Predators: lamb killers or scavengers

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PREDATORS, particularly foxes and crows, have long been considered by many farmers in Western Australia to be a serious cause of lamb losses during the first week of life. Results of the post-mortem examination of 2,179 lambs carried out by the Animal Health Laboratory over the past two years, however, throws considerable doubt on this belief. These examinations revealed that 34 per cent. of the lambs showed mutilation by predators but only about 2 per cent. actually died as a result of predator attacks.

Finding a dead lamb showing predator damage does not necessarily confirm that death was due to predation. This can only be determined by a careful post-mortem examination. Diagnosis of a true predator death is based on the following criteria:

- No signs of disease or any other condition that could have caused death.
- No signs of depletion or partial depletion of the body fat or energy reserves, that is, the body fat, particularly that visible around the heart and kidneys must be abundant, firm and whitish in colour, not reduced in amount, soft and gelatinous, and red in colour.
- Signs of walking and usually of sucking.
- Signs of haemorrhage around the areas attacked.

A little less than half the lambs presented showed varying degrees of predator damage. The extent varied from property to property and the incidence ranged from little or none to slightly more than 70 per cent.

The main predators attacking lambs which have been encountered in the survey to date, have been foxes and crows and the odd dog, eagle and dingo. These predators, particularly crows, were ever on the look-out for a dead or dying lamb which they quickly attacked.

In a large number of cases it was possible to identify the predator species involved by the nature and type of mutilation.

Foxes usually take the tongue, lower jaw, tail and commonly attack the thighs and possibly the neck, and occasionally open the chest and abdominal cavities.

Crows pick the eyes (or uppermost eye) and usually remove the intestines via the navel or anus.

Dogs, as a rule, mutilate the carcass more and commonly attack the neck and chest cavity. It is not uncommon for a killer dog to grasp the lamb behind the point of the shoulder, causing multiple rib fractures, haemorrhage into the chest cavity and possibly lung puncture.

In many carcasses, it was evident that the post-mortem mutilation was carried out by both foxes and crows.

Although the survey to date has demonstrated that predators are a minor cause of lamb losses in the sheep breeding areas...
in the southern half of the State, on some individual properties they may be a problem.

One important aspect of predator mutilation after death is that it may "mask" the real cause of serious lamb loss in a flock or flocks on a property. This is a result of the farmer seeing the predator damage, blaming the predators or scavengers and looking no further for the answer to his problem.

Foxes

The fact that foxes are responsible for very few lamb deaths has already been established from the Animal Health Laboratory findings and those of University of Sydney research workers.

This same conclusion has been reached from an entirely different approach, namely the study of fox stomach contents. Nearly every survey of the dietary habits of the red fox carried out in many parts of the world indicates that this animal is an opportunist scavenger, possessing a wide range of diet, and that it is not a serious predator of livestock. In fact, fox stomach analyses invariably give a good indication of the relative abundance of the different food stuffs at varying seasons of the year. It would seem that the fox is not prepared to work hard for his living but prefers to take the food most readily available.

The latest intensive study of the food of the fox (carried out by CSIRO workers in Canberra) showed that the diet, in the

Canberra district, where sheep (including lambs) predominate, consisted of the following:—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mammals (including rabbits, hares, mice, marsupials and sheep)</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insects and other invertebrates</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reptiles, frogs, etc.</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sheep material taken from the 378 stomachs examined was almost invariably putrid or associated with fly larvae, which was taken to mean that nearly all the sheep and lamb consumed was carrion at the time of eating. This bears out what has already been found from post-mortem examinations of lambs.

Crows

Unfortunately, there is little published research work as yet on the food habits of the crow (or "raven" as it should be called). The results of preliminary work to date, indicate that this bird is also an opportunist feeder who will take whatever food is available at the time. Such things as grain, fruit and carrion are eaten whenever located, as well as insects, which constitute a major item in the crow's diet.

One thing is certain about both the crow (raven) and fox: If they did as much damage as some people claim, it would be impossible to carry on a successful sheep raising industry in Western Australia. However, it is realised that some farmers will always have a desire to control foxes and this can be done by any of the methods listed in Department of Agriculture Bulletin 2604, obtainable from the Department of Agriculture, Jarrah Road, South Perth.

If any farmer considers that he has a problem of lamb losses due to predators, then it is recommended that he submit five or six typical cases of "predator deaths" to the Animal Health Laboratory in South Perth for confirmation by post-mortem examination. Alternatively, the nearest Government or private veterinary surgeon should be consulted.

All available evidence suggests that predators—especially foxes and crows—are not an important cause of lamb losses. Most lambs attacked are already dead or dying.
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