Hitting Close to Home:
The Horror of Wildlife Services

A Long Wait in a Trap

This story was written by Rita Freeman. She and her husband, Randy Oster, live in Clackamas County, Oregon. What they experienced is not an aberration; it happens daily throughout the US, wherever Wildlife Services operates.

It began like any normal busy weekend for us. We are building a nursery and a dream home on 10 acres we purchased late last year in the Estacada area. Little did we know as we planned our chores for the weekend that the events about to take place would change our perception of sheep farming and the federal government for ever, as well as rob us of our peace of mind.

On Friday evening, February 6, 1998, we returned from town to find our dogs had dug out of their kennel. We had never had a digging...
Long Time in a Trap

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problem with them before.

The next morning we went to the neighboring sheep rancher’s to inquire if anyone there had seen our dogs. The rancher said he had not seen them.

As Saturday progressed, we continued to search for our dogs. We posted signs, and I went door to door. My husband Randy began searching the woods adjoining our property.

Upon Randy’s return, I could instantly see something was gravely wrong by the look on his face. As he described to me the incredible scene he had witnessed, I was horrified. In the woods, about 200 yards from our dogs’ kennel, he came upon the first of three trapping areas. What he saw when he got into the woods was, in his words, “the most vulgar display of death I’ve ever seen.”

Before his eyes was the first of three piles of dead animals in a half-to-one-mile stretch of woods. These piles included dead sheep, sheep tails, coyotes, otter, beaver, skunk, possum, and birds. The carcasses were numerous and in various states of decay. Some were no longer recognizable as to species, just a pile of goo where a wild animal had once been. All trails to each pile, were surrounded by a network of traps strategically placed to catch any animal drawn in by the stench of death. As he continued, he would witness a new horror at each turn. He had to toss stones at a coyote to determine whether it was alive but possibly sleeping, or dead. The coyote was snared and had been lain at the trapping pile with the noose still secured around its neck. This coyote carcass, now being used for bait, had been tied to a tree so other animals could not drag it off. Around the entire pile, snares were set to entrap the next animal that would surely be drawn to the stench.

Puppy not so “Lucky”

As Randy continued his search around the trapping area, he came upon a puppy, about six months old, in a snare. Barely alive, the dog was dying a slow agonizing death by strangulation and dehydration. When Randy tried to get close, the puppy began to growl and snap at him. The snare, made of heavy aircraft cable, was longer than most, and he could do little to help her. Her distress at his presence was making her tighten the snare’s grip, so he backed off.

After Randy finished telling me this shocking story, I immediately called the Clackamas County Sheriff to report the incident. But when Deputy Dennis S. Kauffman arrived and we told our tale, he informed us that he could not do anything at that point for us, nor for the dog. He suggested we call the Clackamas County livestock officer, Deputy Robin Iverson, on Monday. We told him that the snared puppy would not survive until Monday and that we would go over ourselves to rescue it. Kauffman was not much help.

When the deputy left, Randy donned thick overalls, grabbed a pair of cable cutters and off he went to the trapping site. Cautiously approaching the trapped puppy, he slowly crawled over dead decaying animals on his hands and knees to get to the stake where the snare was anchored, all the while talking softly to the terrified animal. He worked for about ten minutes with the cutters to get through the cable; the pup soon realized Randy was not going to hurt her, and she began to drag herself toward him. When she got close enough she began to lick his hand. Unable to loosen the cable from the dog’s neck, once the dog was freed, Randy tried to get her to walk and follow him out of the woods, but she was too weak. He had to carry her back to our place.

We loosened and removed most of the cable from her neck, and put food and water next to her. She spent the rest of the weekend laying with her head next to the bowls we put out for her, eating and drinking water as she was able to.

Neighbor lied about seeing our dogs

Sickened by the realization that this mass trapping of animals was happening next door, and thinking that this kind of trapping was surely illegal, we decided to go back the next
day with video and camera and document what Randy had seen.

