

Farm Animals on a Minus 32 Morning.







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It was 32 degrees below zero here this morning. It was also sunny and still.

Anyone who works outside knows that -32, sunny and still, is a lot warmer than 5 above, cloudy with a gusty wind. Even so, 32 below is cold.

Gail suggested you might be interested to know what the animals are doing today. So, I took these photos.

Bison, cattle, and horses are well suited to northern winters. Hogs, not so much.

For bison and cattle, the secret to being warm is having a belly full of hay. They are ruminants.

Ruminants have a great winter advantage over animals with simple stomachs like pigs and humans. The digestive systems of ruminants are filled with billions of bacteria that convert roughage (course plant material) into nutrients they can use. Heat is a by-product of rumination. If healthy ruminants have food, they are comfortably warm at extremely low temperatures.

Of course, bison and cattle grow terrific coats, especially bison.

Cattle need a good shed or windbreak when the wind chill gets extreme or during a blizzard.

Bison could not care less. I have never seen bison seek shelter. I am not at all sure they understand the concept. The bison cow in the photo has snow and ice chunks on her coat from a wet snowfall of several days ago. She loses so little heat that the snow has not melted off.

There is no better winter coat than a fine buffalo robe.

The beef animal in the photo is a heifer that was born here about 14 months ago. She is at the hay feeder. I got her attention long enough to snap the picture. She is completely relaxed in her winter coat. Her color and markings are typical for the Hereford breed.

Horses are not true ruminants but they can handle cold quite well. Their digestive systems have a limited ability to ruminate. That helps. They also grow superb winter coats.

Although they need good forage just like bison and cattle, they have a couple other strategies to warm themselves.

They stand broadside to the morning sun for an hour or two. Obviously, they warm themselves significantly in that way. Every sunny winter morning, all ten of our horses line up on a high spot catching the morning rays.

They also play and run vigorously after their sunbath. There are a number of reasons why horses run, joust and play on cold mornings but clearly one reason is to warm their bodies.

The photo is of Hombre, a five year old mustang. He is standing broadside to the sun while simultaneously picking at some hay beneath him. Notice that his back is covered with frost and snow. Hombre is quite comfortable.

The pigs are not northern animals. They sleep in.

They are comfortable nested in their shed. They have made a bowl-shaped pit of straw and dry sand. By lying close together, they keep warm. They leave their nest only briefly.

They have plenty of food and water nearby but Minnesota is clearly not their natural habitat.

They will not have to put up with winter much longer. We will be out of hogs on Tuesday.

The poultry (geese, ducks and turkeys) are gone except for Gail's laying hens. The flock has outdoor access but they prefer the hen house today.

We keep only a few rabbits over winter. They are in ground pens with sheds. Winter is easy for rabbits.

Gail is working close to the wood stove today. I intend to spend much of the day inside myself.

I hope you are warm and well fed too.

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukah. Tom