

For The Birds

Poultry Predator Management: ID The Enemy

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a two-part series.

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

The fox is notorious for its appetite for farm fowl, but many poultry owners are just as aware of the frequency of raccoon and opossum visits to the farm, and even the occasional skunk.

But when chickens start disappearing or a battered bird is left out in the yard, figuring out who the culprit is — and therefore how to ward it off — may not be as easy as referring to the clichés.

When Shell Rasmussen noticed some chicks getting picked off on her Beatrice, Neb.-area acreage, she never suspected the actual culprit: Her newly weaned farm kittens, which were climbing a tree near the brooder and dropping in through a ceiling vent.

While wildlife won't hesitate for an easy meal at a local poultry farm, Thomas Barnes, state wildlife specialist for the University of Kentucky Extension service in Lexington, Ky., says farm pets — even house cats who are allowed to venture outside, in some instances — are more often than not part of the problem.

"Even if they are well-fed, cats will kill baby chickens," said Barnes, a nationally recognized expert in predator management, whose post-graduate education included South Dakota State University. "And believe it or not, dogs are typically the main poultry predator. These dogs can be free-ranging or they can be the farm pet. Coyotes will come into suburban and urban areas — we know they're in Chicago — but they're generally not as big of a problem as dogs."

Chicken is just as popular in the animal kingdom as in the human population. The most common poultry predators include not only dogs, coyotes and sometimes cats, but also foxes, raccoons, weasels and minks, rats, hawks, owls and snakes.

But before setting a trap, poultry owners need to know exactly what predator is making a visit to the farm flock.

"It's like you're going to war and you're facing the enemy," Barnes said. "You have to identify the enemy and learn everything you can about it. For example, the least weasel has to eat its



PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

body weight four times a day, so it's a voracious eater. First thing you need to know is who's causing the problem."

And it has to be more than guess. "Everyone will say, look for tracks. Well," Barnes said, with the exception for domestic dogs and cats, "that's a lot harder than it sounds."

Wild animals aren't able to survive by being easy to spot and the same goes for their tracks — not to mention that not all poultry predators have tracks, like hawks, owls and snakes.

"If losing just a few birds, put some very fine sand or talcum powder down on the floor, so you can get some visible tracks," Barnes said, but if owners are losing large numbers of birds each night, by far the better way to identify a problem animal in any situation is to study its behavior patterns.

For example, "hawks will take them during the day, while owls will take them during the night," he added. "The least weasel is just six inches long and can get through a quarter-inch gap and, like all in the weasel family, kill animals for the fun of it, so there will be many animals dead in one night without signs of being fed on. And rats will kill young birds, but if you have a rat problem, you have a larger problem with sanitation."

Here are some clues based on what poultry producers are likely to find:

- Missing birds — the most common culprits of chicks are snakes, rats, raccoons and cats; those of adult birds are dogs, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, hawks and owls. Most often, the bird will simply be gone, but sometimes there may be feathers scattered in the area or a leftover wing.
- Dead birds, eaten — any of the mammalian predators.
- Dead birds, but not eaten — sometimes dogs, but more characteristic with weasels and mink.
- Dead birds, not eaten, but the head missing — hawks and owls are notorious for doing this, but raccoons may do this especially if the bird is killed while in a cage or behind a fence, because the raccoon couldn't pull the rest of the bird through the wire.
- Wounded birds — dogs make bites all over the body, opossum bite the breast and legs of young birds, rats bite the hocks of young birds, and weasels and mink make multiple bites and sometimes pull out the guts.
- Missing eggs — Skunk, snakes, rats, opossum, raccoons, blue jays and crows.



Extension: A Look At Options For Insuring Hay In 2014

BROOKINGS — Much of the alfalfa hay produced in South Dakota in 2013 was covered by Forage Production insurance. The amount of insurance totaled more than \$100 million for the crop year. While hay prices have tapered off in recent months, they set an all-time high marketing year average price of \$221 per ton in South Dakota for 2012-2013, said Matthew Diersen SDSU Extension Risk/Business Management Specialist.

"Producers in South Dakota covered more acres in 2013 with Forage Production insurance than in any other state. However, about half of the 1.78 million acres were not covered by Forage Production in 2013," Diersen said.

Diersen added that many producers are self-insuring much of the alfalfa risk.

