack Ranch on SE Bear Creek Road. But it was apparent no wolf took down this cow.

Durheim noted several straight incisions on the animal. One udder had been removed and a circular cut was made around the anus and the reproductive organs removed without puncturing the gut. The left cheek, left eye and tongue had been removed.

“Again, I noted straight, clean incisions where the cheek had been,” Durheim wrote in his case report.

Durheim examined the carcass and found a puncture wound between the neck and shoulder. He found no bite marks.

“There were no apparent animal or human tracks immediately surrounding the carcass, and only minimal blood in the area,” Durheim wrote. “I know from personal experience that if an animal is killed or scavenged by predators, there is typically a large bloody messy area surrounding the carcass.”

On March 6, Casey Thomas called police back to report finding another dead cow bearing the same strange injuries. This one was more badly decomposed than the first but its left cheek was also removed and a 2-inch patch had been cut into the hair on its neck.

Detectives took photos of the dead cows to Prineville veterinarian Dr. Taylor

Karlin for her perspective. She agreed the deaths appeared unnatural and her opinion was included in a search warrant request filed in the case to scan for cell-phone activity near where the cows were found.

Charges in any of the cases could include trespassing and aggravated animal abuse. With the cattle valued at \$1,250 to \$1,400 each, criminal mischief might also be charged.

As a vet with an interest in large animals, Karlin has performed many post-mortem examinations on deceased livestock. When, and if, another mutilated cow turns up in Crook County, Karlin has agreed to perform an appropriate necropsy so she can personally examine a fresh specimen.

“I wish I had an answer,” she said. “We’re kind of at a loss.”

One possible explanation is these were, in fact, natural deaths.

Podcast host Dunning’s long-running show Skeptoid devoted an episode to debunking cattle mutilation in 2015. Dunning, who read the 28-page search warrant request, called the recent Crook County cases typical of numerous accounts often attributed to aliens or satanic rituals.

“This is almost certainly the same kind of bird predation we’ve seen in so many similar cases,” he wrote to The Bulletin. “In my opinion, there is nothing here that suggests anything but normal and expected bird predation had occurred, and ... no justification for a search warrant to seek out an apocryphal human responsible for the wounds.”

Dunning said he’s learned there’s actually a short window of time between when the animal dies and when its body is scavenged when it’s obvious what killed the animal.

“Most particularly birds, and also some insects, will always go first for the exposed soft tissue: eyes, tongue, lips and mouth area, genitals. The animal is dead with zero blood pressure so there is never significant bleeding from post mortem wounds. The body is in the process of drying and decaying, so skin pulls tight from around the excised area, giving the impression of a perfect surgical cut.”

Karlin is awaiting the results of liver and blood samples she’s sent away for lab testing. Police have sent hair samples to the state crime lab on the chance they don’t belong to the bovine.

Last year, the FBI in Oregon started receiving questions about cattle mutilations in Central and Eastern Oregon, according to Beth Anne Steele, spokesperson for the FBI Portland office. But despite sporadic media inquiries, the office does not have a current role in the cattle mutilation investigations, Steele wrote to The Bulletin.

FIRE

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prescribed fire, some using drip torches to ignite grass, while others patrolled to make sure the flames stayed within the designated areas.

Lewis said a prescribed fire, in addition to killing saplings, also can creep up the trunks of mature ponderosas, pruning some of the lower limbs and, as he puts it, “raising the ladder” of the fuels.

Forest officials fear crown fires not only because those blazes can spread rapidly, but because they also can kill a mature tree.

The prescribed fire, by contrast, mainly stayed on or close to the ground.

Prescribed fires occasionally scorch the needles of mature pines, turning the green needles to red, said Steve Hawkins, deputy fire staff fuels program manager for the Wallowa-Whitman.

A prescribed fire in October 2007 that included some of the same ground burned on April 15 left many ponderosas with that rusty-red appearance. Some people who drove past the trees on Highway 7 complained to the Wallowa-Whitman, wondering why the agency tasked with protecting trees would have purposely killed them with fire.

But almost all of those trees survived, Hawkins said — the needle damage was superficial, not fatal.

Pandemic prevented prescribed burning throughout 2020

The April 15 fire was something of a milestone, said Kendall Cikanek,



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Members of the La Grande Hot Shots firefighting crew use drip torches to ignite dry grass for a prescribed burn Thursday, April 15, 2021, north of Phillips Reservoir. The torches contain a mix of diesel and gasoline.

ranger for the Whitman District, which includes the Phillips Reservoir area.

“It’s exciting to get back to spring burning,” Cikanek said.

Spring typically brings the ideal conditions for prescribed burning — fuels aren’t so dry that a fire is likely to burn out of control, but not so damp that flames won’t move.

But in 2020, with the pandemic just beginning and rampant uncertainty, the Wallowa-Whitman canceled its spring prescribed burning schedule.

“That was a risk we didn’t want to take,” Cikanek said.

