

Friday, February 28, 2014

Co-existing with Coyotes

I often wonder when people move in beside an airport and then complain about the noise from the planes. Usually the next step is for them to petition to prevent expansion or even have the airport shut down.

The same could be said when we put a farm with livestock into coyote territory and claim to have a coyote problem. In truth the coyotes have human problem but laying blame doesn't get us anywhere.

Coyotes and humans both want the use of the same piece of property. It is up to us to figure out a way to co-exist. It is possible and more importantly it is desirable because despite what many think, coyotes serve a very valuable role in the ecosystem by cleaning up carrion and controlling rodents and other nuisance wildlife.

When we first started farming we were raising horses and never really felt threatened by coyotes. Oh sure they were there but they didn't bother the horses. Nothing like half a ton of annoyed mare to teach a wayward coyote youngster some respect. I actually liked watching the coyotes pouncing on mice when I was raking hay. They didn't bother us and we didn't bother them.

Several years ago we started to raise sheep and my heart raced every time I heard a coyote sing. I heard many shepherds talk about their problems with coyotes, the kills and efforts to eradicate them. It sounded like an ever escalating arms war with no end in sight.

Maybe it is my background as a biologist that make me think that there has to be a better way. We have coyotes in this area. There is no doubt about that. We also wanted to raise sheep. Therefore it was up to us to protect our sheep.

All the evidence pointed to the use of guardian animals with guardian dogs being the most effective in protecting your flock. So we got a Maremma pup. As our flock expanded we got more dogs to the point now we run three Maremmas. While I feel the dogs are effective they are not without their problems but that goes beyond this blog post and I have discussed some of the problems in a previous post. All that being said, I would not have sheep without guardian dogs.

Next is fencing. That is an ongoing battle with us as we convert out fencing from being horse proof to being sheep and coyote proof. There are many manuals and articles out there on building proper coyote proof fencing. The one recommendation that I have from experience is do it right the first time. We have wasted more money doing a poor job two and three times rather than doing a good job once. We do like the electric net fencing but like the permanent fencing you get what you pay for.

We started by bringing the sheep into an enclosure close to the barn every night. Maybe that works for protecting the sheep from coyotes but it exposed them to high concentrations of

parasites. Shepherds talk about the two "Ps" as problems with sheep: parasites and predators. While a sheep killed by a predator is dramatic and distressing, I truly believe that parasites have the greater economic impact on a flock. We took a deep breath and left the sheep out in the pastures at night. And no dead sheep! We rotate our pastures on a regular basis and the pasture size is small enough that the dogs can easily patrol the area.

There are other things we do that are just common sense though unfortunately not necessarily common practice. We are very careful about how we handle our dead stock. Dead lambs or chickens are buried deep and far from the main farming area. Larger dead stock are removed from the property and taken to the dead stock dealer. Placentas are removed from birth pens and either buried or permanently disposed of. If required they are sealed and frozen until they can be removed permanently. We never feed dead stock to our guardian dogs. They are given large beef bones but never are given lamb or mutton bones. We actually avoid any dog food that contains sheep. That may be extreme but it doesn't make sense to avoid baiting coyotes and not do the same with our dogs. Plus there are some major parasite reasons to avoid feeding sheep to our dogs.

We have used strobe lights. I don't know if they are effective. They are expensive, the sheep hang out around them like they are disco lights and the dogs usually eat them. At \$90 a pop they are pretty expensive dog treats.

It also pays to get to know your neighbor (I am not convinced they are our enemy). For example right now you might be hearing a lot of coyotes because it is breeding season. Over the years we believe that the pack that uses the territory that includes our farm really are not interested in our sheep. We have never had a kill and we are very careful to leave the existing pack alone. First I do not want to fix something that is not broken. Second I do not want to invite another pack into the area that may not be as live and let live with our flock. Finally I do not want to trigger a reproduction boom to respond to diminished coyote population in an area with plentiful prey. A good place to start your research is [CoyoteWatchCanada](#).

And that comes down to our final strategy. We have intentionally left a lot of wild areas on our farm and wild corridors throughout the farm for wildlife to move. This provides for habitat for natural prey species for coyotes. If there are sufficient rodents, raccoons, skunks, berries etc for coyotes to eat they have no reason to go after our flock. In general we wanted to make it easy for them to do the right thing and difficult to do the wrong thing. Coyotes are not stupid. They will not risk their life to get something to eat if there is something available that does not pose a risk.

In my opinion the biggest problems are found in areas where the only thing to eat is livestock. All natural habitat and natural prey species have been removed from an area. I liken it to going into suburbia wastelands where the only place to eat is a burger joint. If only one restaurant is available, that is where you are going to eat. Coyotes are the same.

If I go out and find a dead sheep am I going to change my tune. Maybe, but our first reaction will be what did we do wrong and fix it. I still think that we can co-exist with coyotes.

TTFN
Laurie