On Monday morning, February 9, Randy took the puppy to Wilsonville Veterinary Clinic for treatment. The vet kept "Lucky" (our nickname for this loving, golden lab/retriever mix) and determined it would be necessary to perform surgery to remove the rest of the snare from her neck.

He then went to Clackamas County Animal Control, where he spoke with J. Ross Craven, Dog Control Officer II. Our rancher neighbor had, in fact, turned our dogs in on Friday afternoon, February 6. Why he deliberately lied to me when I asked him on Saturday morning if he had seen our dogs, I do not know. Apparently, the dogs had not chased the rancher's sheep but were found in his field. Randy showed the officer our video tape of the trapping areas, which made it patently obvious that every animal — whether domestic or wild — was being baited into the area on purpose. Cravens was horrified by the video footage and immediately released our two dogs to Randy.

That same day, I contacted State Fish and Wildlife and all other state agencies I could think of to inform them of what, at the time, I believed were illegal trapping practices. My calls basically fell on deaf ears or into the abyss of voice mail. Finally in frustration, I decided to contact the television media.

Never imagined it was the government's doing

On Tuesday morning, February 10, we reviewed all our information with Jon Catton of KGW News. We agreed to meet the next day, so he could investigate and film the violations for himself.

On Wednesday Randy was nearly driven off the road by Mark Lytle, a Wildlife Services employee, who was leaving the adjoining property where the trapping was being done. When we first met him several months earlier, he told us he regularly checked on the rancher's sheep and kept a travel trailer on the rancher's property.

Visibly shaken and almost in tears, Mark asked Randy, "Why did you do this to me? I never did anything to you. I have a wife and kids to support and I am probably going to lose my job over this." At this point in time we thought it was Wildlife Services' job to prevent rather than be the instrument of such horror, so Randy's natural response was: "Then do your job, Mark!"

We still assumed that the rancher was the culprit, and that we were exposing a farmer who was breaking the law. Never in our wildest dreams did we think that a federal government agency would be responsible for such a horrific act, and that we as taxpayers were paying for it. We were about to find out how wrong we could be and how angry we could be at a federal government and its employees totally out of control.

WS moves fast to clean up all the evidence

While Randy stood talking to Mark in the road and waiting for Jon Catton to show up, Catton was on the phone with me, telling me about how his morning inquiries had led him to the Wildlife Services office and to Dave Williams, State Director. Williams had told him we could be charged with illegal trespass and theft of the snares, which were federal government property, both serious charges. But this discussion was mostly engineered to attempt to discredit us in Catton's eyes — and to serve as a delaying tactic to give Mark Lytle a head start to rush up to Estacada and clean up the decomposing animals and the traps.

By the time Jon Catton got out of Williams' office and obtained permission to access the property leased by the rancher where the trapping was done, the cover up was complete. Except for a few stray snares apparently missed by Lytle in his hasty clean up, and the gooey greasy spots where the most decayed animals had been, the area had been completely cleaned up — thanks to Wildlife Services. The only documentation remaining was the video and photos Randy had taken the previous Sunday.

Had someone told us this bizarre story, we would have perhaps thought that person was exaggerating. To see first hand as we did, this indiscriminate trapping of any and all species, baiting with other wild animals that had been snared and left in piles, and the reaction and cover up by our federal government, as well as their responsibility for this type of mass carnage was, to say the least, a sobering experience for Randy and me.

Friday the 13th leads to more horror

By Friday the 13th, Wildlife Services had rallied and enlisted the help of Deputy Robin Iverson, Wildlife Officer, in their attempts to silence us and Jon Catton of KGW. Deputy Iverson accused us of trespassing and stealing three federal government traps. I told her the only snare taken was the one that had been surgically removed from the rescued puppy's neck. She lectured me on how great Wildlife Services was, and how the rancher →
was just trying to protect his poor lambing sheep, and that they were well within their rights. She instructed me that all the Wildlife Services and the rancher wanted was their snares back. She demanded that we take the one snare we had and place it in a brown paper bag with her name on it, and leave it at the desk of Clackamas County Sheriff's office before Monday at 8:30 a.m. If we did this - returned the snare or snares she said we had stolen - she indicated there would not be any charges filed against us.

