

Whodunnit? VERIFICATION

Submitted by Cam Hill, Program Coordinator, Livestock Protection Program



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The scavenger birds have helped you locate the carcass. It's a four month old calf from your favourite cow, the one that always gives you the best replacement heifers or whose calves tip the scales at sale time. And it's that friendly calf, the one the grandkids can scratch behind the ears. With domestic livestock it's never the old, the sick, or the injured. It's your best. That's just a rule amongst wild predators. Go for the best ... you're gonna draw some heat so make it worth your while.

So what happened? Whodunnit? Wolf, bear, coyote, cougar, birds, the neighbour's dog, aliens? We are so fortunate in this province to have a process to help us get answers. Over 800 producers have now taken verification training from the Conservation Officer Service as have a spattering of other interested individuals such as trappers, veterinarians, college and university students and government folks. If you are fortunate enough to have taken the five or six hour training session then its time to get your hands dirty. If you haven't taken the training, then dig that phone with cracked screen out of your pocket and call your neighbour. If he/she hasn't taken the training then call the Livestock Protection Program (LPP) hotline and we will find you some help.

So where to begin? Safety first. Always, always, always think safety first. We ranchers are tough breed, but remember that scurrying back to the house or barn to get a rifle or a can of bear spray isn't a sign of weakness, it's a sign of intelligence. Whether or not a bear (or rarely a cat) was responsible for that calf's demise is irrelevant. Bears can smell a carcass from

It happens to most producers at some point, and for some, way too often. You're heading out to feed or are checking cattle on range and there's that darn raven and all his buddies squawking from an old Cottonwood snag. A couple magpies go drifting by and you get that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. Not again...

a great distance, up to 32 kilometers the experts say, and so you never know when one might show up to investigate.

Whether you are doing a verification on your own animal or doing one for a neighbour, you need to do a complete and thorough job. The Livestock Protection Program pays \$150 to do a verification so you need to earn it. There are gifts, such as doing an injury only verification, where a couple photos may be all that is required. Often times the calf will already be penned or in a squeeze so you hardly have to get any manure on your boots. Kill verifications however, generally take more effort. That old mother cow that died five days ago in the mid July heat ain't much fun. I have been known to tie a rope to the hind leg of a stinky old cow and rapidly drag it 100 meters down the trail then jump out and do some quick skinning and photo taking before the stink and hornets catch up, then repeat the process several times until complete. Tip – don't take your wife out for dinner after doing a verification on a stinky cow (a story for another time). Remember that the verification process is in fact, an application only. The verifier is collecting evidence, documenting the process through photos and completing the Verification and Compensation Application form and submitting it to myself, the LPP Program Coordinator. The application is then shared with the Ministry of Agriculture's Business Risk Management Program and the Conservation Officer Service. We all have roles in reviewing the application and in approving compensation and/or mitigation where applicable. The better the application, the more likely that mitigation will be

approved and/or compensation paid. If you are doing a verification for your neighbour and it results in compensation and perhaps the removal of offending predators, he/she will be forever grateful and will come help you sew up that next messy prolapse without hesitation. If however, you are self-verifying one of your own cow critters and we, as application reviewers, believe it to be a non-predator attack or inconclusive then the \$150 verification pay is not paid. To be clear, that is only when doing your own, not when doing a verification for others. The most critical element in the verification process is photo documentation, which was covered in detail in my previous column. We approvers need to see the evidence. Good photo documentation provides integrity to the process. If a file is audited or happens to draw some attention from the media, or individuals critical of predator removal, then we need to have solid justification for our decision to move ahead with mitigation efforts and to pay compensation on the loss.

Some verifiers have become quite adept at putting the crime scene together and documenting proof of predator involvement. There are others however, that simply snap a few photos and hope they captured something of value. Sometimes it works, particularly on attacks that demonstrate classic wound patterns for that species involved, but often it is not enough. Simply snapping photos of a dead cow or sheep carcass, without skinning parts or all of the animal, is not generally sufficient. I see this too often when reviewing files where the verifier has found predator tracks and predator feeding has obviously occurred. Often times a predator has been spooked



This bred heifer had been fed on by both wolves and a grizzly sow and one cub. The bears had buried the heifer; however, the challenge faced by the verifier was to determine which predator made the kill. The carcass was pulled out of the debris pile and the remains skinned back. Bruising along the backbone revealed that the grizzlies made the kill with the wolves moving in afterwards. This finding was supported by studying the predator tracks leading to the kill site. The bear tracks had more fallen snow in them leading the verifier to believe that the wolves arrived later. Cam Hill photo

off the carcass so the verifier is confident that that particular predator was responsible for the demise of the animal. Not always so. Wolves, coyotes, bears, ravens and eagles are all effective scavengers. Cougars less so but in lean times they too have been known to claim found carcasses as well.