"The coverage level typically purchased remains quite low compared to other crops," he said. "About one third of insured acres have been covered with Catastrophic Risk Protection (CAT). The cost for CAT is low, but the payouts are infrequent and low as well," Diersen said.

When the coverage has been bought up using the Actual Production History (APH) plan it is often at the 50 percent yield election level. He explained that the average outlay across all South Dakota APH policies in 2013 was about \$12 per acre.

The deadline to purchase or change coverage for 2014 is Sept. 30, 2013. While it only covers yield loss, Diersen said the price election level has been increased with higher market prices.

"In 2014 the price election is \$210 per ton for alfalfa and alfalfa-mixed hay. The higher price election level and continued high premium subsidy rate may make coverage more attractive to those self-insuring. Those that have been buying coverage may look to lower the election level if the protection provided remains adequate," he said.

"None of these products offer the revenue protection common to many other crops. However, for the commercial hay grower selling the majority of production, there is a natural hedge in place."

MATTHEW DIERSEN

Other hay in 2013 totaled 1.35 million acres in South Dakota. Non-alfalfa hay can be insured with Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) coverage from the Farm Service Agency or with Pasture, Rangeland, Forage (PRF) — Rainfall Index coverage from crop insurance agents.

Diersen explained that NAP covers farm-level yield losses. PRF covers against precipitation shortfalls in regional grids.

"PRF can also cover alfalfa," he said.

New for 2014 crops is Rainfall Index — Annual Forage insurance, which could be used to insure a newly-seeded hay crop that is not yet eligible for Forage Protection coverage.

"None of these products offer the revenue protection common to many other crops," Diersen said. "However, for the commercial hay grower selling the majority of production, there is a natural hedge in place."

As production is reduced in a region, Diersen said there is still a tendency for prices to increase. This partially lowers revenue variability. For the hay grower feeding the majority of production, the coverage is lacking as higher feed replacement costs are not offset by higher indemnity levels.

To learn more visit, iGrow.org.

Opinion

Are There Milo Forests In Our Future?

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

Ethanol production has certainly changed the landscape of the corn industry, but sorghum might be a viable revolution of the ethanol industry and the eventual landscape of Nebraska and South Dakota.

A farmer near Farwell, Neb., which is northwest of Grand Island, Neb., is growing more than 50 varieties of sorghum in his fields as part of a test plot for ethanol production. Known as the "milo man," which is proudly displayed on his pickup's license plates, John Dvoracek told *Brownfield Ag News*, based in Jefferson, Mo., that sorghum is that next wave in ethanol production that will really take it to the next level. It's more efficient than sugar cane, which is by far double the efficiency of corn, and sorghum doesn't need near as much moisture to grow as corn.

But growing more sorghum in the area would



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what we would see out our windshields driving down the road: some of the most promising varieties Dvoracek is growing are 12 to 15 feet tall, and one variety — if it can withstand our area's sometimes early freezes — grows to 20 feet tall!

And while corn prices continue to look great, sorghum may not be such a hard sell. The *Lincoln Journal Star* reported this past spring that many ethanol plants, such as those in Trenton, Neb., (in Southwest Nebraska) and Ravenna, Neb. (near Grand Island), are

require a big change in the infrastructure that is currently set up for a primarily corn market, and it would certainly change

actively seeking to make milo the main ingredient in their ethanol, because the research is there to show that it is far more economical for plants. Ralph Scott of Trenton Agri-Products said they hope their openness encourages producers to grow more sorghum in the area. And Kansas's Ag Department is making it a priority to encourage producers to grow milo.

While the corn industry seems supportive of new-found interest in sorghum ethanol production, there has to be a little trepidation. The corn industry is where it is today because of ethanol demand. Corn prices are still phenomenal, and the rest of the agribusiness sector is relishing in the larger profit margins, too. But if sorghum

was to take off, corn prices would fall and farmers would be in a crunch, as input costs don't follow the ups and downs of the grain market.

On the livestock side, switching ethanol production to sorghum would be a boon. Current corn prices are crushing the livestock industry, but sorghum is not nearly as popular of a feed among livestock producers.

Ethanol production has done a lot of good things for the corn industry, but it has splintered supporters. As a livestock producer, if sorghum ethanol production would take the edge of the corn price-while continuing to take the edge off my fuel bill—that would indeed make me happy. Even if we were living in a forest of milo!



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