



Controlling Predation on Goats – Some Ideas

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As goat production continues to grow in Florida, more and more acreage is being managed for the pasturing of herds. With this comes the challenge of managing not only for housing, reproductive and nutritional needs, but also for the protection of herds against predators. Predation is a serious problem that goat farmers have to take into consideration, and will have to place as a line item in budgetary planning.

The following document lists some existing and potential predators of goats in Florida, and reviews ways in which they may be controlled.

Domestic and Feral Dogs

Domestic dogs can be a serious problem where they are permitted to run at large, particularly near urban areas. True feral dogs and coydogs (coyote-dog hybrids) are also a problem but are far less common, if present at all, in Florida.

Domestic dogs do not normally kill for food and their attacks usually lead to indiscriminate mutilation of prey. When they do feed, they tend to leave torn, ragged tissue and splintered bones much like coyotes do.

Coyotes

Coyotes are the most common and the most serious predator of livestock in the western United States. With their populations increasing in Florida over the last decade, it is not unlikely that increasing attacks on goats will be reported.

In attacks on adult sheep and goats, coyotes typically bite the throat just behind the jaw and below the ear, although repeated bites made while shifting their hold may obscure the initial tooth punctures. Death commonly results from suffocation and shock; blood loss is usually a secondary cause of death. On small prey such as young lambs and kids, coyotes may kill by biting the head, neck or back, causing massive tissue and bone damage.

Coyotes have been the focus of predator-control efforts for years in the western part of the United States where sheep production is big business. In these areas, poisons, traps, snares, airplane hunting, dogs and other methods have been used to control or eradicate coyote populations. For the most part, coyote numbers have remained relatively stable despite these extensive control efforts.

When coyotes are causing damage, people want the problem corrected but don't always want the coyote killed. "Can't you just catch the coyotes and move them someplace else?" is a question sometimes posed to wildlife damage biologists. And the answer is, "No." Except on rare occasions, coyotes are too cunning to be caught in cage traps. There are, however, many non-lethal options available to cope with coyote problems. In some situations, the only option may be to use a lethal method.

Florida Panthers (Cougars)

Cougars attempt to stalk their prey and attack from cover. They frequently kill sheep and goats by biting the top of the neck or head. Broken necks are common in these kills. This differs from the typical coyote bite in the throat and general mutilation caused by dogs. However, cougars also may kill sheep and goats by biting the throat. This may result from prey falling or being knocked down and caught, or it may simply be the method found effective by individual cougars and most convenient on some prey animals. Panther attacks on goats have been largely unreported in Florida, perhaps because farmers tend to assume dog attacks once dead or mutilated animals are discovered.

Bobcats

Bobcat hunting and killing behavior is much like that of cougars because they prefer to stalk their prey and attack from cover. On small prey, such as lambs, kids and fawns, they bite into the skull or back of the neck and may leave claw marks on the back, sides and shoulders. Bobcats may also kill with a bite in the throat, typically just back of the jaws over the larynx. This could result from catching the prey after it falls, or it may be individual bobcat behavior. In a Lee County Extension/Parks and Recreation joint experiment in 2007, a single Bobcat jumped a 5 foot fence to kill two 30 pound pygmy goats on separate nights. The carcasses were found partially buried under brush and leaves.

Wild Hogs

In some areas, domestic or wild hogs prey on poultry and livestock. This occurs more often during droughts or other periods when mast (acorns, etc.) and other foods are

scarce. Hogs will also feed readily on carrion but some hogs become highly efficient predators. Hog predation on livestock usually occurs on lambing or calving grounds, perhaps partially because of the prevalence of afterbirth. Occasionally, adult animals giving birth are fed upon and killed by hogs.

Eagles

Bald eagles readily accept livestock carrion, although some individuals may prefer live prey to carrion. Eagles are efficient predators and they can cause severe losses of young livestock, particularly where concentrations of eagles exist. Generally, they prey on young animals, primarily sheep and goats, although they are capable of killing adults. Understandably, it is difficult to control eagles using lethal methods as they are a protected species in Florida. Keeping small kids under a sheltered pen will protect them from predation from the air. Some experts suggest that the use of fishing lines (monofilament) across the tops of semi covered areas tends to make birds uneasy and they will not land.

Snakes

Venomous snakes, particularly rattlesnakes, occur on nearly all livestock ranges of the southern and United States and in many other areas; thus, it is inevitable that substantial numbers of livestock are bitten. Because young animals (colts, calves, lambs and kids) are curious and far less cautious than adults, they are the most common victims of snakebite in livestock. Many of them are bitten on the nose or head as they attempt to investigate snakes. It is a difficult task to prevent these encounters which however, happen infrequently.

Control Methods

Non-lethal methods

When a coyote, dog or big cat is suspected of killing livestock, the first impulse of many farmers is to kill the animal. Although lethal methods of control may be the best short-term solution, the livestock producer should consider the following non-lethal methods that offer long-term protection.

Guard Dogs

A good guard dog can protect sheep and goats from feral dog, Panther and Bobcat damage. Larger breeds, such as Great Pyrenees, Komondor, Anatolian shepherds and Akbash, often work well to intimidate the much smaller coyote. Guard dogs should be acquired as puppies and habituated to the flock or herd at an early age. Human contact must be kept to a minimum. If the guard dog is treated as a pet, it will not properly bond with livestock and its effectiveness will be lost.

On the other hand, the guard dog needs to be tame enough that the owner can approach it for vaccinations, worming and other care. Dogs have individual personalities - one dog may bond with the sheep or goats while another dog may not work as well. A good guard dog remains with the livestock at all times and confronts coyotes and other dogs that approach. Guard dogs require a lot of initial training and must be provided with shelter and food in the field. They may be excellent guard animals for a while and become less effective later. One caveat here though, is that occasionally, guard dogs have been responsible for killing goats. The offending dog must be removed from the responsibility immediately.

