

MANAGEMENT NOTES

You Can't Turn 'Em Loose— Or Can You?

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Fencing has proven you can successfully manage sheep without the herder, but can you graze them without a herder and without fences? Probably 90% of the readers will jump to the conclusion that this can't be done, especially in the rugged alpine ranges of the west. Well just don't tell this to Ray Paddock of Leadville, Colorado, because he's doing it! And, he's doing

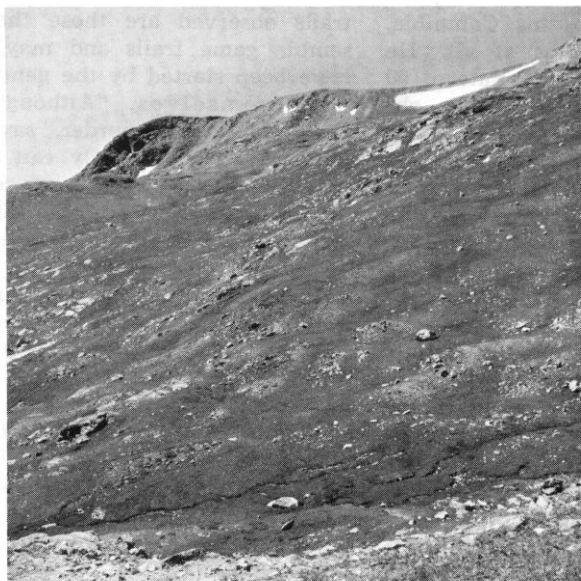


Portion of Lake Creek sheep allotment,
San Isabel National Forest, Colorado.

it successfully to the benefit of both livestock and range.

In 1937 when Ray's dad took over the Lake Creek sheep allotment, just under Independence Pass, San Isabel National Forest, they were herding sheep in much the customary way it is done in the high altitude ranges today. Much of the allotment acreage consists of steep slopes. Herding a band over such slopes to the various pockets of feed can cut the sod in contour-like trails. These cut trails do not come as a surprise to anyone who has observed herded allotments in the west. It's true that the herding technique (loose or tight) employed dictates the degree of cutting, but few of the steep high altitude ranges lack broken sod.

Capacities have long been based



1,000 ewes plus lambs use this allotment without being herded.



530 ewes plus lambs are being herded on this adjoining allotment.

on proper use of a given range. Better distribution has been recognized as a solution to improving use. Some range specialists, however, have come to the realism that perhaps improper sheep use of alpine ranges can be recognized most rapidly in terms of soil disturbance.

Sod cutting was the apparent range problem on the Lake Creek sheep allotment back in 1945. Another conflict recognized by the Paddocks was that herding seemed contrary to the natural instinct of sheep to scatter. This caused a continuous battle between herder and animal. Recognizing these two factors, the Paddocks set out to do something constructive about them.

From 1945 to 1960, the herd was pretty much turned loose according to an agreed management plan between the ranger and permittee. This was a typical management plan that called for so many days sheep use in each of the feed areas. Instead of herding the sheep in each one of these areas, Mr. Paddock decided to turn them loose for the permitted season of use and then move them to a new area where again they would be turned loose for the agreed upon capacity. Mind you now, there are no fences on this 13,000 acre allotment. Yet in 1960, Ray just knew his sheep would do better and so would the range, if its battle with the hooves of trailing animals could be ended.

This rapidly met with the ranger's approval because both his observation and those of his predecessor were that this range showed signs of improvement while adjacent allotments even with reduced numbers of sheep continued to show active erosion scars.

Despite the fact that "it can't be done," a band of 1000 ewes plus 1100 lambs was turned loose for a two-month grazing season. This has been going on for six years.

How can Ray Paddock do the impossible? Well he's been in the sheep business since he was 16. He's now 54. His observations of sheep over these years convinced him of the following: When turned loose, it is the sheep's will to scatter. This is the basic premise on which this management technique rests.

The first question asked is, "But don't the predators raise havoc with the unprotected 'meekest' of all animals?" Paddock reported the loss of 21 lambs this past year. This is 1% of the number he runs. The Forest Service Region-2 average for the past six years as reported by permittees has been 1.3% of the permitted sheep. As a matter of fact, Ray Paddock believes that the scattered non-herded band is less susceptible to the large predator losses than the tight herded band. When sheep are scattered in bunches ranging from 5 to 25 head, it is

pretty difficult for a single raid, even by a bear, to account for a very large loss.

The next assumption most people make is that sheep left alone, unfenced will surely get lost! To this Paddock claims that "you simply can't lose a sheep in the mountains, it's just a matter of going out and finding them." Sure, a few of his animals go over the mountain and get mixed with the adjoining band, but fewer by far than those of the neighboring herded band that come over to his side of the mountain "lost." And the adjoining allotment herders report it a definite problem to try to drive Paddock sheep down the wrong side of the mountain. To this Ray claims again it's instinct for sheep to graze toward the higher country, but they finally seek their way back to where they entered the allotment.

Ray has also observed that when herded, the sheep want to use the same bed ground; many times it's a chore to change location. Not so with the non-herded sheep. A small bunch may use the same bed ground once or twice, but the normal practice is for the bunch to choose a new bed ground each night and generally it is right where they finished feeding.

Is there any special equipment needed to make this system work, you might ask. Ray has reported

that a pair of binoculars is an absolute necessity. You cannot rely on finding the sheep by just hearing them. A trip through this allotment is almost ghostly because of the lack of sound coming from 2100 head of sheep. The only other equipment you might need is tranquilizers to keep you from worrying too much until you have proof that this system actually works.

Another question you might ask is: Are there any secrets to running sheep under this system? Well, Ray confesses to a few. First, he uses the Columbia breed sheep. He feels that the tighter the wool, the tighter the sheep want to remain in a bunch. This means it will be more difficult to adopt this system if your breed is Rambouillet. But he has run Suf-

folk, in addition to his Columbia, without any problems at all. He also puts out salt at the rate of 50 lb/day for the band. He has observed that the sheep use this about 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning, after they have fed. This is different from the common practice of salting herded sheep at the bed ground location. And the final secret, if there is one, he does run his own replacements.

What are the advantages to such a system? The first and foremost in any woolgrower's mind would be the fact that an average 5-lb heavier lamb is produced. This for sure makes the sheepman happy. And the thing that really makes the land manager happy is that trailing damage is almost non-existent. The only

trails observed are those that resemble game trails and may even have been started by the game animals themselves. "Although you can't eliminate the herder," says Ray Paddock, "you certainly can eliminate the camp-tender because this dual job can be a one man affair." Ray does not herd, but he does ride every other day through the alternate bands of sheep that he runs on two different allotments. He distributes salt and makes observations with his fieldglasses, but this is all.

You are right—this is not a cure-all for all sheep allotments, but in answer to "it can't be done," Ray says, "I'd sure hate to go back to herding on this range." If you listen carefully you can hear the range echo, "Amen."