

## RANCHER PREDATOR AWARENESS

### Levels of Fear

#### Mark L Coats

The word fear has a very broad spectrum. It's a word that groups a lot into four letters. When we think of fear, we recall something personal—an instant or a situation that had been burned into memory. But with little effort we can create or imagine and easily expand a fearful situation.

When one thinks of the word “*hot*” we understand it resonates a level of fear. *Hot* as a word has different levels. We would call a cutting torch in operation *hot*. We could also apply that description to a cup of coffee. The severity between the two is drastically different.

In our language we use synonyms to create levels for the word hot, such as it's *balmy* outside. *Fear* also has some of those attributed connections, such as spooky or scary. But as *hot* has a measurable scale, such as Fahrenheit or Celsius, *fear* has no such scale.

The levels of fear are dramatically different, from just a startling encounter, to the fear for ones life. The two are both fear, but quite different in response and degrees of fear.

Humans transfer their personal *fears* to a perception of the situation. Each person probably relates to each situation differently. When animals enter into the equation, those same transferable thoughts transfer to perception and again each person has a different degree of perception.

Many would say that in training animals that *fear* has no place. From my experience there is no way around it. Whether it's horses or livestock, our interactions are just that—*our interactions*. As we interact with animals, we are introducing a new and foreign action to the animal; for example when we desensitize a young horse in order to eventually work together. That initial desensitizing or “*sacking out*” can only be perceived as overcoming the young horses *fear*. Being able to read the horses reactions and actions certainly aid in establishing a connection that can be built on. Threatening or forcing through these initial interactions won't help in creating a working relationship, but the initial interaction is still overcoming fear. Taking the desensitizing of the young

horse too far will also hinder the working relationship. Desensitizing taken too far promotes standing without movement, when in the next step of training you are promoting movement. You are presenting a new situation that then results in two conflicting actions. The horse's perception is that your picking a fight, reversing the desensitizing and the personal connection that you worked on establishing.

These actions are not specific to horses alone. They apply to livestock as well. As I said above, the act of desensitizing when taken too far promotes standing without movement. You must create a situation for cattle that reinstalls the natural instinct of the *defensive posture of the herd group*, or the *Standing Solution*—an instinct that management practices and concentrated efforts of individualizing has diminished.

Trying to understand the levels of *fear* is a challenge, but as with all training of animals, one of our first steps should be establishing a response—a recognition, if you will. That interaction could be recognized as a first low-level response; such as a tip of an ear, the raising of a head or defecating. This alertness could be the first step of an escalating *fear*. In relating it to a thermometer, it's a low temperature in that if it continued escalating, the temperature would rise.

Movement would be the next response, not necessarily a response of flight, although wildlife would have that response. But this movement of our stock would be just moving away from pressure. By releasing the pressure, the stock would settle back into their contented well being.

This is the basics of low-stress Stockmanship, *Pressure and release*.

By continuing movement without a release, you are escalating the movement into a *chase sequence*. A *fear* input for our stock, and it is perceived as a predator/prey interaction, often compounded by being individualized. The level of *fear* has escalated into an effort to stay alive. We've all seen cattle run through fences or leave corrals in this state. This is a reaction to perceived pressure. When the action of flight is contained, then the stock's response changes to a fight scenario.

I have often hear that we need to make our cattle more defensive, maybe meaner, and maybe breed horns back into cattle. My thoughts on these efforts

are simply to say I believe that it is the wrong direction to pursue. This comment is heard frequently from ranchers as a deterrent to wolves. But simply put, as the cow chases a wolf, individualizing herself, another wolf locks on to the hind quarters, the wolf's preferred target. The fight was the precursor for a sure depredation.

Another challenge is understanding what we are trying to achieve. In the case of our stock encountering an apex predator, we would prefer that we could remove the top rungs on the ladder of *fear*—the reactions of fight or flight. Both reactions are playing into the play book of what the predators require for Individualization.

As a response, instead of flight or fight, we are trying for the preferred reaction of the *defensive posture of the herd group*. This stance will promote another reaction of *fear*, moving it from the cattle and transferring it to the predator. The *standing solution* engages the instinct of self-preservation in the predators, an instinct that all animals have. It will simply tell the predator to move on to the next victim. It's Nature's natural defense for herd animals. It is also Nature's way of interrupting a predator's actions.

As we described briefly in the beginning, the basic Stockmanship skills above such as creating movement can be done with *pressure and release*. What becomes difficult is the necessity to work outside of the corrals, and the requirement to effectively create the release. The corrals establish a perimeter that controls the release, keeping the cattle within confinement. In the open with no fences or perimeters, pressure is easily applied but without the release, it is just flight, creating *the chase*.

The requirement is to contain movement. By using dogs as *pseudo predators* that can stop the cattle, we secure several needs; first establishing a herd posture and, as in over-desensitizing the young horse, we can remove movement and create the *standing solution*. Secondly, we can ensure the release. By establishing the release we set to memory a response to pressure. Promoting the *defensive posture of the herd group*.

By establishing the *defensive posture of the herd group*, we instill an effective stance that is a *safe zone*, a place of calm resolve that the cattle will seek under pressure.

The cattle soon establish a behavior that sets a response to pressure. During training, the cattle become aware of the dogs presence. This perception of pending pressure triggers the response of seeking the *herd group*. This action of seeking the *herd group* is actually the release (the desired response) that we have trained the cattle for. This reaction or response is just to presence, eliminating the need for the predator to apply pressure to engage the response.

Our *pseudo predators* have a specific job, and it is a completely different effort than a stock dog's who's effort is to assist a rancher in the movement of stock. The dog who's Job it is to simulate a predator has a substantial list of requirements.

First and the highest on the list is the containment of the stock. This is *the stop*. The *pseudo predator* is our answer to corrals. We must have containment to effectively create a release. The release is the basic building block of training animals with *pressure and release*. The release of pressure is key in instilling the proper response.



The second important quality for the *pseudo predator* is speed and a constant movement around the stock. A quality stock dog moves around the stock with stealth, keeping a watchful eye on the stocks position as well as the handlers. The unbridled movement of the *pseudo predator* keeps the stock questioning where it is it now? That action draws the stock closer to each other in a defensive position.

Personally I prefer movement over bite. I like the *predator awareness dog* to use speed; such as darting at a cow rather than physically engaging it. When the cow shows a response, the *predator awareness dog* immediately releases its pressure and moves on—speed over brawn. The essence of *predator awareness* is removing fear and replacing it with the *standing solution*. I believe that constant fear is not promoting a solution to an apex predator’s presence, it is just presenting the pressure and stress constantly.

Another quality that I like is the ability of the *predator awareness dog* to “shed”—the ability to seek weakness in the *herd group*, which is the loosely arranged stance of the *herd group*. This looseness can be exploited by an apex predator.

Diagram 4: THE BLOCK  
By encouraging shedding and blocking the return you are establishing that by being individualized the cow receives pressure. The reason for the block is to establish the understanding and encourage the desire to return to the herd. The return when aloud, is the relief of pressure, establishing the herd as a safe and calm place.



The *predator awareness dog* seeks an opportunity to *shed* (or sort out) that individual and remove it from the herd. The *predator awareness dog* then continues applying pressure not allowing an escape or the return to the *herd group*. The trainer then calls for the release which should happen immediately allowing the stock to return to the calmness of the *defensive posture of the herd group*. This action, although performed on an individual, is observed by the entire *herd group*. This training promotes the awareness that being individualized is not a good thing—promoting the *herd group as safe zone*.

[www.rancherpredatorawareness.com](http://www.rancherpredatorawareness.com)