Randy and I let her know that if they wanted their snare back badly enough to press the issue, we would return it in the presence of our attorney, and that we would need to get a receipt for its return; or it would be returned in front of Jon Catton's TV camera. After that phone call, we never heard any more about it, except that Wildlife Services supposedly wrote a letter to the rancher stating that the agency would no longer trap in the area because their property had been tampered with and three snares were stolen.

**Rancher gets WS's blessing to blast us**

We found all of this particularly interesting, in light of the fact that Jon Catton's video footage of the site, which was taken after the clean up, shows snares that were left behind. The agency's ability to count and keep track of their snares obviously needs work. None of the snares, including the one embedded in the dog's neck, was marked with Department of Agriculture markings as they claimed and is required by law.

When the neighbors in our immediate community heard what was going on, many of them came out in our support. We found out most had lost dogs and were opposed to the trapping and methods used by Wildlife Services. Fortunately, they were willing to help, with us leading the charge, for objecting to their cruel and indiscriminate killing of wildlife and domestic animals as their only method of protecting a small herd of sheep.

The music and cannons continued past the lambing season into May and June. Repeated calls to the Clackamas County Sheriff's Department went unheeded. In desperation, trying to save some of our peace of mind, we hooked up a Public Address system similar to the one the rancher had pointed at us. Within hours we received a call from Clackamas Sheriff Bowman saying he had confiscated our stereo system and speaker and was writing a report to the Clackamas County District Attorney asking that Randy be charged with criminal misconduct for harassing the rancher! In response to our complaint we were told in a letter from Wildlife Services that the rancher is allowed to play music at all hours of the day and night to protect his sheep from predators. Unbelievably, the rancher has the right to do whatever he wants to protect his sheep even breaking laws the rest of the public is obligated to obey. (As I write this piece, on October 26, 1998, criminal charges are still pending against us, and we have been told by the Clackamas County District Attorney's office that we have no right to a copy of Wildlife Services' letter unless or until this matter goes to trial.)

Why is the Federal government in the business of subsidizing sheep ranchers? This rancher does not prac-
tice good husbandry, and he utilizes none of the standard, sensible precautions which could protect his sheep, such as using guard dogs or llamas, or penning his sheep in barns or lambing sheds at night. In fact, he allows the sheep to graze all 350 acres at will.

On July 19, these sloppy ranching practices led to the first of three separate incidents in which we found the rancher’s sheep in our fields eating our nursery stock. After numerous attempts to talk to the rancher and the Sheriff’s office, after leaving many messages, Randy (and a neighbor whose property was also regularly trespassed by the sheep) repaired the dilapidated fence line where the sheep were crossing. To this day, neither neighbor nor we have heard a word from the rancher. Evidently he is so used to having others, including the taxpayers, take care of his sheep for him that he does not feel it necessary to respond to our messages or offer thanks for herding his sheep and fixing his fence line.

Toward the end of September, we noticed buzzards circling the areas where we had found the traps and dead animals. Several times we heard distinct howling of animals in pain. Then one day, the sheriff called to tell us that our dogs were spotted in the rancher’s field. Our dogs had been trained since the February incident with a radio controlled fence and had not violated training even once.

**Back to square one?**

We put two and two together, and of course began to worry that Wildlife Services or the rancher had gone back to baiting traps. On Monday, September 28, our worst fears were realized as Wildlife Services trapping notices suddenly appeared on the land adjoining ours. The trapping had started up again. This answered a lot of questions for us. It confirmed that the buzzards we had been watching for almost three weeks were, in fact, circling the traps, and it also explained why our dogs had crossed the fence line after eight months of total obedience to our training. It fit in with the painful howling we had heard.

Oh my God! We were right back in the same place we had been earlier in the year. As our anger flared and we began a letter-writing campaign to protest this new round of trapping, the signs were removed—just as fast and mysteriously as they had appeared.

