

WinkWorld August 2002

Joan's Real World: Prairie Pedagogy

Joan's personal reflection of the past month on the ranch in South Dakota. This is a personal glimpse into my world. Last month I spontaneously wrote about a horse falling on Dean. Your responses to my personal sharing encouraged me to tell a little more about my ~real~ world.

July 2002 on the Ranch

Living on the prairies has many challenges; somehow I get to relearn this every time I am here.

The prairies are a land of extremes. The weather always has primacy. This past month has been no different. The drought continues with a vengeance. We have had .41 of rain and 3 straight weeks of plus 100 degrees. We had two days when the thermometer registered 119 degrees; several days of 113. We have not been able to bail a single bail of hay. No feed this summer means no feed this winter.

So, what does a drought on the prairies look like?

- Deep open cracks in the sod;
- gray, rock-hard dirt showing through tan, sparse grasses as far as the eye can see;
- trucks carrying calves and cows to market because of the lack of feed and water;
- hundreds of flies fighting to get into the house daily; too many succeed;
- the depressed looks on the faces of dirty, tired ranchers who know they may lose everything this year;
- the more depressing conversations which dominate human interactions.

I am well-aware that many of my colleagues think that I am living a relaxed, rural life. The drought dampens all romantic notions about life on the prairies.

Synchronized Artificial Insemination of the Cows and Heifers

Dean finished the synchronized artificial insemination of the heifers and cows. Some of you might want to stop reading right now. I will limit and even sanitize my descriptions a bit. However, I do find it to be a fascinating process, which consumed much of 12 days. It is a very productive way of improving a cattle herd, which of course, can be wiped out in a drought. Basically, in synchronized artificial insemination, estrogen and progesterone are given at different intervals to synchronize the cows' estrous cycles. The cattle have to be brought in and moved through the shoot 4 different times in the whole process. Below, I will summarize the process.

First, we have to bring in the cows. This is the horseback ride through the prairies. Brown prairies.

Next, each animal receives a shot and an implant to prevent estrous for one week.

After 7 days, Dean takes out the implant and gives another shot to begin estrous. It takes between 48 and 72 hours for all the cattle to come into estrous; at 55 hours, the breeding

begins. The sperm can stay alive for up to 12 hours after it is deposited, and thus can still fertilize the egg even if the cow hasn't shown estrous when the breeding begins.

Frozen semen is kept in tanks of liquid nitrogen. Each tank can hold 300 units of semen. Each straw of semen is taken out individually; one per cow. The straw is placed in warm water and allowed to thaw for 45 seconds. At this time the straw of semen is loaded into a pipette and threaded through the cervix to deposit semen into the uterus.

We take the herd back out to the pasture.

Puma

We had a puma or mountain lion on the ranch for a few days. When they are near, the environment changes. Their presence is evident in the behaviors of all animals. The deer vacated the rugged breaks on the ranch. We found a dead calf and a mama cow with a strange wound. A cow tried to jump a very sturdy and high fence for no apparent reason.

When a puma is on the ranch, all other animals are watchful and nervous. Me, too. My friend, Mary Ann, came from Tucson to visit during this time. During one of our morning walks, we realized that we were following the awesome tracks of the lion. The pad was larger than the fist of my hand.

Our friend, Darryl, Mary Ann's husband, helped with ~real~ ranch work while he was here. A terrible wind had whipped the tiles off the steep pitched roof of this two-story house; he helped pound them back into place. He helped fix a split rail fence, and he took out a broken window (more wind) from a second floor window. Remember that all of this was done in 110 degrees heat.

40th High School Reunion

We attended my 40th high school reunion. I found it fascinating the way awkward teenagers transform themselves into marvelous adults. I was particularly thrilled to see how some classmates, who came from very difficult and/or deprived backgrounds, had created wonderful lives.