

Rancher Predator Awareness

Monitoring 3 Symbiotic relationships Mark L Coats

An observation that I have been witness to is the many symbiotic relationships there are in nature. Just as flowers are a joy to look at, they are part of a bee's life. One without the other doesn't fair well. We often concentrate on one piece of the puzzle such as admiring the flowers but spraying the bugs that bother us as we are enjoying nature.

One commonly observed relationship with predators is that specific species of birds seem to follow the predators. The thought is they feed on the carrion after the predator has completed its depredation. The species of birds include Vultures, Ravens, Magpies and Jays. All these birds are common at a depredation site. The birds' actions can actually degrade the evidence in the investigation of a depredation. Most of the investigating agencies request covering the carcass with a tarp so the birds don't jeopardize the evidence of the investigation.

These birds have a symbiotic relationship with predators. Many people's observations are that they follow the predators.

My observations appear to conclude differently.



While changing irrigation water sets one evening I noticed a calf that appeared off. So after checking it, it definitely needed to be doctored as it had summer pneumonia. The time of day would not allow time for me to saddle up and take care of this calf that evening. The next day I was already scheduled for the first half of the day. This calf would need to wait until the next afternoon for it's needed attention, a definite gamble.

The next afternoon I arrived to the pasture and was disheartened to see an overwhelming presence of birds. I have not seen this many birds all summer. My conclusion was that I was to late in my attempt to save the calf. But an odd fact was evident, the buzzards were circling like some old western movie. The magpies and ravens were all in their respective groups but all in different areas. There were not any birds concentrated to a specific site.

Ravens tend to frustrate me with their constant noise. So as one flew by mocking me, I discharged a round in its direction. There was total silence and instantly all of the birds flew away.

As I rode out to find the presumed dead calf, there it lay still alive, so I happily doctored it and put it together with its mother and brought some other cows closer and left the calf to get better within this protective herd group.

The result was the next morning the calf was chewing its cud and got up and made an outstandingly big stretch. For the readers who aren't aware those actions are as good as it gets. In reflection, the birds preceded a predator's presence. The calf would have been an easy prey victim for almost any predator. The birds themselves would have been satisfied due to natural circumstances in a rather short time. The fact is that the birds were very attuned in detecting the sick calf prior to any predication or predators presence.

What if the birds do not follow the predators, but rather lead the predators to an opportunity? With that thought, it may present an answer to why the wolves are being attracted to bone yards. I realize that boneyards are ligament attractants, but are the birds just a neon sign alerting the wolves to the bone yards locations?

Birds may scout our herds for opportunities. Can that knowledge assist us in monitoring our herd's health? We can do so by not just waiting for an abundant concentration of birds, but an awareness of the birds' presence as a searching for opportunities. When any bird presence is noticed it may suggest further investigation efforts are needed.

Another possible answer for the lack of predatory pressures is that I had my first mammal depredation in eight years at this same location approximately 50 days ago. My conclusion at that time was that I had been neglectful in my duties of applying deterrent, *scent*. My scenting diligence and deterrent placement certainly has been elevated since. Possibly deterring the predators from presenting further conflict.



From previous experiences along with this one I am confident that scenting is a viable deterrent.

Predators do not always require an animal that is off its game. The predator can certainly subdue healthy animals, but all predators are opportunistic. I believe that a predator will

continue to compound any opportunity too its own benefit. But recognizing clues about possible opportunities may be a small step in preventing a conflict.

Realizing animal behavior aids our efforts in deterring a predator's presence. It also enables us to create deterrents that will effectively ignite the instinct of self-preservation. Instinctually engaging a response that tells the predator to move on.

After doctoring a calf, one can assist the sick calf by placing it with other cattle and settling those cattle into a herd group. Also by scenting the area around the calf, you present a perimeter deterrent to a predator's presence. Allowing the extra protection and security for the calf so it may have adequate time to recover from its illness.

Another possible relationship could be between black bears and wolves. Both are apex predators, but they don't seem to be opponents. Often the two tracks are found in relatively close proximity. There are often photographs showing the two species together at camera traps. As far as other apex predators such as lions, those situations are not observed. Coyotes appear to be solely with coyotes.

The relationship between bears and wolves may have something to do with scat. With bears being omnivores, the cellulosic scats are often found, but the meat scat seems to disappear quickly. I think that the meat scats are part of the food chain. The thought is to place a trail cam at those locations. Usually by the time I return with a camera the scat has already preformed its disappearing act.

It does appear that when wolves are in an area, coyotes seem to relocate to another area void of wolf presence. Then when wolves move to a new location the coyotes seem to return. As our home ranch borders the Lower Klamath Wildlife Refuge and we normally have an abundant population of coyotes. Monitoring coyote presence has proven successful for us in determining wolf presence.

Birds can be strictly carrion eaters, but some birds are predators themselves. This is a baby fawn and upon inspection it appeared to have no broken bones from something such as a strike from an automobile. Within a quarter of a mile of its location there was another fawn in the same condition. Also present was another eagle and more buzzards. My conclusion in this observation is that the doe was lost most likely in a road kill scenario. Leaving the two fawns unprotected and vulnerable.



I have personally witnessed eagle depredations. We often think of a depredation as a battle, but often they are not. This particular depredation was a bald eagle on a two-day-old beef calf. The calf had recently nursed and had laid down for its nap. As the mother came to the hay wagon for her mourning feeding she left the calf unprotected.

An eagle that was perched in a nearby tree flew down to the calf and landed on it. The landing and take off appeared to be all one continuous motion. As the eagle then flew up to the top of a tree, the calf jumped up as if startled and jumped away. As I watched the calf it was up and down several times and then finally laying down to die from the injuries it had received. The eagle had pierced the calf with its talons and proceeded to a tree waiting for the depredation to reach its conclusion. It was definitely not much of a battle.

I immediately went to the calf and picked it up. The intent was to graft another calf on to the mother, mitigating the loss. When grafting an adoption onto the mother, we require the dead calve's hide to tie on to the new calf, fooling the mother into believing that all is well. Upon skinning the calf the wounds were apparent but didn't appear to be lethal. So upon opening the thorax cavity, the blood attested to the depth of penetration that the eagles talons had achieved.

I have had questions from people about deterring avian predators. What I have found is that the defensive posture of the herd group seems to effectively deter avian predations also.

My location in the Klamath Basin is home to the largest eagle population in the lower 48. So, efforts to deter mammal predators seems to have helped in deterring other predators as well, an unintended bonus to deterring a specific predator, the wolf.

The herd posture even seems to deter ravens. But the herd posture does not deter other birds, such as songbirds, from using the cattle as foot warmers. But the birds seeking warmth seem to be the only avian pressure to the herd group.

Mothers do separate from their calves, but if you have spent some time training your cattle, it seems as the cows will leave their calf with a nursery group or a *sergeant cow* more readily.