

Strategies for Coexisting with Wolves

by Gail Kimberling
of the Hells Canyon Journal

Few ranchers, Hilary Anderson says, can run a viable operation in the midst of wolves.

Yet, Anderson and her husband, Andrew, have defied the odds by operating a successful and thriving cattle ranch in an area filled with grizzly bears and wolves in northwestern Montana.

It was a conscious effort born of frustration from the lack of assistance by local wildlife officials – an effort that involved dedication and trial and error.

"We were thoroughly invested in making it work, that was the critical piece," Anderson said.

Brought to the Panhandle by Pine Valley ranchers Sheila and Barry DelCurto, Anderson was the featured speaker at the "Strategies for Ranching on a Landscape with Wolves" workshop held January 10-11 in the Halfway Lions Hall.

A wildlife biologist in addition to being a rancher, Anderson spent considerable time during the workshop discussing specific methods the couple developed to successfully coexist with natural predators, from reducing the vulnerability of their herd to increasing range utilization.

"There has been an instrumental shift in how we do things, and it's been really, really valuable for us," Anderson said.

Low Stress Livestock Handling

One of the first practices the Andersons utilized was low stress livestock handling (LSLH). A technique already popular with horse owners (it's also known as "natural horsemanship"), Anderson said the method depends on "clear communication in terms the cow understands."

Whit Hibbard, a Montana rancher who promotes low stress livestock handling, defines the practice as "a livestock-centered, behaviorally correct, psychology-oriented, ethical and humane method of working livestock which is based on mutual communication and understanding, not coercion."

By comparison, Anderson said conventional livestock handling is human-centered and physically-based. In conventional livestock handling the cattle are expected to be difficult and unruly and are therefore treated accordingly, with force and coercion.

Using videos to demonstrate the difference between the two methods, Anderson explained, "A big key in low stress stockmanship is knowing how to get out of the way, or not getting in the way in the first place. This helps avoid panic. The cows remain calm and in a mental state where they can think. It also takes less time, effort and manpower to complete the task."

Anderson said the foundations of low stress livestock handling are:

Mindset: "Taking responsibility and empowering yourself to make the switch to get where you need to go."

Attitude: "Be positive, confident, dedicated, decisive and willing to make mistakes. Cows are constantly present right in that moment, and as you work with them you need to be present in that moment, too – not on the cell phone or thinking of dinner."

Preparing animals: "Establish trust and familiarity, and work with their mind to work with you."

Anderson admitted the method takes time, commitment and routine.

"You can't start doing this with 1,000 head scattered throughout the country. It comes back to little moments day to day," she said. "We need to use small ways to make them comfortable with the process and avoid pressure."

The basic premise, Anderson said, is keeping the animals in a normal frame of mind to avoid a fight-or-flight response.

She explained cattle want to be in a herd and go with other animals in the direction they are headed. But they also want to see what is pressuring them so it's important to always stay out of their blind spot, Anderson added.

"Under excess pressure they want to move back to where they came from," she said. "You need to outthink them."

Anderson continued, "Everything you do has meaning for the cows, whether you intend it or not. There are tons of small opportunities throughout the day to make adjustments that make a difference."

Using low stress livestock handling can improve quality of life, efficiency and production, which all leads to more profitability, Anderson said, adding, "We all have a great skill set. This is our way of life, and it's just a different way of looking at it. It has made us more successful and brought us joy."

Rekindling the Herd

Low stress livestock handling can also help rekindle

the herd instinct and enhance the mother-baby bond, Anderson said.

"We wanted to rekindle the herd instinct to reduce vulnerability. We didn't arrive at this because someone told us, but it happened through observation and trial and error," she stated.

While in a herd, cattle are less likely to panic or make deadly split-second decisions, Anderson said.

"All ungulates can distinguish between predatory and non-predatory moves," she continued. "We need to take responsibility for our relationship with our livestock and not be the equivalent of wolves in the minds of cattle. You don't want cows to respond to predatory-type pressure and you don't want the cows' mindset to switch to the 'flight' zone. You want to give a cow time to think and respond positively to you or your dog."

