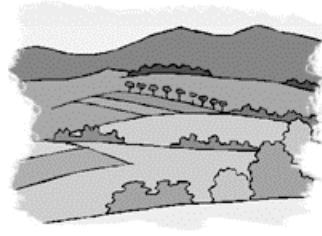


Ranching and Wildlife



By: Jim Knight, Extension Wildlife Specialist, Montana State University

Many people do not realize that ranchers contribute major benefits to wildlife. Some of the benefits are purposefully done for wildlife, other benefits happen as a side effect of good range management. Ranchers consider the wildlife resource in all management decisions. They space the wires on fences for minimal disruption to wildlife. They leave windmills and electric wells pumping in pastures even when the livestock have been removed, just to provide water for wildlife. Wildlife biologists have found that the removal of coarse older grass stimulates the production of young grass and forbs, which are better for wildlife. When properly managed, cattle duplicate the role of buffalo when they remove these older coarse grasses.

The private land rancher provides the most important need for wildlife: habitat. Much of the critical winter wildlife habitat is on deeded lands, along with some of our most important year-round habitat. Without the contributions of private lands, wildlife numbers would be at a much lower number. Besides, if the land presently being used for ranching were instead used for subdivisions, factories or cities, the wildlife habitat lost would be disastrous.

There are many inconveniences and costs ranchers must put up with because of wildlife. Most ranchers are more than willing to do this, but the general public sometimes does not appreciate what the rancher must contend with. Most people realize that wildlife predators often pose a problem for ranchers when they kill sheep, cattle and horses. The ranchers expend a great deal of money to keep predators in check. The reduced numbers of predators also benefit deer, antelope, elk, small mammals and birds.

Big game, such as elk, is very damaging to fences. These large animals have a tendency to crush down the top wires of a fence when crossing it, resulting in a continuous repair bill for the rancher.

Keep in mind the only source of revenue for most ranchers is from the sale of red meat produced from forage and water on the ranch. Beef, sheep and wildlife are all red meat produced from ranch land, so the forage and water used to produce wildlife is the same forage and water the rancher could use to produce income-generating livestock. Instead, the rancher willingly shares his resources with the wildlife. We all owe the rancher a debt for his generosity.

Ranch land is usually available for hunting and other forms of recreation. Sometimes this recreation is free and sometimes the rancher charges a fee for providing hunting opportunities. Regardless, the care and consideration provided to our natural resources by ranchers is a valuable service. Ranchers keeping an eye on wildlife reduces poaching and makes detection of disease or other wildlife problems much more likely. The ultimate

benefactor of ranchers caring for wildlife is the wildlife itself.

Most ranchers are excellent stewards of all resources on the land, including wildlife. Ranchers who make their living caring for the land do more for our wildlife resource than any other group of people in the state.

- *Dr. Jim Knight*
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