

Wolves kill calf near Keating

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KEATING — Wolves killed a 500-pound, year-old calf near Keating late Monday, Jan. 24, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife confirmed after an investigation the following day.

A rancher found the dead calf on the morning of Tuesday, Jan. 25, on a 25-acre private pasture near Tucker Creek, according to ODFW.

Tucker Creek flows into the Powder River near Keating School, at the intersection of Keating Cutoff Road, Keating Grange Road and Miles Bridge Road.

Brian Ratliff, district wildlife biologist at ODFW's Baker City office, said on Friday morning, Jan. 28, that the rancher who owns the calf has done "everything right" to avoid attracting wolves to the property, and has also been instrumental in the past in encouraging other ranchers to bury carcasses and take other steps to thwart wolves.

Ratliff said that in the most recent confirmed wolf attack in the Keating Valley — a herding dog killed on a ranch on Friday, Jan. 14 — six unburied cow carcasses attracted wolves.

Although the area where the calf was killed is within the known range of the Keating Pack, none of the four wolves from the pack fitted with tracking collars had been in the area the night the calf was killed.

Ratliff said he has flown over the area in a helicopter three times this week, most recently on Thursday, Jan. 27, but didn't see any wolves on those flights.

He said it's possible that uncollared wolves from the Keating pack killed the calf.

It's also possible that wolves that aren't part of any pack have moved into

the area and have not been identified.

"We don't know at this point," Ratliff said.

He said late January and early February is a common time for young adult wolves to disperse from packs.

The Keating pack consists of at least 10 wolves.

With calving season underway on some ranches and starting soon on others, Ratliff said he understands the anxiety resulting from the two recent wolf attacks in Keating Valley.

"Everybody's really on high alert because calving season is just starting," he said.

Ratliff said ranchers in the Keating area have set up a text message group that allows them to spread information — such as the attack on the calf this week — rapidly.

"It's a good way to quickly tell a bunch of people, your neighbors," Ratliff said.

Depredation report

The carcass of the calf found on Tuesday, Jan. 25, was mostly intact but the organs and most of the hide and muscle tissue from the calf's hind-quarters had been eaten, according to the ODFW report.

ODFW biologists who examined the carcass said the calf had died the preceding night.

They found a struggle scene in the snow about 20 yards in diameter, with fresh calf and wolf tracks, and blood.

Biologists shaved and skinned the carcass. They found multiple premortem tooth scrapes on the remaining hide on the left rear leg above the hock, as well as premortem tooth scrapes on the calf's throat and back.

The size and location of the tooth scrapes are consistent with wolf attacks on calves, the biologists concluded.



Peter Nilsson/Contributed Photo

Elk gather in this undated photo at Peter Nilsson's farm outside La Grande. He says he loves watching the bald eagles and moose that show up on his farm by the river. And he thinks elk are cool, too. But not when an entire herd parties all winter at his spread, eating his hay.

Gangs of elk feast on hay

Drought, heavy snows drive hungry animals into farm country

By ANNA KING
Northwest Public Broadcasting

LA GRANDE — Anthony Leggett's farm is nestled in the foothills outside Anthony Lakes in Eastern Oregon.

He grows pasture grass and beardless barley and puts up big stacks of hay to earn extra money for his young family. Leggett's farm costs include equipment, chemicals, fencing and fertilizers. But hay makes money.

"Your hay is your paycheck," Leggett said. "That's how you pay your bills, that's how you support your family. And they just take it. You know, they're animals — that's what they do."

He said it's a frustrating situation and he does his best to safely haze the animals.

Across the West, widespread drought has left elk, deer and even wild turkeys hungry and in poor condition — even a bit desperate.

Elk are even attacking farmers' haystacks in Washington and Oregon. Record snow across much of the Northwest's mountains has driven animals down to the lowlands — in gangs. And climate scientists say things may only get worse in the future.

Hay prices are up
Joey McCanna spends a



Peter Nilsson/Contributed Photo

Elk can undercut a haystack by eating at their neck height, destabilizing the bales. Many commercial bales can weigh more than a ton each. Sometimes those destabilized bales can fall on the animals and kill them.

lot of his winter teaching hay growers and ranchers how to build elk-proof electric fencing.

"The other big thing we have going on, that we have staff kind of running frantic on, is we have a lot of elk damage," McCanna said on a recent wildlife management Zoom. "Elk getting into haystacks is one of the big ones."

McCanna is an expert on resolving wildlife conflicts with humans for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. He teaches farmers how to set up automatic propane cannons to haze them with noise. But elk are smart, and it doesn't always work.

This year, drought has

upped the stakes — hay prices are up across the West.

"This summer was very hot and dry. And alfalfa and grass hay is at a premium right now," McCanna said.

Floods and fires

Meade Krosby is a senior scientist at the University of Washington's Climate Impacts Group in Seattle.

"So one of the primary ways that wildlife respond to changing climate is by moving," Krosby said. "They shift their ranges — they want to track the change in climate as it happens."

She said now, more than ever before, animals will need to move quickly. Climate-induced floods and fires in the Northwest are dramatically pushing animals around on the landscape. She said wildlife will need safe corridors to run for it.

"They have to move so fast, but they have all this stuff in the way," Krosby said. "They have roads and highways in the way, they have cities in the way, agricultural areas. And all of these form these barriers to wildlife getting to where they need to go to shift their ranges to adapt to climate change."

Starving with a belly full of hay

Making things worse, elk can starve on hay.

Elk have four-chambered guts that change their bacteria with the season and what's available to eat. In the spring and summer, bacte-

ria colonies adjust to digest green shoots and high-protein feed. But in the fall and winter, gut bacteria are essentially programmed to eat big quantities of dried twigs and grasses with a lower energy content.

"The bug is clostridium perfringens," Colin Gillin explained. He's the state vet for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"It's a bacteria that all ruminants carry in their guts; it's just you don't want that clostridium to get out of control," Gillin said. "And it's when you throw corn in there, it starts to have a party."

In this case, the corn is hay.

The bacteria break down the walls of the stomach and intestines, so an elk can starve to death with a belly full of alfalfa.

'Elk curtains'

At the Northwest Hay Expo in Kennewick, mostly men, mostly unmasked, roam around the great hall, slapping hands and checking out the latest in twine, balers and tarping technology. Pamphlets, ball caps and squishy stress-balls shaped like little tractors litter vendor's tables.

A vendor motions to a passing farmer, "Hiya, how you? Enjoying your day so far?"

Clint Vieu is from Walla Walla. He's with a major tarping services company called ITC Services out of Moses Lake. He said one solution for growers is to install "elk curtains" that are tarps covering the sides of big stacks. Left unprotected, Vieu said, "Stacks have fallen on elk 'cause they'll eat into it so much that it will actually destabilize the stack and it will collapse and fall in on the animals."

'It's life'

Every year, elk bust up Anthony Leggett's fences to get to his hay and crops. And every year, he fixes them again.

"You know, if I chase them off my property, they just go to the neighbor's property and get into their haystack," Leggett said.

Still, Leggett has made his peace with the elk.

"We just happen to live in a spot where there's a trail that they come down on," he said. "For us, it's life."

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