Even as a non-trained verifier, there are a few general species specific rules to look for when suspecting a predator attack. The verification training course goes into much greater detail but if you haven't taken the training, or can't figure out where your spouse filed your notes, then these general rules will give you some guidance;

Bears are maulers. They tend to target the top of the back, the shoulders and neck areas with a crushing action delivered somewhere along the thoraco-lumbar spine. With grizzlies I have seen fairly consistent face bites as well. Incidentally that too is an ugly truth with bear attacks on humans. Protecting the face, neck and back are critical but again that is a topic for another time. Wolves almost always hamstring their prey so bite marks, including canine repositioning which appears as a bunch of mostly vertical stratified scratches on the hide, will be evident in the hams area (hind end, under the tail). Often all or part of the tail will be missing. I once verified an old dead cow where most of the carcass had been consumed. She had been dead for a week or so and so there was very little to work with. I was done for the most part and the rancher and I stood there solving other

worldly problems when I happened to glance at the underside of the tail. I could see some reddish blemishes so commenced to skinning the tail out. Sure enough there were several puncture wounds found with considerable bruising on the underside of the hide, evidence that some toothy critter grabbed the tail while the cow's heart was beating. On a large cow that pretty much ruled out coyotes and that is not an area targeted by bears so we were conclusive in determining it to be a wolf kill. Coyotes, when

targeting calves, will also go for the hind end but often will also grab the shoulder or neck. Measuring canine bite spreads helps narrow down the field of suspects. Cougars like to target the head, upper neck and throat area. Ravens have increasingly been known to kill calves, newborns mostly, and in one quick strike take out an eye. There is profuse bleeding from the eye socket and the calf will quickly expire. The tongue is also targeted as is the navel, the soles of the feet and the rear vents. I will generally skin the hide back around both eyes of a suspected raven kill to compare the two. Even a carcass several days old and one that has been heavily scavenged will show considerable hemorrhaging within the target eye socket. Eagles will occasionally kill calves as well however their occurrence is much less common and generally restricted to Golden Eagles. Domestic dogs have also been responsible for losses. Last summer I had a verifier send me some photos of a badly injured three month old calf. It turned my stomach to look at them. The heifer was missing both ears and her muzzle and the lower legs were covered in blood. The calf stood with her head hanging and was euthanized. We quickly determined the injuries to be the work of dogs. Dogs do messy work. They don't kill for a living like wild predators and don't have the skills to be efficient. Wounds will be found on all parts of the body and the chase may be long. Compensation will not be paid out for dog kills however the program will pay to

do a verification unless it was determined in advance to be the work of dogs.

All these target areas, for each of the predators discussed, need to be skinned back to confirm bruising on the underside of the hide and within the muscle tissue. When the heart is beating, bruising occurs. Bites and tears that have occurred after death will show no bruising or blood shot tissue. Even kill remains that have been heavily consumed or that have baked in the sun for days may still show evidence of bruising on the underside of the hide. And remember, as verifiers we are not always trying to prove what killed a cow critter but also trying to prove, and document through photos, what didn't. If there are no blemishes on a completely skinned out carcass, then we can assume that the animal died from some other natural cause. As a verifier it is best to photograph that process as well and submit with the verification application. Documenting a lack of kill evidence is important, not only to help justify mitigation and compensation decisions but also to guide the producer in determining what else might be going on.

The verification process also involves looking for supporting evidence not found on the actual carcass. Predator tracks, scat, drag marks and blood trails, hair found on a fence, and other evidence that may support a non-predator kill such as nearby Water Hemlock, skid marks or vehicle parts found on a road, are all things that help to draw a solid conclusion on whodunnit.

A good verifier and one with plenty of experience can often find evidence of a kill on even the most challenging of cases. The only way to get that experience, however, is to get in there and get your hands dirty! Don't hesitate. And if you have questions about the process or the Livestock Protection Program in general please feel free to contact me at LPP@cattlemen.bc.ca.

*Further information about the Livestock Protection Program can be found at www.cattlemen@bc.ca/lpp. For incidents of cattle or sheep losses, injury or harassment where wolves, coyotes or birds are suspected please call our toll free number **1-844-852-5788**. For incidents involving other wildlife such as bear and cougar please contact the COS RAPP line at **1-877-952-7277**.*