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 Univer­
sity 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>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mammals (including rabbits, hares, mice, marsupials and sheep)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insects and other invertebrates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reptiles, frogs, etc.</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 success­
ful 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 pre­
dators—especially foxes and crows—are not
an important cause of lamb losses. Most
lambs attacked are already dead or dying.
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