

Ranchers and Wolves:

A Better Way

By Carolyn Campbell, *AWA Conservation Specialist*



In the fall of 2014 I was lucky to meet two Alberta ‘pioneers’ I have admired for some time. They’re not the homesteader-type pioneer, but pioneers in the sense that they raise large herds of cattle and sheep in wilder parts of Alberta, while taking deliberate actions to co-exist with wolves. One lives in the rolling foothills of southwest Alberta, the other adjacent to a Wildland Provincial Park in the Peace country. Their attitudes and actions are a powerful inspiration for conservation-minded ranchers and all who value our large wild carnivores as part of what makes Alberta special.

Joe Engelhart is a range rider who works on the extensive public lands grazing leases of the Spruce Ranch Cooperative, south of Longview. The leaseholders count on him to keep watch on about 2,000 cow-calf pairs and 500 yearlings. He continues the long, proud tradition of the professional cowboy, but with a 21st century outlook. He’s a steward for the health of grazing lands and stream corridors and does as much as possible to reduce wolf and grizzly conflicts with cattle.

In 2003, a few years after Joe began working on the ranch, there were serious predation problems by the local wolf pack, named the Willow Creek pack: they lost 20 head of cattle to wolves. To put that in perspective, in a typical year they might lose 30 head to poisonous plants. But the stress to the livestock and the spike in predation was a problem they had to address. Biologist Charles Mamo, who had worked with other ranchers, came and collared some of the wolves. Joe learned how pack members used different areas, and he was fascinated by how close the wolves

were at times, without his knowing it.

The members of that pack, habituated to killing cattle, were almost all eventually shot or trapped. The last collared female paired up with a male from outside the area, and they became the alpha pair that re-established the Willow Creek pack. However, this time the terms were different. Joe watched their movements, was aware of den and rendezvous sites, and he managed cattle to minimize opportunities for predators. Although there are no radio collars on local wolves anymore, he continues to keep a close watch out for signs of wolves, bears and other wildlife in the area.

“Having a human presence out on the land is really important,” he told me. “I can reach all our lands in a long day’s ride.” Joe is out on the ranges most days. He works with hardy, high-stamina herding dogs developed

in New Zealand called Huntaways. They don’t defend against predators directly, but they keep the cows closer together and are essential in moving them from one area to the next.

“Wolves will take advantage of opportunities. Yearling cows are curious, inexperienced and somewhat reckless. I try not to put them out on the far west pastures anymore, or at least mix older, more experienced cattle in with them. Mother cows have better instincts to defend themselves and their calves. I use cross fences to keep cattle in an area, or a few more riders would do the job if you wanted fewer fences. As we’re able, we’re using less 3-strand barbed wire and more 2-strand electric on the closer fields, which is effective and better for wildlife.” Predation from wolves has been very low, with only one confirmed wolf livestock kill since 2008.



Louise works with Sarplaninac livestock guardian dogs, which in her experience have the right mix of aggression towards predators, calmness with humans, and bonding capacity with livestock. PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL

The Alberta government sets the terms of a compensation program for livestock producers who have stock either killed or injured by bears, wolves, cougars or eagles. When a producer suspects a predator-caused incident, a fish and wildlife enforcement officer comes to investigate. If, in the officer's opinion, the evidence points to a confirmed or probable predator kill or injury, a claim is filed. For a confirmed predation, the producer is paid the average commercial value for the animal when it was killed, with a minimum payment of \$400. For cattle less than a year old, a producer can choose compensation based on average prices the following October for a 550 pound animal. For a probable predation case, the producer is paid 50% of the loss if a confirmed kill by the same species is found within 10 kilometres and within 90 days before or after the incident. In mid-2014, the Alberta government reported to rural municipalities that "during the last three years, total annual compensation payments averaged \$267,000 with 12 per cent of claims denied. Denied claims could have resulted from ineligible livestock or predators and/or lack of evidence." There are no requirements to have predator deterrents in place.

The Alberta Conservation Association traditionally funded all predator compensation payments from hunting and fishing license fees, but payments have risen in recent years due to cattle prices and predation incidents. In 2014-15, the federal government is providing half of the program funding.

