Learning The Hard Way

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One thing about these intriguing bison that we all love so much is that their instincts and wild nature are constantly teaching us new things about them. We often learn these things the hard way. As we learn through experience, we also need to share with fellow producers through newsletters, conventions and general visiting. I hope this article will help other producers learn a lesson we and other producers have been learning the hard way.

During the time of the Olds Bison Advantage 1999 Convention we lost two calves, one bull and one heifer. Two weeks earlier we had weighed and split our last year’s weaned calves into bulls and heifers.

To better utilize our pastures in our rotational grazing program, we decided to put the yearling heifers into one breeding herd and yearling bulls into the other breeding herd. These herds both had a few straggler cows yet to calve. We’d heard from other producers that you shouldn’t put inexperienced two year old breeding bulls in with the cows. Often the scent from a cow with a new calf will stimulate the bulls to try to breed her thinking she’s in heat. In the process a new born calf will often be injured or killed. We heeded this advice and our two year old breeding bulls were locked in the corral until well after the final calves were born.

As a result of yearling bulls aggressively bullying calves, we now have lost two young calves. I discovered one dead bull calf (five days old) the Friday morning of the convention and worried the remainder of the weekend for the safety of our other calves. The other dead calf, a heifer, I discovered Sunday afternoon after the farm tours.

Speaking about our first mishap with other producers at the Olds Convention, I realized that calves were being killed by one year old bulls, as well as two year old bulls. At least half a dozen producers had lost from one to four calves by aggressive behavior of bulls either this year or in previous years. And

Continued on page 24

IRISH CREEK BISON

Thank You to the following people who purchased our entries at these shows:

1998 AGRIBITION - REGINA
‘97 Heifer - Dr. Marlowe Goble, Idaho
‘97 Bull - Lucien Gilbert, Fabreville, Que.

1999 GTSS, Denver
‘97 Bull - Lance Kuek, Lincoln, Nebraska
‘98 Bull - Paul Jonjak, Lyons, Colorado
‘98 Heifer - Ben Hudye, Norquay, SK.

1999 WILD ROSE, CAMROSE
‘98 Bull - Dale Bindig, Juroki, SK.

A very Special Thank You to the Producers who purchased stock off the farm!

JOHN & JOANNE DOREY
Vermilion, AB. T9X 2B1
Ph: 780-853-2024
Fax 780-853-2147
breeding bull that killed four calves before they got him out of the herd.

After checking our records we discovered that the week old bull calf had been killed by the cow's own bull calf offspring of the previous year. The mother of the dead heifer calf, however, had a heifer calf last year which was in the other herd. This twelve day old calf had been killed by an unrelated offspring, probably the yearling bull which had chased the mother around so much that first day that she had left her calf behind. Upon finding the calf, Peter grabbed it, put it in the truck and returned it to the cow. The cow had obviously continued to be harassed by the yearling bull until the calf was eventually killed.

We noticed that the cows which the yearling bulls harassed were cows generally at the bottom end of the pecking order. They obviously were not able to protect their calves even from a yearling bull. Some of the more dominant cows stood their ground.

Whether these yearlings are trying to nurse or in some other way bond with their mothers, breed a cow with a recently born calf or are just playing too rough, the result is unfortunately the same, a loss of life.

Other producers that I spoke with at the conference were almost shocked at our experience with these yearlings as they (as far as they knew) hadn't had any problems with yearling bulls in their herd. However, just recently, another producer had a cow abandon her newborn calf. Her previous calf was late, so they left it with her for the winter instead of weaning it. The cow had absolutely no interest in the new born calf and now her yearling calf is nursing again.

We, fortunately, have not had problems with the group of yearling heifer calves in our other herd. Another producer told me of a situation where one of his weaned yearling heifers had wanted to nurse its mom and in the process almost killed the newborn calf before he was able to split her off. It seems yearling heifers can cause their fair share of problems around calving mothers too.

I write this article as I anxiously wait in my truck by the corral in attempts to sort off the remaining 9 yearling bulls from our cow herd. We were able to sort off 15 on Sunday night after the farm tours, but these last ones are more of a challenge. I truly hope this article gives you some food for thought as you continue in the management of your herds and can save the lives of many little calves. I only wish we had not had to learn this lesson the hard way.