Donkey

Most donkeys have a natural dislike for coyotes and dogs and bond well with livestock. Select a gelding or jenny because the more aggressive jacks sometimes injure or kill sheep and goats. Do not place two donkeys in the same pasture or in adjoining pastures because they will bond with each other and not with the livestock. An effective guard donkey remains with the sheep or goats at all times. Advantages of donkeys are that they are not high priced and do not require as much training and care as guard dogs.

As with guard dogs, there are no guarantees that a donkey will be 100 percent effective in controlling predators. It may be necessary to try more than one donkey to find one that functions as a good guard animal. One method of selecting a donkey is to put it in a small lot or corral with a strange dog, making sure the dog has plenty of escape routes. A donkey that reacts aggressively to the dog has a good chance of being an effective guard animal.

Llamas

Livestock producers in Missouri, Georgia, Alabama and the Carolinas have used llamas as guard animals in their goat pastures. Studies in Iowa have shown these animals to be quite effective in protecting sheep, goats and cattle. Aggressive toward both dogs and coyotes, llamas are easy to handle and bond with livestock in a matter of days.

Although expensive initially, their longevity of 12 to 18 years and their usefulness as guard animals make the price reasonable over time. Llamas require little attention because they feed with the animals they are protecting.

Fencing

A well-built net or woven-wire fence can be 100-percent effective protecting pigs, poultry and sheep from coyotes. The fence should be at least 7 feet high to keep coyotes and bobcats from jumping over it. An outward slant to the wire at the top can be added to keep coyotes from climbing over, and an apron of wire extending outward from the bottom will keep them from digging under the fence. If the apron isn't used, a few well-placed snares or traps should catch the occasional coyote that digs under the fence. A

shorter, woven-wire fence can be made taller by attaching extensions to the posts and adding extra wire.

A high-tensile electric fence can serve as both a livestock and predator-proof fence if it is built to the right specifications. Contact a fencing company for specific details.

Initial costs for this type of fence are comparable to or even lower than a woven-wire fence with barbed wire at the top. Beginning with a hot wire at the bottom, the fence should have at least 7 strands of alternating hot and ground high-tensile wire. Be sure the wires are stretched tight. The fence must be maintained to ensure there are no washouts that will allow predators to crawl under without getting shocked.

Installing a single electric wire near the bottom of the fence to keep predators from digging or crawling under the woven wire is a waste of time and money. A high-tensile predator-proof fence built to specifications is the best option. Fences can be cost effective for small enclosures but may prove expensive for large pastures. In the case of high-dollar exotic animals (like Boer goats and dairy animals), a high fence or high-tensile electric fence should be considered. Losing a few expensive animals could quickly justify the expense of a predator-proof fence.

Electronic Guard

The Electronic Guard is a device developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Damage Control program as a temporary way to protect livestock from coyotes. The battery-powered guard turns on only at night, the time when coyotes, bobcats and some feral dogs usually kill livestock. Approximately every 15 minutes, a strobe light and siren turn on to scare coyotes away from the area.

This method isn't a permanent solution. Coyotes eventually learn that the guard doesn't pose a real threat, and they may ignore it after a few weeks.

Electronic Guards cost about \$250 each. If a pasture is 10 to 20 acres with a lot of cover, two or three guards should be used. From time to time, they should be moved from one position to another. Click on this link to read more about the electronic guard.

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/wildlife_damage/content/printable_version/fs_wseguard.pdf

Scarecrows

Because coyotes don't mind living near people, scarecrows, clothing with human scent and other similar tactics do not keep them away from an area. Scarecrows may however work for a short while to deter dogs and large cats from your herd. Changing the position of the scarecrow every few days will present a more authentic deterrence than one that is permanently positioned.

Live trapping

Baiting large traps with food work best on canine predators such as dogs and coyotes, but because bi cats stalk their prey it is unlikely that this method would be effective against Panthers and Bobcats.

Because most coyotes and feral dogs are too wary to be caught in cage traps, this method should be tried only with animals that are habituated to people and only as a last resort when shooting or snaring aren't possible. Use a large cage trap, bait it with meat and apply coyote/dog trapping lure. Trapping lure can be made from fish oil, canned sardines (opened of course or with small hole made into the can), road kill, or even a goat previously killed by predators.

Live trapping is not as humane as it may seem because animals caught this way often bite and tear at the wire causing damage to their mouth and teeth.

Lethal Methods

Shooting

Shooting problem predators, as long as they are not protected, is always an option in rural areas and sometimes within city limits if ordinances allow it. Because coyotes are cunning but somewhat predictable, shooters should spend time observing the coyote's habits to increase their chance of success. Many nuisance coyotes show a pattern of stalking livestock at a certain time of the day. A coyote, and sometimes dogs, may visit its kill several times over a period of a day or two until the carcass is reduced to bones and hide.

Once the coyote's pattern becomes known, shooters must station themselves near the coyote's path, paying attention to wind direction so the animal won't catch their scent. Sunrise and sunset usually are good times to stake out a coyote kill.

Intentional poisoning

The fact that coyotes and dogs will return to their dead prey and continue to feed, set these animals up to being easily poisoned. While this is not advocated by the author, there is a long history of the method being used to control and prevent future attacks by the offending dog or coyote.

References

- *Procedures for Evaluating Predation on Livestock and Wildlife* -Dale A. Wade and James E. Bowns
- *Missouri's Coyotes - Damage Prevention and Control*