



Sheep Camp Realism

Build it and they will come.

Words by Hank Vogler. Photos by Michael Edminster.

Living in a sheep camp will give you a more realistic view on wildlife management than a doctorate at Bunny Hugger U. You no more than get the mules unloaded and the tent pitched and the neighbors will show up. No, not someone to borrow a cup of sugar. I mean varmints. Your kitchen boxes may be the attractant or the grain sack. It doesn't matter; within hours of arrival, animals all up and down the food chain will look at you as a source of food.

As soon as the rats and flies show up, snakes will be close at hand to catch the mice. Skunks will be checking you out. Coyotes, lions, bobcats, ravens, camp robbers... the list goes on. You within hours will have created an interdependent ecosystem.



Yes, they were there first. Whether the earth will stop rotating when you pack up and leave is up for debate. Nonetheless, the effect on the area, if you are a fatalist fern fairy, will never be the same. All these crea-

tures will take the path of least resistance for their own survival. You have just become the new source of easy living. If they are not dispatched, within a short period of time they will multiply and overwhelm the system and ultimately cause some of the food chain to collapse. Starvation will once again rule and the survivors will move on or die.

Step back in time to when the first white people began to enter the Great Basin in search of furs, minerals, or merely a way to get to the gold fields of California. You needed fuel for your transportation. Whether you were on the shoe-leather express or living large with a horse and Yolanda the burro, there was no sign of a Piggly Wiggly down the street and two blocks on the right. Feed and water for your animals was essential. Without feed and water, you had just a few days before fricassee of burro, then horse, then moccasin, then starvation.

Picking a place to survive took a little bit of foresight. As soon as you secured feed and water for your transportation, and a source of food for yourself, you then would need to guard these resources from the neighbors.

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Just like in the Kevin Costner movie “Field of Dreams,” build it and they will come. Once again the lowest on the food chain will be first. You can start with the ant and work your way up to the mountain lion; it’s all the same. No animal can survive if it expends more energy in procuring a food source than the energy needed to reproduce and survive as a species. With this interdependence, something is going to live and something is going to die. The survivor will be the one that wisely uses the resource.

Man with his opposable thumb and his large brain has survived for years by the use of tools. As this Great Basin pioneer will soon realize, to protect his feed source for his animals he will need to expend energy in the form of building a fence to protect feed and water. This might include spreading water on dry ground to expand his refueling station for his mode of transportation. As his meadow expands, so does the envy of the neighbors.

In this area, maybe one jackrabbit could survive in a square mile. With water expanding this meadow, 15 rabbits may be able to inhabit this “altered ecosystem.” A deer might smell the grass. A grouse of some flavor might be attracted to the ever-expanding pie. These animals dependent on plants will soon be followed by animals that will consume other animals for their survival. This includes coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, weasels, skunks, rats, lawyers, politicians, and environmental terrorists, aka fern fairies. The animal with the big brain will reason that he can tolerate a certain amount of this use as he now has a new feed source to prevent his belly button from banging into his backbone.

The earlier inhabitants had limited weapons and as hunter-gatherers merely wandered off when a food source got scarce. This new European influence made for more permanent settlement. Expanding the feed



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Silvario at Lake Creek Camp in Idaho.* ▶ Guard dogs help keep the sheep safe from numerous predators. ▶ Motherless “bummer” lambs are fed by hand. ▶ There is always a black sheep in a band, perhaps one black to 100 whites, so the herder can guess if his flock is all there. OPPOSITE: Day-old lamb. ▶ Herder moves the band to new feed ground, with the help of herding border collies and big, white, protective guard dogs.



source and nurturing the land were bred into these new upstarts. For this new upstart’s own survival he will realize that limiting predation on his new friends, the herbivores, he can feed and clothe himself and with wise resource management continue to expand his riparian area and the number of animals that he has become interdependent on for his own survival.

Now, this is where the rubber meets the

road, or in this case, this is where the male bovine fecal matter hits the fan: *It’s not equally fair to all the animals!* This smelly stuff sounds a lot like the Communist Manifesto, where everything is equal. It all works real well on paper but in the real world it’s not quite that way. Even as flawed and unfair as free enterprise is, it is still the best thing going. If you want more of something, allow someone to make a profit and he will increase that product. As long as you can take advantage of the fruits of someone else’s labor and get away with it, there are those who will. You want more sage hen? Plant alfalfa,

shoot ravens and crows, and catch coyotes, badgers, foxes and bobcats. If you want more parasites, give them budgets that forever expand and don’t have any form of measuring success, i.e., more sage grouse or deer or anything tangible. Wafting philosophically about nature’s balance and the purity of thought come from people with full bellies and the desire to live off the fruits of others’ labor by making them feel guilty for working hard and becoming successful.

Hang and Rattle! Hank ■

These sheep are not Vogler’s, who ranches in eastern Nevada. They are part of the John Falkner Ranch in south-central Idaho. Photographer Michael Edminster spent six years as a gringo shepherd. He carried a camera, brought his family, and recorded it well.