

Grazing cattle good way to improve range, wildlife

Cliff Gardner

The myth that cattle are destructive to range and grasslands has gained widespread acceptance throughout our nation in recent years. Everyone seems to believe that cattle and cattlemen are bad.

Things have certainly changed. Remembering back to the time when I was a boy, driving cattle along our valley road, it seemed that nearly everyone that came by would stop and give us a good and encouraging word. They would usually comment on how good the cattle looked, or ask how the feed was doing before going upon their way.

These days things are different, as often as not when we meet people on the road we get a scowl, or maybe a remark about how dirty the cows are making the road. Why is it that people's attitudes have changed so much. Is it because the American people have finally awoke to the fact that cattle are bad, or is it the things they're being told these days?

I know if I had been raised in town and had been exposed to all the repeated misinformation now being disseminated throughout our nation, how livestock is destroying our wetlands and overgrazing our public lands, I'd be concerned. And I've got an idea that the next time I went camping I'd notice the very symptoms I'd been told about and come home convinced that something should be done.

So how do we in the cattle business explain the importance of livestock impact? It's difficult, but let me begin this way. If old plant material is not removed from year to year by grazing or cropping, it interferes with new growth; primarily by restricting the amount of sunlight that would otherwise be available to newly formed leaves. In addition, many competing plants, smaller in size or stature, may receive no sunlight at all.

So what happens when this is allowed to occur for more than a year or two? Some of the more important plants, beneficial to both livestock and wildlife, such as forbs, legumes, and finer-stemmed grasses, simply die out. Plant diversity is lost, and insect production often declines as well.

For those of you that live in town, think of how your yards would look if you failed to mow your lawn or trim your shrubbery. Plants, whether they are in your yard or in the country, in order to remain healthy need to be hedged. And in the wild, hedging is accomplished best by cattle.

Cattle and horses by nature like to congregate near water holes or other favored spots to fight flies during summer months, and in so doing, often create bare spots or "sacrifice areas".

But is this all bad? Not necessarily. For many species such areas are critical habitat. Take the killdeer as an example, they nest right in the middle of the most bare and abused areas they can find. You would think that their nest would be trampled by the large animals, but not so.

More than once I've watched in fascination as a mother killdeer would raise herself just above her nest and vibrate her wings in a manner that let the large animal know she was there.

The needs of waterfowl are very similar. When cattle tromp aquatic vegetation into

the mud they create open feeding areas for ducks and other birds, providing, among other things, visibility necessary for defense against predators. I have long observed that there is something about the trampling and mixing of mud, cow manure and sunlight that creates almost perfect habitat for insects. Vernón Bodtck explains why:

Phytoplankton (microscopic algae) is the base of the food chain in aquatic habitats. Zooplankton (microscopic animals) feed on phytoplankton. Infertile waters are clear but they are devoid of life. Fertile waters are murky with plankton, but they are teeming with life. All animal life in or about a pond — birds, fish, amphibians, insects, crustaceans and mollusks — are dependent directly or indirectly on phytoplankton. Phytoplankton and all other aquatic vegetation are dependent on sunshine and nutrients — primarily phosphorus and in the arid West especially nitrogen. Cattle droppings, especially urine, supply these nutrients. Wetland habitats are more productive for all wildlife when they are grazed by cattle.

Then too, cattle trails act as roads for young birds, allowing them to move from one type of habitat to another, or from the nest to critical feeding areas right after hatching. In addition, vegetation that has been grazed or impacted early in season sprouts anew in late season providing tender and nutritious feed for ducks, geese, sage grouse and other wildlife.

Closely cropped meadows and rangelands also produce more insects, beneficial to a broad variety of wildlife. Rodents, too, prosper when lands are grazed. Mice, gophers, rabbits, prairie dogs, and ground squirrels are always found to be more abundant wherever livestock are grazed on a regular basis.

Although the above examples are of wildlife and habitats associated with the central or northern part of the West, the principles apply nearly everywhere, be it in the desert or on the plains.

When the great herds of buffalo moved through the plains in bygone years, they would leave vast areas trampled and beat. Buffalo trails and wallows would deepen with each passing herd, and when the winds blew, great dust clouds would rise across the plains. But then, as the rains returned or spring would come, the plants would burst with great life and vigor.

The same buffalo wallows that were eye sores during the dry season all of a sudden were water holes important to wildlife and Indians alike.

It was not until large herds of cattle and horses began to appear across the West that wildlife began to increase. In fact, it was in the 1940's and the 1950's, (at the very time our western range lands were alleged to be in their poorest condition) that we had the greatest number of mule deer, sage grouse, ducks, and even song birds.

So what really happened when white man put millions of cattle onto the Western rangeland? The same thing that was occurring when buffalo ran on the great plains, hundreds of wildlife of every description began to appear.

Gardner's ranch is located in Ruby Valley.