



Small Ruminant Ramblings

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Predator Management Important In Goat, Sheep Production

Common predators of goats and sheep in Louisiana include coyotes, domestic and feral dogs, feral hogs, bobcats and foxes.

But not all 'predators' are a producer's enemy. A predator that is a pest or a threat is an animal that kills goats or sheep. Some predators of other animals, however, can be beneficial predator, such as a predator that kills rabbits, rodents or other animals a sheep and goat producer wants to keep away from the herd. For example, coyotes may be the predators that maintain raccoon populations and keep raccoons from preying on young kids and lambs.

Predator management

Predator management is an important aspect of goat and sheep production. First, it is crucial to understand that predators have a positive role in the ecosystem and that the goal of the producer should not be to completely eliminate predators but rather manage their populations. Integrated pest management techniques can be used to assess the amount of predation a producer is experiencing and ways in which to reduce losses. That begins by determining whether a predator is a pest or a beneficial predator, scouting their population trends, determining economic threshold of losses, considering management alternatives and recognizing environmental effects.

Scouting population trends

This can be accomplished by checking fences for hair and monitoring the area for droppings (scats) and tracks. Scent stations can be used to lure predator species in an effort to identify them. They can be made by clearing a 1 yard diameter of vegetation. A track surface is then created by laying a substance that will maintain tracks such as flour, sand or lime. An attractive scent is placed in the clearing. The station should be monitored for three consecutive nights to identify any predator tracks. Scouting population trends should be repeated once a year so trends may be studied over time.

Determining economic thresholds

An economic threshold is the point at which the losses incurred from predators exceed the cost to prevent the problem. There is a delicate balance involved in controlling expenses of preventing predators compared to the value of the potential losses.

Considering management alternatives

Producers are encouraged to develop an array of management alternatives with nonlethal and lethal practices.

Non-lethal practices may include:

- Kidding or lambing in sheds.
- Penning animals at night.
- Using guard animals such as dogs, llamas or donkeys.
- Using electric or conventional fences. Using noise-making devices (animals quickly acclimate to noise, so these devices may be ineffective over time).

Lethal methods include:

- Use of foothold or leg traps.
- Live traps or cage traps.
- Snares.
- Chemicals such as M-44 (sodium cyanide delivery devices).

Terminal options involving poison are strictly controlled by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry and typically require licensing. Recognizing environmental effects Manipulation of wildlife populations can involve numerous ramifications. For example, reduction of the coyote population may result in an unwanted surge in white-tailed deer population density with an overall negative environmental effect. Evaluation of environmental effects of predator population manipulation must be objectively determined.

Interpreting evidence

Study carcasses

It is first necessary to determine if young kids or lambs have been the victims of predators or if they died due to natural causes. The general condition of the kid or lamb and evidence of dehydration, such as sunken eyes, should be evaluated. A young kid or lamb that has not walked usually will have smooth, soft hooves, and milk may be absent from the stomach. Evidence of predation can include teeth spacing of punctures, the number of bites, location of damage (throat, back of head, back) and hemorrhaging under the skin.

Species profiles

Coyotes generally attack the throat region and bite and collapse the trachea. Death by suffocation often results. Considerable hemorrhaging may also be present under the skin. Coyote tracks are long and slender with visible nail marks, especially of the second and third toes. Their tracks also will show a bilobed heal pad and fall within a straight path

Bobcats will bite at the base of the skull or the side of the head while embedding claws into the flank.

Death is caused by crushing the spine or skull. In addition, hair may be easily plucked from the carcass. Bobcat tracks are more rounded and larger than the coyote, nail marks are absent, and the heal pad is trilobed.

Foxes will leave multiple bites on the back and usually only prey on kids and lambs. Their tracks are coyote like, but smaller, and marks from all claws will be visible.

Feral hogs prey mostly on lambs and kids. Often, no evidence of predation is found because hogs consume the entire carcass. A livestock producer may find a bloody patch of ground, a hoof or an inverted hide with or without the skull attached. Circumstantial evidence often includes dams with distended utters and missing young. Signs of feral hog presence include the existence of rubs on trees and utility poles, mud wallows, and uprooted soil and plant material. Hog tracks are cloven-footed with blunted tips and dew claw marks (which differentiate their tracks from deer and goat tracks).

Domestic and feral dogs will leave multiple bites on the hind quarters, frequently with flaps of skin pulled away from prey. The tracks are very similar to the coyote and may be difficult to discern. The injury to the carcass may help the producer differentiate which animal is the predator in question.

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