Are coyotes right- or left-handed, and who cares?

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The sheep killer left the pasture with his belly completely full of lambs. He'd killed and consumed 2 this night, obviously more than he needed for himself. But back at the den 8 hungry pups demanded more and more meat, and this was not his first foray into the pasture.

On the way back, he passed downwind of a juniper, and a strange, new odor caught his attention. It wasn't food or the smell of another coyote, but a strong attraction that was different and appealing. As a pup, he had learned of traps from some sloppy sets, and he knew better than to slide under fences; but this was different, and he was compelled to investigate. He turned to the wind and followed his nose to the tuft of grass from where the scent originated. He stopped to study the situation.

What happened next is of vital concern to the rancher losing the sheep and to the wildlife damage practitioner (pronounced *trap-per*) who is charged with solving problems. The scent is a trap lure put there by the trapper to cause the coyote to "work" the set and get caught. A lifetime of experience has taught him that this type of coyote won't walk the roads, won't go through a fence, and will shy away from anything that looks new in the pasture. He has carefully placed a foot-hold trap precisely 8 inches from the lure, offset 1 ½ inches to the right. This set, he has learned, will catch the sheep killer by the right front foot.

Well, maybe. To be certain, he has placed subtle guides just outside of the jaws on the left—a pebble and a small twig to cause the coyote subconsciously to step directly on the pan with his right foot. It works, too. Ninety-nine times out of 100. But maybe there's something else at work here as well.

Are coyotes, like people, predominantly right handed? Would offsetting to the left, with stepping guides be more effective? There's a couple of ways to find out. One would be to make every other set offset to the left and record catches and misses. If you're a fur trapper and can stand to miss one every now and again, be my guest. For the wildlife damage professional, a miss of a stock killer costs everyone—more dead sheep, more time spent on this problem, and more sleepless nights for both the rancher and the trapper. There is a better way—research. Research is the scientific pursuit of knowledge that can answer these questions at less expense, and with greater certainty, than trial and error. Far too often, however, answers are available, or can be with little effort through research, but they are not.

During one of the down times in a wildlife damage conference, I asked a coyote researcher: "Are coyotes right handed?" It had never occurred to him, and he wondered why it mattered. He told me that he could find out the answer to my question. A study at the facility where he worked involved feeding coyotes a certain flavored ration when they broke an optical beam with their foot. While the researchers were interested in the flavor attraction, recording which foot they used hadn't occurred to them. It turns out, coyotes used their right foot almost all of the time. It stands to reason that when working a set, they would also be right handed.

There remains a gap between the wildlife damage practitioner and researcher, but I sense that it is closing. Practitioners are often caught up in their day-to-day problem-solving and have little time for show-and-tell. Researchers are often paid in a system that rewards publication, and have little time to get dirty learning what the questions really are. Some wildlife research seems to be science for the sake of science and has little field application. We must all be better at communicating our own knowledge and experience. Using just the field of predation management, the ideas of supplemental feeding predators, auditory attractants, and pre-baiting for M-44 use are the products of research/operations collaboration that show significant promise. These ideas were for use in the field, but were refined and tested by research.

Human–Wildlife Conflicts will be used as a communication tool for the science of wildlife damage management. This is our journal. It is my hope that my fellow practitioners will read it, question what they read, and offer their experiences in these pages. I'm betting someone out there knows another secret that will advance our efforts. Through collaboration and exchange, that can happen. ❇