

The Demise of the Sheep Industry

Over the years I have been an interested observer of the demise of the sheep industry. Reductions in the demand for wool have played a large part in the decline of sheep industry here in the West, but sheepmen have had other problems as well. Beginning in the 1950's there began a campaign in this country to eliminate bounty programs. This accomplished, animal rights groups then began campaigning against the use of toxins; more recently it has been trapping. Even when the "anties" could not accomplish complete elimination of predator programs they were able to secure reductions in funding. They have also been successful in reducing or eliminating predator control on wilderness areas, refuges, Forest Service lands and even BLM lands.

Many sheepmen may have withstood depressed markets, but when such problems coincided with reductions in predator control, few survived. The Sorensens were one outfit that hung on longer than most. Loyd and his wife Alta had started with no more than 50 head of sheep in the 1930's. By 1955, they were running 15,000 sheep in Elko County. In the 1970's the Sorensens converted much of their operation to cattle but continued to run sheep on their most rugged and less assessable range. But in 1988 a large portion of their Range was designated as Wilderness. During the campaign for wilderness designation in Elko County, citizens were assured that there would be no change in grazing practices because of wilderness designation, but in 1990, when the Sorensens made application for control of predators on newly created Wilderness lands, the application was never processed. Knowing that there was no future for them in the sheep business if they could not control predators, the Sorensens sold the last of their sheep the following spring.

I had witnessed the demise of sage grouse production in south Ruby Valley in the mid 1970's. During the 1940's, sage grouse would come into the meadows soon after the hay was put up, concentrating along the edges, close to sage brush. In the 1960's few remained. On our ranch there was one bunch of 10 or 12 birds that came in on the meadows below the Jasper Place each Fall and another bunch of about 6 or 8 that came in on the sand ridge below Dawley Creek. But those the bunch I remember the most were those that came in below the barn yard. The last year I saw them, there were 11 birds, an old hen with 10 chicks. There were a lot of coyotes on the ranch at that time. We would see one or two within 4 or 5 hundred yards of the barn every time we would ride out to do cow

work. It was when I was riding in the Well Field that I first noticed a pile of sage grouse feathers, first one and then two, and then three. By the end of the fall there were only two birds left, the old hen and one chick. That was the last year we saw sage grouse in any number on the ranch. Once in a great while there will be 3 or 4 come in on the sand ridge, but very rarely.

And so, when I learned that there would be no more predator control on the East Humboldt Range, and that the Sorensens were going out of the sheep business, I predicted that there would be a rapid decline in sage grouse numbers in North Ruby Valley within a few short years. And sure enough, by 1993 the cattle ranchers in North Ruby were complaining of coyotes killing calves during calving season. And as predicted, sage grouse are now scarce in North Ruby Valley, just as they have been in South Ruby Valley since the mid 1970's.

Gilbert Temoke was witness to the rapid increase in coyote numbers in North Ruby Valley. Gilbert, who has worked as the gunner for the Animal Damage Control Department for many years, told me that the most coyotes ever gotten by them, (pilot and gunner), in one day was there in North Ruby Valley two years ago. He said that they killed 107 coyotes in no more than three hours and could have killed more if they hadn't run out of shot gun shells.

Another area of interest has been Butte Valley. Until recently, the Beltron Paris family ran sheep over most of that area. When Gorden Healy and his family moved there in the late 1960's there were sage grouse galore. Garden said that in late summer and fall there were sage grouse all over their meadows. Butte Valley had become a favorite hunting area for Doc Quinn after he moved back to Elko County in 1986. Each Fall he would go to Butte Valley for his limit of sage grouse. And of course Doc always came home with great tails of all the sage grouse they had seen.

But, three years ago there was a major change in Butte Valley, the Paris Family sold their sheep and went out of the sheep business. It seems that the Paris family, like so many other ranching families, were experiencing great difficulty working with the government. Anyway, to make a long story short, this fall I mentioned to Doc that since the Paris family had been forced out of the sheep business, it probably would not be long until he was going to see a vast reduction in sage grouse production in Butte Valley; and Doc said, "Its already happening. "We only saw 10 or so birds this year, and most of them were old hens and roosters."

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