Alberta Wildlife Predator Compensation Program Incidents and Payments

Source: Alberta Conservation Association Annual Reports

	Wolf	Grizzly	Black Bear	Cougar	Eagle	Unidentified Predator	Total
Claims							
2013-14	167	53	15	18	3	11	267
2012-13	74	17	10	14	3	4	122
2011-12	176	20	16	12	0	4	228
2010-11	162	10	12	21	0	3	208
2009-10	127	10	7	8	3	19	174

Compensation, 000\$

2013-14	221	73	17	4	3	8	326
2012-13	83	19	12	8	1	3	126
2011-12	219	23	24	4	0	3	274
2010-11	165	9	10	9	0	2	194
2009-10	107	15	4	5	1	12	144

Note: Statistics Canada reports that between 2010 and 2014, the July 1 inventory of beef cattle on Alberta farms (cow-calf plus feeder-stocker operations, so excluding feedlots) was 4.3 million, give or take 100,000, and the July 1 inventory of sheep on Alberta farms was 200,000, give or take 5,000.

Alberta's predator compensation program (see inset) reduces livestock producers' financial loss from predation. Like many in the southwest Alberta ranching community, Joe supports somewhat higher payout rates to recognize rancher risks and loss. He also supports adding stronger incentives for producers to reduce predator opportunities

and attractants. Through partnerships such as the Waterton Biosphere carnivore program, many ranchers in the southern foothills have been Alberta leaders in programs such as secure storage and removal of stock carcasses. But there are no requirements to have these or other predator deterrents in place to qualify for compensation.

Joe strongly believes that livestock-habituated, problem wolves have to be killed, but with measured and humane methods. He values having a stable wolf pack in the area. As he sees it, random killing of non-problem wolves could cause a splinter pack to form or could bring in new wolves that cause more problems.

There is no wolf bounty sponsored by the municipal government on the grazing leases where Joe rides. However, at least 10 rural municipalities in Alberta now pay amounts from \$15 to \$500 per wolf killed within their districts, on public lands up to 8 kilometres away from grazing leases, or in some cases on traplines. The provincial government has authority over wildlife management, yet it looked the other way as this wave of new wolf bounties occurred since 2010. FOIPed documents obtained by AWA in 2011 revealed that the provincial carnivore specialist advised internally that indiscriminate bounties are ineffective. Wolves have high reproduction and dispersal capabilities, and wolves that aren't preying on livestock may be replaced by wolves that will. Subsequently, fish and wildlife officers quietly told several municipalities that bounties were ineffective in reducing predation.

Although there is little transparency about the scale of these bounties, AWA has compiled records indicating that municipal governments have paid out over \$315,000 to kill at least 1,100 wolves since 2010. Not surprisingly, there is no evidence that overall wolf populations or predation incidents have declined since bounties came into effect. There is also no information available about the harmful bykill to non-target species from use of inhumane and indiscriminate snares that are baited to catch wolves. In 2013 and 2014, international wolf scientists with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) called on the Alberta government to replace its outdated, ineffective bounties with modern, evidence-based management. The reply from ESRD Minister Robin Campbell was to suggest the scientists take their issues



To reduce opportunities for wolves in the rolling foothills landscape, Joe puts the older, more experienced cows rather than curious yearlings out on the further pastures.
PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL

to the municipalities. To date, the Alberta government cites the substantial overall Alberta wolf population as its rationale for dodging its responsibility to redirect wolf predation concerns into effective deterrent and management practices.

In northwest Alberta, Louise Liebenberg and her family have built the Grazerie, a thriving sheep and cattle ranching business, using a comprehensive approach to deter wolf and coyote predation. They had grazed sheep in the Netherlands and moved to Canada in search of wilder open spaces. They own 460 acres (about 200 hectares), half of which is open, half of which is forested and bushy close to a Wildland Provincial Park; they rent another 800 acres (or 300 hectares) of hay and pasture land. The Grazerie raises about

600 ewes with their lambs, and 50 cattle. “Ranchers own a lot of real estate and need to be prepared to share their lands,” Louise told me as we walked out to a pasture. “I have a responsibility to create areas on our ranch where wildlife, including predators, can exist. I also have a responsibility to keep our cattle and sheep safe.”

