

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

The Lost Sheep *By Stewart Truelsen*

In the late 1970s, the American Farm Bureau Federation produced a television documentary called *The Lost Sheep*. It was about coyote predation of America's sheep population. The producer of the film, the late Jack Angell, a former NBC newsman, hoped to change the public's attitude about predator control. Many if not most Americans viewed the coyote sympathetically as a symbol of the Old West.

Sheep producers, on the other hand, knew the coyote far more intimately—as a cunning, persistent killer. “Meek as a lamb” is a true saying. Sheep are defenseless against predators and no one understands this any better than the coyote.

Coyotes account for half of all predator kills, which in a recent year numbered almost a quarter million head of sheep. In dollar terms, livestock losses due to coyotes are in the tens of millions of dollars annually.

The U.S. sheep population once numbered more than 50 million head, but is only about 6 million today. Coyotes and other predators are not entirely to blame for the steep decline, but they play a significant role.

The Lost Sheep contained dramatic footage of a coyote killing a sheep and interviews with sheep producers attesting to how devastating the losses can be to a livestock operation, to say nothing of the terror inflicted on the sheep. But environmental and wildlife groups opposed a number of the lethal means available to stop predators, and the public was either uninformed or just didn't care.

Decades after the Farm Bureau documentary, public attitude is finally changing, and the reason is captured by the title of a new book, *Coyote at the Kitchen Door*. The author of the book, Stephen DeStefano, an eastern wildlife biologist, said until recently people in the East were disgusted with the killing of coyotes and were unconcerned about large losses to livestock.

“Now that we suspect that coyotes may kill and eat some of our pets, we in the East wage a war of our own against the species. It is nothing that the coyote hasn’t seen before, so it adjusts and moves in the suburban terrain just the way it has on the plains and prairies of the West,” he wrote.

Last summer in Rye, N.Y., the southeastern tip of the state, there were two separate coyote attacks on children. In one instance, a 6-year-old girl running alongside her house at night was knocked down by two coyotes and bitten before being rescued by her mother.

Eastern coyotes are larger than native western populations and carry wolf DNA, which they acquired in the species’ migration eastward across the northern United States and southern Canada.

Usually the excuse is made that unwelcome wildlife encounters with humans occur because we are encroaching on their habitat. That’s not the case with coyotes; they are advancing on us, and they like what they see—plenty of food, no larger predators, and no hunting or trapping in metropolitan areas. When it comes to the issue of controlling these predators, lost sheep is a valid reason in itself, but it appears the issue is taking on added urgency as the coyote is striking closer to our neighborhoods.

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Stewart Truelsen is a regular contributor to the Focus on Agriculture series and is author of a new book marking the American Farm Bureau Federation’s 90th anniversary, Forward Farm Bureau.