What did this bizarre posting of the property mean? Our neighbor told us he had witnessed Mark Lytle putting the signs up on Monday and taking them down on Thursday. Was it a token attempt by Wildlife Services to post the property and follow their own procedures? How come the signs disappeared so quickly? What is Wildlife Services up to? Are they still trapping even though they have taken down the signs? If so, is this trapping being done within the Wildlife Services guidelines, or are they allowing or stocking the piles of carcage we found earlier in the year?

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**Exactly what is Wildlife Services and what do they do?**

**Fiscal Year 1997**

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Why do my tax dollars go to fund an agency that has the authority to go into an area and sterilize it of wildlife, breaking every trapping law in effect, killing even non-predatory animals such as beaver, and otter? The methods of trapping being used are in violation of the Wildlife Services’ own guidelines, and when exposed, this government agency covers up its actions, denies, and harasses the citizens who pay their very wages.

After seeing the records of animals taken by trapping since 1990, and the numbers relevant to sheep killed by predators, value of the sheep killed, numbers of various wildlife killed and the amount of government labor hours expended to protect this herd of sheep, even I, the novice analyst, can see that the scale is out of balance. I don’t want my tax dollars supporting this activity and there is not one taxpayer that I have spoken to about this situation who has not been enraged by the very existence of this agency, their reckless, unethical practices, and blatant harassment of us and our neighbors.

**If the law permits this**

We feel helpless to fight against a rancher who is given special rights by out-of-control state and federal agencies. He has the right to do whatever he wants and kill whatever he wants — all the while that our rights are being violated. We have had to suffer his music and cannons all day and night for months on end. The rancher is granted immunity from the law that makes it illegal for the rest of the citizens in this community to make loud noises and play loud music after hours. He is allowed to rob us of our peace of mind, our sleep, and our health, to protect 40 lame, unhealthy sheep.

Is this fair and equitable treatment? If the law permits this, it needs to be changed.

**Did Princess Have to Die?**

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could be seen. Nobody made a call to inform Mr. Struble.

After a few days, Princess’s body still remained at the site because she was too heavy for the elderly Mr. Struble to move, but her collar and tags had been mysteriously removed and a fresh half of a deer carcass was put out as a lure bait. Although they had removed Princess’s tags, nobody called Mr. Struble. Days later, someone removed Princess, the rest of the bait and the trap. Still, no one called Mr. Struble.

If the law’s requirements and the United States Dept. of Agriculture’s (USDA) Wildlife Services’ (WS) own directives had been followed, Princess might not have lost her life. If warning signs had been clearly posted as mandated, Mr. Struble may have been able to prevent his dog from being drawn to the area by the smell of rotting animal carcasses being used as a bait lure. As it was, neither of the two warnings were posted where they could be seen or read from the road, and only one included warnings about M-44s (the spring-activated device that ejects sodium cyanide powder into the mouth of an animal that pulls on it). None of the neighbors who lived within a tenth of a mile of the site had been notified of the traps or poison. Nearby medical facilities were not notified of the presence of M-44s, another important safeguard for people and animals in the vicinity of these deadly devices. Unlike Compound 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate), sodium cyanide has an antidote, which will work if used immediately.

Princess is just one of the many victims of the negligence and incompetence typical of the WS program. Traps and poisons are indiscriminate; they are placed on private and public lands at taxpayers’ expense by WS purportedly to protect livestock, but they maim and kill whatever creature is attracted to their baited presence. For every predator targeted by WS, untold numbers of nontarget animals are trapped or poisoned to death. The death toll includes companion animals and endangered species, and children are also put at high risk.

Why did Princess have to die? Maybe because WS cannot afford the inquiries, reasoned challenges, and bad publicity that would accompany proper public disclosure.

Something is dead wrong with the priorities of this agency.

**Upset by what you’ve read?**

**What you can do:**

- Make copies of these stories and circulate them.
- If you live in a rural community be aware of possible Wildlife Services’ activities—which will set traps and poisons for owners of even one sheep or goat.
- Write your Representative in Washington and tell them you want Wildlife Services’ lethal predator control program abolished.
- If you know anyone who has experienced a similar encounter with Wildlife Services, please let us know.