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News Column
University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension
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WHAT HAPPENED TO MY CHICKEN?

A favorite client of mine brought me a bit of Nebraska History. A Nebraska Farmer chicken tattoo kit designed to help stop chicken thievery in the 1930's. I suspect it did not help much because the ability to read chicken tattoos in the human stomach was not thought of until CSI came on TV.

Dogs are the most destructive killer of chickens. If many birds are killed and few or none are eaten it is likely dogs are the predator. Several other animals might have multiple kills, but the signs of eating will be evident. Coyotes can access chicken enclosures by digging under, climbing over, or chewing through chicken wire fences. There may be multiple kills. Signs of feeding, like feathers, bites on the back of the neck with feathers missing and missing birds are the usual. They will return until the chickens are gone or the fence improved and repaired. Red fox will take killed birds back to their den. A occasion bird may be left behind if disturbed during flight. If there is a small opening in the chicken enclosure, the wily fox is likely to find it.

House cats can be major predators of baby chicks, but are unlikely to challenge larger birds. Bobcats are frequent throughout Southeast Nebraska. If the chicken is gone and there is a smell of cat urine, bobcats might be likely. They do not bury their scat like house cats. Cougars usually go for larger prey, but if chickens are unprotected, they are a convenient snack.

Mink will make an opening in the neck and pull the skinned head or body through the hole as they feed. They will kill and pile multiple birds for later feeding. Weasels will rip open the jugular vein and feed on the blood. Rats will feed on blood, but usually will eat part of the carcass also.

One client purchased a new live animal trap to catch their poultry predator. They called the Extension Office the next day to ask, "What animal would get caught in a live animal trap and tear it apart from the inside and escape. Large male raccoons are quite powerful animals. They may reach through small holes in the wire and grab a head, or leg and pull it through the opening. They commonly kill several birds and sever the heads eating the crop and neck meat. They sometimes will take the body.

Skunks and opossum are omnivores. They usually would feed on young birds, eggs, or feeding in connection with rats or weasel. If they do kill adult chickens, it will usually be by mauling them with repeated bites on many body areas. Both are active at night and would make singular kills. Rats and snakes will feed on eggs and young birds, rarely bothering older poultry.

If your poultry enclosure does not have a cover, or the birds left out overnight, the owls will find you. Headless bodies are a good sign. Great horned owls can carry away the whole carcass. During the day, red-tailed hawks and several falcon species will also prey on poultry, particularly young birds or smaller breeds. Hawks and falcons are likely to kill several birds at a time. There are usually plenty of feathers around, torn off the chicken while the predator feeds.

If you have figured out there are lots of dangers in raising poultry on farms, acreages and backyards, you are right on target. The dangers are just as common in town as in rural areas.

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