Anderson said the pressure zone is different with different individuals within the herd, and producers must act accordingly. She also said the couple spends considerable time reinforcing the behaviors they want by taking new cattle on dry runs across scales and through pens, comingling new cattle with older animals to unify the herd, and working with calves right from birth.

"Babies are the most susceptible to predation, and if we can keep babies with mothers and mothers with mothers we can minimize the loss," Anderson said. "Our goal is to enhance and not otherwise detract from the mother-baby bond."

Emphasizing the significant impact of these practices, Anderson noted they have only suffered the depredation of one calf out of 61 herds in five years.

"As managers we can bring out what cattle have going for them," she stated. "Every day, whatever we do has to have meaning to the cows and translate into behaviors we want to see."

Increasing Human Presence

The term "ranger riding" has different meanings to different people, Anderson said when discussing the need to increase human presence on their land.

"It can be a volatile," she admitted.

Some range riders are hired to basically use telemetry to track and report collared wolves, while others focus on observation, herd management, engaging with the landscape, and communicating with landowners.

"There is no one way to do it," Anderson said. "Range riding can be done by individuals on their own ranch or through a community effort. Either way, the rider needs to be there to support YOU. You don't want someone with their own plan and to lose the trust of the community and other ranchers."

"Our definition and application turned out to be different," she continued. "We don't care about what wolves are doing 'out there,' we want to know what wolves are doing with our herd and that our livestock are OK."

Anderson added the use of range riders should be ground up, instead of top down, and she mentioned some ranching communities are using federal and/or local funds to hire range riders.

"They are paying thousands of dollars to hire riders to be out there just looking around, but it's expensive and not sustainable," Anderson commented. "What happens when funding runs out?"

For the Andersons, the use of individual range riders is cost effective and quickly paid for itself.

Previously, it would take the couple eight to ten hours to find just 50 to 70 percent of their scattered herd. Now, Anderson said, they can find 100 percent of the herd in just an hour or two.

"You minimize the vulnerability of cattle by increasing human presence and gathering the herd," Anderson said.

She added increased human presence can also help ranchers obtain real-time information from the landscape, haze predators, remove or doctor sick animals, and find carcasses in a timely manner and respond accordingly.

Carcass Management

A common misconception,

Anderson said, is once wolves get taste of beef they will always choose cattle over wild ungulates.

"They eat what they can kill, and they kill what they can capture," Anderson said.

At the same time, wolves are opportunists and will scavenge whatever is easiest, from old bone piles to carcasses.

With that in mind, Anderson said they developed two goals for carcass management on their Montana ranch: decrease the encounter rate and prevent habituation.

"Wolves and bears get used to where a food source is if ranchers dump (carcasses) in the same area," Anderson said. "We have found bone piles, even really old ones, are such



Photo courtesy of Sheila DelCurto

BARRY DELCURTO INSTALLS FLADRY FENCING

around his calving area in Pine Valley. Fladry can be used with or without electric fencing as a temporary deterrent to wolves.

a strong attraction that wolves and bears will alter their usual patterns to access the piles. And what happens is you have predators concentrated in an area seeking a food source and then they come in contact with live cattle, increasing the encounter rate."

Anderson said in one instance, ten cows were killed on a nearby ranch before the owner figured out an old bone pile was attracting predators to the area. "The only thing to do is kill the predator or change the circumstances to make cattle less vulnerable," Anderson said.

Anderson said ranchers in the Blackfoot watershed of Montana collaborated with environmental groups and the state fish and wildlife department to create a carcass pick-up program; in other areas, Anderson said, counties have established dump sites.

Local rancher Sheila DelCurto said carcass dumping is a big problem in the Panhandle, not just by producers but also by hunters. DelCurto is worried the carcasses will bring more wolves into Pine Valley, further endangering cattle.

"It's a major thing we need to address, and we want to get the word out," DelCurto said.

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett, who is also a rancher, said the county is looking at ways to assist with the problem through enforcement and carcass removal.

"We can talk to ODOT [Oregon Department of Transportation] and say we have a problem and they may be receptive," Bennett said. "But as producers you have to pre-plan to help reduce wolf attractants. If the ground freezes four feet deep you just can't go out and dig a hole."

