

Grazing

I have learned to pay attention to the social and educational needs of my animals.

It is the educational part I want to stress to you.

The bison herd is a complete herd of between 30 and 50 animals, depending on the time of year, birthing and harvest.

One lead bull, a dozen or so cows plus young and growing stock.

That is fine they are a nice self contained unit socially and otherwise.

I lead all my animals from pasture to pasture. For the bison herd, the bull insists on leading and that works just fine.

A good bull quickly figures out when I am there to move them or just to tend to some other issue.

Because I buy all my winter hay, and in Minnesota that is a big expense, I try to reduce the beef herd to as few animals as possible.

I don't keep a beef bull. The bison bull and herd provide all the animal excitement I need.

Our basic beef scheme is to buy about 25 grass-fed yearlings in April, grow them on our pastures until late fall and then sell the meat by the quarter. Economically that works very well.

I quickly realized that I needed to keep at least one or a few beef animals to teach the new arrivals.

Dumping 25 animals of the same age onto an unfamiliar farm without any adult leadership is probably equivalent to setting 25 fifth graders alone on an island.

Nobody would know what to do, when to get up, when and what to eat, where to find water and other scarce nutrients or how to behave. It's not just a matter of the obvious effects of such ignorance, I also find that the lack of social order is very stressful for the animals. They need rules and order.

I suspect that a lot of us forgot that fact because animals in feedlot, heavily medicated and with nutrients constantly in front of them don't really have choices to make.

My solution is to keep at least one mature animal over the winter. Actually, it works out well for me to keep at least one cow and a few calves over the winter, so that is what I do.

A steer with all the right qualities seems to work just as well.

At first I thought I was just solving the general issues of leadership as partially listed above but it gets much more subtle than that.

My farm is blessed with a great range of plant environments as I mentioned above. The variety of grasses, forbs and woody plants is terrific and I have added plant species back in over the years.

Like many others I have learned that these plants virtually all have a role in environmental and animal health.

For example, I used to work to eradicate plants such as wormwood, yarrow and mullein from my pastures. I now mow them back to the fence rows (I use my horses for mowing and pasture maintenance) and let these forbs and herbs have the fences.

I now recognize that the animals make use of these plants medicinally.

My pastures and particularly my low ground pastures have a whole list of plants that the old grazing literature told us was poisonous.

I have no doubt that these plants are poisonous or toxic in the right quantities. I believe now that many if not all are medicinal or critically nutritious in the correct lower quantities.

I once had an animal that killed itself by ingesting only choke cherries. It died because a million seeds plugged its stomach.

I had a cow that became very sickly each year shortly after I moved the herd into a particular low paddock. I never figured out what she ate but the other animals didn't have a problem.

I have had animals that gorged on pine needles until they became ill even though lots of other grazing was available.

My point is that some animals, like people, make dumb choices and some make good choices.

This is getting to be a long letter. I hope you don't mind. My point is as follows.

I select an animal, normally a cow, that:

1. Will come when I call so I can easily move the herd. The younger animals will always follow. It is of course easy to find such an animal in a herd that is handled gently.
2. That is bossy but not mean. The young animals need to recognize her leadership but they don't need to be beaten up. I don't keep any horned beef animals.
3. That is calm and intelligent. That is not hard to find either but an important factor in keeping the herd calm in stormy weather for example or during hunting season when guns are fired.
4. That respects my fences. I use woven wire topped by barb wire around the perimeter of the farm because of a busy highway. Interior fences may be one, two or three strands with one electrified.
5. That is in excellent physical condition in all seasons. I want an animal that is able to find good food at all times and shows it.
6. That is healthy and energetic in all seasons. That indicates to me that she knows how to balance nutrients and how to self medicate. I worm the herd once or twice a year but frankly I am not certain it is necessary. That is the only medicating I ever do.
7. That seems to spend a lot of time calmly chewing her cud. That indicates a lot of things to me that generally imply she is in tune with her environment.
8. That appears to manage insect pests well. This probably means she knows when to be where in the pastures.
9. That forages effectively in all terrain and keeps my pastures in balance.
 - a. For example a good forager will walk down brush and keep it in check. Buckthorn, a relatively new, non-native species of brush, is a big problem throughout Minnesota but not in my pastures. The cow knows how to walk these plants down to strip off leaves, fruit and buds. The species survives but it is controlled at a beneficial level.
 - b. I want the herd to keep nettles, poison ivy, beggar ticks and numerous other plants in check. The cow needs to teach them to eat those plants in moderation.

In summary my point is that grazers should be selecting animals that are good teachers.

We need to select animals not only for physical qualities but also for mental qualities. At least as those qualities relate to good grazing.

I hope this information is of interest to you.

Best regards.

Tom Barthel