In addition to questions about the likelihood of spreading the virus

among fire crews, Cikanek said forest officials wanted to avoid creating smoke, which could exacerbate health problems for people afflicted with the respiratory illness.

Conditions on April 15 were close to ideal, he said.

With steady winds blowing from the northeast and north, smoke was generally pushed away from Baker Valley, although smoke settled into the Sumpter Valley on the evening of April 15 and Friday morning, April 16.

Frequent fires reduce fuel on the ground

Before the Forest Service started fighting fires a little more than a cen-

tury ago, wildfires, mainly low-intensity ground blazes, swept through the pine forests in this part of Sumpter Valley on average every seven to 15 years, Hawkins said.

These estimates are based on studies of fire scars on old-growth ponderosas in similar areas.

Prescribed fires are designed to mimic those historical blazes, which were ignited either by lightning or by Native Americans.

The April 15 fire was the third prescribed blaze the Wallowa-Whitman has lit in the past 40 or so years in the strip between the reservoir and Highway 7, Hawkins said.

He described the fire as a “maintenance burn,” one intended to reduce the accumulation of fuel on the ground.

Hawkins said the flames will have other benefits, including spurring the growth of grasses and shrubs, such as bitterbrush, that are important forage for deer and other wildlife.

The area around Phillips Reservoir is an important part of the forest, he said, being a popular spot for hiking and mountain biking.

The April 15 fire also will help protect the Forest Service’s Union Creek Campground, Lewis said.

He said the prescribed fire burned through parts of the campground, reducing the fuel loads in that highly used area (the campground isn’t yet open for the season).

Crews burned more acres near the west end of the reservoir on April 16, Cikanek said, and workers patrolled the area through the weekend.

CENTER

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“I still cannot believe it,” Kausler said.

The complex has a new place in the Union community, one that guests can discover Saturday, April 24, during an open house from 4-8 p.m.

Those attending will learn of how the Catherine Creek Community Center’s old Methodist Church building is now a chapel available to all denominations for religious services, weddings, funerals and more. The building, constructed in 1905, served as a Union Methodist Church until 2019 when it closed because of declining membership. The Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church assumed ownership of the building plus its fellowship hall and parsonage building.

LaVon Hall said she and others feared the worst if the the Friends of the Historic Union Community Hall had not purchased the building complex.

“We were worried that if someone else bought it, it might be made into a bed-and-breakfast or torn down so that the bricks (of the old church building) could be sold,” said Hall, a member of the Historic Union Community Hall Board.

This would have been tragic in Hall’s eyes because the building complex is such an integral part of Union’s history. It has been the site of milestone moments for community members, including weddings, baptisms, celebrations of anniversaries and birthdays, plus Sunday school sessions and plenty of youth gatherings.

Had the complex been torn down, the old church’s bell, which can easily be rung in its tower by pulling a second-floor rope that comes through a ceiling, would have been lost.

“A lot of people want to know if the bell still rings. They tell stories of sneaking up and ringing it,” Hall said.

The old church’s interior wooden architecture and dozens of stained glass windows also could have been destroyed. The stained glass windows include several behind the altar area that have not been seen in six decades. The windows have been hidden since 1954 when the fellowship hall, which is connected to the back of the altar, was built, Hall said.

The fellowship hall, as part of the Catherine Creek Community Center, will be available to rent for events such as wedding receptions, baby showers and other celebrations. The fellowship hall also will be a site for Union County Food Bank distribution and other community activities.

The parsonage, a one-story home built around 1930, is serving as a rental. Hall said income from the rental, which is being leased six months at a time, will help pay off a loan the nonprofit took to raise a portion of the \$25,000 to purchase the complex.

The Friends of the Historic Union Community Hall was created as a nonprofit in February 2020 and was able to raise the \$25,000 for the purchase of the buildings in a year. Hall said the nonprofit’s fundraising was boosted by help from an anonymous donor.

She said the effort to save the property “is an example of a community working together.”

Hall and Kausler are among the six members of the Historic Union Community Hall Board. The others are board president Terra Richter, Geneva Williams, Lori Baird and Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage.

The board’s fundraising work is not over. The organization needs money for the upkeep of the Catherine Creek Community Center and to pay off the loan.

Fundraising activities on tap for the Friends of the Historic Union Community

Hall include a raffle at the April 24 open house. Raffle prizes include an electric guitar, a cord of wood, a \$100 Union Market gift certificate and two paintings.

The success the Friends of the Historic Union Community Hall has experienced in saving the old Methodist Church complex is a credit, Hall said, to more than generous community support.

“We had to have divine intervention for so many things to fall into place,” Hall said.

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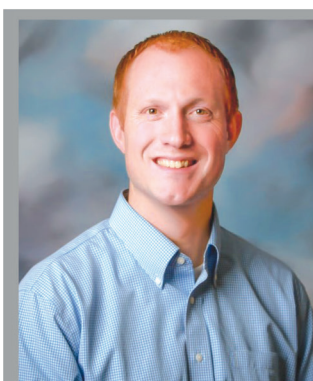
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