Other methods to eliminate and/or reduce carcass attractants include using landfills, incineration, composting, and speeding up decomposition.

"On the open range you can move the carcass away from areas where cattle congregate," Anderson added.

Additional management methods discussed by Anderson included:

Synchronized Birthing and Illnesses

Long calving periods, or trickle calving, leaves young cows especially vulnerable to predators. Anderson said they have changed to synchronized birthing on their ranch to shorten the calving season; they also make sure calving is done as far as possible from known predator routes.

The Andersons also pay close attention to sick or injured cattle, immediately treating the animals to reduce opportunities for predation.

"All of our wolf predation last year was in the fall on several animals sick with pneumonia. Both my neighbors and I lost animals due to wolves," Anderson said. "We found the cows right away and treated them and didn't have any more problems. But our neighbor didn't, and he has continued to have problems. He viewed it as a wolf problem and then killed ten wolves, but it still didn't change his bottom line."

Ground Cover and Movement

When ever possible, Anderson urged producers to pay close attention to the terrain and ground cover where cattle graze, as landscape features can be used to outcompete predators.

She said, "With cattle this is a very important component to consider. If there is less than ideal footing it increases vulnerability."

The same can be said for vegetation, and Anderson explained, "The element of surprise is a game changer. Low visibility areas are tricky because cows will be able to smell wolves and bears, but they can't calculate the threat. To have something jump out of sagebrush or trees can be really scary."

Anderson added caribou and bison move constantly to avoid predation, and ranchers can apply the same concept, but on

a smaller scale, to cattle herds.

"There was an incident where a wolf killed a bison and that night the bison herd moved 50 miles," Anderson said. "It's all about spacing and movement. We have used this, and it's been extremely valuable for us."

Physical Barriers: Anderson said they have had limited success on their ranch with a variety of predator deterrents and physical barriers.

Trail cameras provide awareness and "extremely valuable information," but operation and placement take considerable skill, Anderson said.

Radio-activated guard systems, or RAG boxes, feature a strobe light, loudspeakers and an internal computer to collect and store information received from wolf radio collars. The boxes are generally placed on a fence line and programmed to emit sound and light whenever it picks up a signal from a radio collar.

Although initially effective, Anderson said wolves soon lose their fear of the boxes with repeated exposure.

Temporary electric fencing can be effective for short-term, high intensity grazing. "It reinforces the herding goal where and when it works," Anderson said, "but you have to be on a four-wheeler stringing up fence instead of on a horse riding with cattle."

She added the same goes for high tensile fencing, depending on whether it's used for smaller operations or open range conditions.

Fladry fences are very effective but also labor intensive. Used with or without electrified fencing, fladry involves red flags hung at 18-inch intervals along a thin rope. Anderson doesn't recommend fladry for large areas, "but it's worked great for us on a small scale in the short term," for example, during calving.

Anderson added the placement and maintenance of fladry is important. "I've never had wolves breach a fladry fence unless there was some kind of gap," she said.

Goals, Obstacles and Solutions

Anderson asked workshop attendees to discuss and share their goals, obstacles and solutions.

Goals ranged from profitability and maintaining a viable family tradition of ranching to reacting proactively to the wolf issue.

Obstacles included lack of space (land), politics, financial burdens, and environmental stressors such as wolves and sage grouse.

Solutions mentioned were increasing livestock numbers and communication – with other ranchers, the public and governmental agencies.

Anderson said the question for each producer to ask is: "Can you ride it out and get to a place where you can work it out? Are we building an operation that can ride out one storm after another?"

She added, "Managing all of these peripheral storms is exhausting, so we need to focus on building a strong core."

Anderson said she and her husband have learned, "The human/wildlife conflict often has much less to do with the wildlife and a lot more to do with the humans, and the success of one does not have to be contingent on the failure of the other. Both can be made better. It's hard to invest in your best if you are defending yourself from the worst."

"We have worked on building a foundation of social resilience through incentive, safety, trust and communication," Anderson said. "You don't need to wait until there is a crisis, until there is something too great to lose. The common goal for us was just one thing: it required the investment of the people who were there living it."