

Beautiful Beef at a Breakfast Buffet.



This photo was taken minutes after I moved the beef herd to fresh pasture. Our Snake River Farm is divided into 70 paddocks (grazing pastures). When grazing intensely, cattle will eat shoulder to shoulder as in this photo. This particular herd consists of forty beef heifers. At times all forty will graze in a line. For the past two weeks, I have been moving the cattle daily into pastures that are less than one acre in size. This is called "Intensive" or Mob Grazing." Contrary to what you might think, intense grazing is best for both the animals and the land. The great prairie soils of North America, from Canada to Texas, were produced by intense grazing such as this. For thousands of years, enormous numbers of bison and elk moved across the land. The traditional or common technique for pasturing animals is to leave them in one pasture for weeks or even all season. Nothing could be worse for the pasture. Grazing at a leisurely pace, the animals eat only the best and most palatable plants. Then, as soon as those favored plants start to regrow, they eat them again, and then again. Each time diminishing the plant's root reserves until it dies. Eventually, all that remains in such pastures are coarse weeds of little food value. In our area, a bitter herb called yarrow is most likely to prosper. Yarrow is the white flowering plant that dominates many poorly managed horse pastures. As you can see in the photo, this pasture is lush with many types of plants. The cattle are devouring a mixture of more than 20 legumes, grasses, and forbs. Forbs are broad leafed flowering plants sometimes considered weeds. If the cattle eat them, they are not weeds. In fact, many prairie forbs are rich in minerals and vitamins. When grazing shoulder to shoulder the animals tend to eat everything.

There is some competition involved.

These intensely grazing cattle, like the vast moving herds of the past, leave a soil surface that at first glance may seem devastated.

They leave a landscape of unpalatable stems, stepped on and crushed plants, hoof prints that open the soil surface, manure, and urine.

We now know this is the perfect environment for soil building microbes, revitalized plants and new seedlings.

This is the second grazing of this paddock this year. There will be at least one more grazing before winter. Each time the cattle “devastate” the pasture, the soil and vegetation improve substantially. The pasture is now self sustaining. No outside fertilizer, no chemicals, no new seeds are required. Just grazing animals and splendid Minnesota summer.

Tom