Reducing attractants and deterring predators is a cornerstone of their operations. Lambing takes place in heated pens in a large barn. The Grazerie removes all carcasses and other attractants to an on-farm composting area they have constructed. Out in the fields, active human presence and the constant watch of eight to ten guardian dogs establish a strong deterrent. The sheep are managed to stay closer together rather than scattering

widely. Adult guardian dogs remain with the flocks and swiftly deter any wolves or coyotes who test boundaries. As evening approaches, Louise or her husband work with border collies to bring the sheep into electric-fenced night corrals, and guardian dogs remain with the flock all night. During calving season, the guardian dogs are ‘on duty’ out in the field with expectant mother cows to ensure that any predators keep their distance.

Her choice of livestock guardian dog is the Sarplaninac. This breed originates from mountainous Macedonia in former Yugoslavia, where shepherds and dogs still work closely together to keep their flocks safe from wolves and bears. In her experience, this dog breed combines the right level of aggression towards larger preda-

tors, calmness around human handlers, and a strong capacity for bonding with sheep. Louise now raises pups to renew the Grazerie's guardian dog 'corps', and for other producers. When I visited in autumn 2014, the pups born early that year were in with the rams.

"I am predator friendly, but my dogs are not. They are there to ensure that the wolf or coyote realizes it isn't worth the trouble, and moves on." The Grazerie is in a rural municipality that has had a wolf bounty of \$300 per adult wolf since 2011. As a result, coyotes are the more common predator in the immediate vicinity now. In late 2013 a large coyote made the wrong choice, entering a night corral and her dogs quickly dispatched

it. In five years, Louise has lost one ewe and three lambs to predation. "And that was my fault, I had locked my dogs up in another part of the ranch. The coyote of course is an opportunist."

The Grazerie is the first ranch in Canada to be certified Wildlife Friendly and Predator Friendly. Louise maintains a fascinating blog about ranch life, including how their predator deterrence is applied year round. She doesn't believe the designation provides an economic benefit, as their products are too far from specialized markets to command a premium. But she values the Predator Friendly certification as a useful way to start conversations with other ranchers on co-existing responsibly with predators. "There

are a lot of conservation-minded ranchers out there, and this can help plant that seed, that they don't have to fear making the change."

Louise believes that killing a wolf that has been habituated to constantly prey on livestock is justified, but it should be the last option to use, not the first. She was one of the very few who spoke up publicly against her municipality's wolf bounty. In her view, the funds would be much better spent helping producers with incentives to reduce the root causes of predation. "Why couldn't municipal governments use those funds to assist ranchers to change, by sponsoring the cost of livestock guardian dogs and on-farm composting facilities?" she asks.

Louise is a strong advocate for ranching. Her challenge to AWA and other conservation groups is to become visibly stronger allies of ranchers on public lands, to support practical steps that improve livelihoods as well as the environment. In central Idaho's Sawtooth National Forest, a partnership of ranchers, three levels of government, and local wolf advocates has worked for six years, amidst wolf pack ranges, on effective non-lethal methods such as guardian dogs and electric fencing. One hundred thousand sheep and lambs have grazed across this project area, yet fewer than 30 sheep have been killed in the six years. A three-year South African scientific study of 11 farms, published in 2014, found that adopting non-lethal predator control yielded significant cost savings to livestock producers. The co-authors suggest the "use of [lethal] controls is influenced by the attitudes of farmers and their neighbours as much as by any realized economic advantages." Joe Engelhart, Louise Liebenberg, and other conservation-minded ranchers are at the forefront of these changing attitudes in Alberta. By seeking responsible government wildlife management, and by highlighting their success, AWA hopes many other producers will join them if practicing predator friendly ranching. ♣



Joe works with hardy Huntaway herding dogs to keep the cattle he manages relatively close together and to move them between fields. PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL