

Nature's dance of friend and foe

She trotted with her head down, nose almost touching the ground, in a twisting, turning, haphazard pattern.

I opened the sliding glass door to step onto the deck on the west side of the house to watch her.

In the half-light of early dawn, she made her way across the upper end of a V-shaped meadow that I used for a calving pasture. Cows and calves usually bedded there.

Last winter's snow laid the coarse yellow-brown grass flat. The vixen's shaggy coat had bunches of old winter hair hanging from her belly.

I surmised she had a new litter of kits hidden in a den by the creek.

She stopped suddenly standing with one foreleg bent at the knee and paw near her belly. Her ears were alert as she focused on a tuft of grass two feet in front of her.

She held that pose for a few seconds and then pounced swiftly, driving her nose into the grass. She flipped her nose toward the sky, opened her mouth, and a vole spun into the air.

Another leap and she caught it before it hit the ground to flip it skyward again, toying with the little rodent, thoroughly enjoying herself.

The vole barely landed on the bleached mat of coarse grass before she sprang forward, grabbed it with her teeth, and devoured it.

The abrupt movements of the red fox drew the interest of a heifer calf that had risen from her bed on the dry grass. I noticed the color match of the calf's face and the tip of the vixen's tail, both pure white. The red color of their bodies also matched.

The curious calf gave the animated fox her full attention as they began stepping toward each other. Both had ears pointed forward and noses out-

stretched as they moved closer together.

Black nose of fox almost touched pink nose of calf before they stopped. They stared and sniffed, making a complete investigation of each other.

The activity of fox and calf caught the attention of three more white-faced calves. They bounced across the meadow to join their herd mate, and the fox, surrounded by inquisitive little bovines, crouched and then jumped playfully between the closest two.

For the next few minutes, fox and calves romped together as the mother cows watched closely, but never interfered.

Perhaps tired of the game, or else remembering her young ones and their need of nourishment, the vixen broke away and continued her zigzag hunt. The calves followed along for a short distance and then, in a group of four, raced, bucking and bellowing, to join their mothers.

By all appearances, both cows and calves immediately forgot the female red fox.

A week later from the same deck, again in the half-light of early dawn, I saw a large gray coyote walking toward the cattle on a cow trail beside the west boundary fence of the meadow.

I thought of the .30-06 rifle that hung on the porch wall, but made no move to get it, opting to watch him. If he started threatening my calves, I could reach it quickly.



Center Stage

Duane Portwood



He stopped now and then to look from side to side and extend his nose to test scents carried in the early morning air. My cows had all calved, the youngest calf at least a week old.

The lone coyote's round belly and full flank made him look well fed. I thought he seemed more curious than hungry and did not consider him too dangerous since no calf was newborn.

I sat still and watched as he got closer and closer to the cattle.

Eight Hereford calves lying in a thick tangle of cured grass spied the coyote about 50 yards away and, one by one, rose to their feet. They regarded him warily.

Some of them nervously looked around for their mothers. Three or four of them took a few steps in the direction of the cows eating at a hayrack.

Upon seeing the reaction of the calves, the cows sensed something wrong and, heads up, walked rapidly toward the calves. Then they too spotted the coyote and, after satisfying themselves, using both sight and smell, that their babies were OK, headed at a fast walk in the direction of the coyote with the calves close behind.

The large canine stopped when he saw cows approaching. Obviously not comfortable, he went toward the barbed wire fence.

The cows formed a skirmish line and broke into a trot. They made low

moaning sounds. I could not tell whether they were threatening the wild dog or attempting to reassure their babies, telling them to stay close.

With eyes wide, nostrils flaring, heads moving up and down butting the air, the cows presented a formidable battle line.

Mr. Coyote ducked under the fence and, looking back from time to time, skulked into the brush in the bottomland near the creek. The cows stood close to the fence and watched him vanish.

Even with him out of sight, they did not forget him. Still on the fight, they patrolled the fence, careful to stay between their calves and the last place they saw the coyote. They remained unusually attentive for the rest of the day.

From my vantage point above the meadow, I watched those two shows, close together in time, being careful to stay quiet. I reflected upon the contrast in behavior demonstrated by cattle, particularly calves, in the presence of the two canines.

Many people think of cattle as dumb beasts without capacity for thought or reasoning. Nevertheless, these cows and young calves quickly and correctly distinguished between playmate and predator and took appropriate action in each case.

A writer and cowboy poet, Duane Portwood has been volunteering his time and talent at the Sheridan Senior Center for more than two years.

Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.