

17SHORT

A year ago the 15th of February, we started shearing on the worst cold spell of the season. Steam from our breaths froze on the bandanas tied across our faces; mesquite limbs hitting the exposed edges of our ears caused shocking pains.

Last week, we sheared on days of 60 degree highs and 40 degree lows. Sixty percent of our ewe flock remains after drouth sellouts and we are down to 12 head of replacement ewe lambs on a normal count of several hundred head, so it didn't take much time to finish.

Everything is winding down except predation. The last Spanish goat was eaten by a fencing crew before Christmas and four huge eagles glide over the south side every week, checking to assure we don't get the urge to go back in the goat business. The fence fell over to the garden some time in the winter and the garden plot will be so full of gourd vines by spring, it'll take a plow heavier than my weight limit to break the ground.

After we sheared down close to the highway, an animal large enough to rip the rib cage out of a grown deer dragged her prey several feet and covered the carcass in big sticks to place further challenges on the sheep operation. He or she hides in the brushy pasture of a neighbor's, or this is the report, and is most likely a mountain lion imported from Mexico or a product of the Big Bend Park's big cat programs.

Time is running out, however, for this immigrant. She'd better enjoy these dry times. Four out of every ten springs are wet in the shortgrass country. Acclimated as this lion is to the Chihuahua desert alkalies and greasewood flats, she's going to be plenty tender-footed once the rains start falling out here.

Mountain lions still are afraid of man in our area. The other day on the feed grounds, however, an eagle kept his distance but didn't bother to fly off while we were pouring out cake. The trick to scaring them away, I'm told, is going around looking like a tough hombre.

That means stacking a bunch of empty feed sacks in the pickup bed and covering the dashboard in empty vaccine bottles and worn out gloves. The tail pipe and muffler needs to sound like the thumping of a pumpjack, and a gun rack half screwed together has to stick out in the back window holding a saddle carbine and a punch stick.

Other than this masquerade, about all eagles have to watch for is touching the hot wires on a rural electric line, or maybe spraining their ankle in a fast landing, or being the unlucky bird selected to pack a radio for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife people.

Summarized, the turn the woolie and hair business has taken today is that all the dumb coyotes and the careless mountain lions have been caught. Men of vision have quit raising sheep and goats and gone into finer vocations, such as incubating ostrich eggs and fencing off exotic game preserves, leaving only trap-wise predators and hardheaded sheep and goat men to compete for a little lamb and a few kid goats.

The sheep sheared good and looked thin without their winter fleeces. We used to have to worry about losing fresh shorn ewes from cold weather, but today we have too many other adversaries to bother about the outside chances.