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Livestock

Rancher takes different tack on wolf depredation

By LEE JUILLERAT
For the Capital Press

The recent killings of three calves by wolves in Jackson County, Ore., probably by members of the Rogue Pack, hit close to home for Mark Coats, who advocates a predator awareness program he believes can reduce such incidents by wolves, coyotes and other carnivores.

Coats, who has cattle operations in Siskiyou County in far Northern California and Klamath and Jackson counties in Oregon, said the attacks happened on a neighbor's land.

"My cows turned out fine," he said. "I'm confident in my cows' ability to stand off predators," explaining he routinely takes steps to retrain his herds.

Coats doesn't necessarily like it, but he accepts the fact that wolves have become a fixture in Oregon and parts of Northern California.

"The wolf is a carnivore. Killing is what he does. By the laws of the ESA we can't do a lot," said Coats, referring to protections to wolves mandated under the federal Endangered Species Act. "We need to learn how to stay in business in his presence."

Over the past six years Coats has been studying and implementing new ways of preventing cattle deaths by predators, including wolves, coyotes and mountain lions. He has been working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on creating a predator awareness program he believes can successfully reduce or eliminate predation deaths.

"What they need is the individualized chase," where a wolf or wolves isolate a cow or calf from the herd, then



Courtesy of Mark Coats

Cattle form a defensive group, which rancher Mark Coats trained them to do when threatened by a predator. In the foreground is a guard dog. Studies indicate wolves typically do not attack groups of livestock, Coats said.

chase, immobilize and eat the animal, which is often still alive. "We're trying to interrupt that. That is the key."

The key, he believes, is training cattle to gather in herds when threatened by wolves or other potential killers.

Coats began researching wolf and cattle behavior six years ago when OR-7, then a lone male gray wolf that for several years was electronically tracked after it left the Imnaha Pack in northeast Oregon, passed through his lands near the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge along the Oregon-California state line. During his wanderings in Southern Oregon and Northern California, OR-7 eventually found a breeding female. The pack has grown and also includes OR-7's grandchildren.

"My phone was ringing off the hook because I was the cattlemen's president," remembers Coats, who served as the Siskiyou County Cattlemen's Association president for three years, of what spurred his interest. "I started doing a lot of research on what cattlemen can do."

What cattlemen and oth-

ers can do is limited. Wolves east of Highway 395, which slices through Washington, Oregon and California, are not protected by the ESA but wolves west of the highway are protected, which restricts ways cattle ranchers and others can deal with potential depredation threats. Coats said various studies, including research done in Yellowstone National Park, show threats can be reduced or eliminated if cattle are taught to group together and not to flee or run.

"The fear of the wolf is still there. There are no sound practices to deter him," Coats said of concerns by livestock owners who are legally prevented from killing wolves. "We cannot manage them with any effective measure."

Instead of hunting or trapping wolves, he believes the predator awareness program is a viable alternative. "When wolves confront livestock, they (livestock) get fearful for their lives. Once they reach the group, the pressure is relieved. A defensive standing posture will deter wolves. What we're encouraging is a defensive posture of moving

to the herd."

He said studies indicate wolves do not attack groups of livestock, choosing instead to chase individual animals. According to Coats, previous studies showed that wolves will leave if livestock remain still and in groups. While he is focused on cattle, he said the group-and-stand theory applies to other livestock. "We always saw losses to coyotes, but since we've worked with this program we haven't had any losses to mammals."

"Training can last several months or, if done intensely, seven to 10 days," he said. "And it continually needs to be tuned up. The cow must understand it is its decision to return to the herd. ... A key is training them to stand and not run or flee."

Studies indicate cattle can check attacks by gathering in groups as few as three, although he prefers groups of 10 to 12. In more open areas, such as the Wood River Valley south of Crater Lake National Park, he promotes having groups of 40 or 50.

He hopes to make his findings more available through a series of workshops.

Workshop helps identify livestock predators

By KATY NESBITT
For the Capital Press

VALE, Ore. — As wolves continue to disperse throughout the state law enforcement officials and ranchers are learning how to determine whether livestock was killed by wolves or another predator.

Todd Nash, a Wallowa County rancher who attended the meeting, said the instructors, Canadian conservation officers James Barber and Jesse Jones, talked about looking at the totality of information at hand when investigating livestock that appears to be killed by a predator.

During an investigation, the instructors noted the type and age of the livestock and whether the rancher had previous problems with any particular predator.

Then, Nash said, they moved on to obvious things such as ruling out bears in the winter and looking for tracks, bite marks and attack sites.

Various predators kill differently, the instructors said. When bears attack, they maul, using their paws, but not always their claws. He said bears get on the back of their prey and often attack the withers, the ridge between an animal's shoulder blades.

Differentiating between coyotes and wolves is largely determined by the spacing of their teeth. Also, wolves are bigger and stronger and can take on larger prey. Both canine predators use their teeth, but coyotes are multiple biters, leaving more bite marks than wolves.

Cougars are more strategic and typically kill their prey by clamping down with one bite.

Oregon ranchers whose livestock and working dogs have been proven killed by a wolf can apply for compensation under a program administered by the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

Jerome Rosa, the Oregon Cattlemen's Association executive director, said his organization was a supporter of the training, which was sponsored by the Malheur County Sheriff's Office.

"With the Oregon wolf population increasing 30 percent per year and limited qualified personnel to confirm depredations, this program is another tool in the toolbox to manage escalating conflicts between predators, livestock and humans," Rosa said.

Following a string of investigations into dead cattle presumed killed by wolves, Travis Johnson, Malheur County's under sheriff, said there was an interest in getting additional training in necropsies.

"Part of the reason we want to bring this in is so we will all be better educated," Johnson said.

The deputies have had a couple of classes, Johnson said, and have worked closely with Wallowa County Sheriff Steve Rogers and Chief Dep-



EO Media Group File

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist Pat Matthews, left, uses shears on the carcass of a Sept. 29 wolf depredation on private land at Marr Flat, southeast of Joseph, Ore. The calf and land belong to Wallowa County commissioner and rancher Todd Nash. Cowboys Wyatt Warnock, center, and Clancy Warnock, right, who work for Nash, look on. Law enforcement officials and ranchers recently met to learn how to identify which predators have killed livestock.

uty Fred Steen, who are well familiar with investigating whether livestock was killed by wolves.

Wolf attacks on livestock started in 2009 when lambs and a calf were killed outside Baker City. Steen said shortly after wolves began killing cattle in Wallowa County in the spring of 2010 he attended training in Enterprise led by Rick Williams, a USDA Wildlife Services agent from Idaho, and a workshop hosted by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in La Grande.

But the bulk of his expertise in animal necropsies, he said, was in the field investigating dead livestock with Marlyn Riggs, who was Wallowa County's Wildlife Services field agent until 2014.

Steen said he attended the workshop in Malheur County "to see how these Canadian conservation officers work through their process."

Like the Wallowa County sheriff's office, Johnson said when his deputies investigate a potential wolf kill they treat the area like a crime scene and contact the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. A veterinarian who is on Malheur County's wolf compensation committee has assisted with necropsies and trained the deputies.

An investigation of an animal presumed killed by a predator attempts to determine if the animal was killed or if it died of other causes and was eaten by wolves afterward.

"We want to try and be able to differentiate between different kills," Johnson said. "With each predator the kill characteristics are different. All are very distinct and some distinctions are very nuanced."

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife has hosted a few workshops with Wildlife Services, Roblyn Brown, Oregon's wolf coordinator, said.

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