

This fall of 2008 has been exceptionally long and mellow. The summer was adequate for rain, not abundant but adequate and we're happy for that after the dry years.

By late October the bison herd was grazing in native grass a mile south of the farmstead. I intended to move them north to winter pasture the next Saturday morning. That happened to be two weeks before deer season. The grass was about played out and besides I wanted the gates opened for a couple weeks to let the deer settle down. The winter pasture is a 20 acre piece near the farmstead. Leading the herd from the south prairie to the winter pasture requires winding through four pastures and across the township road. I had a few good helpers lined up.

I checked the herd at dusk on Wednesday. That was the Wednesday before the Saturday of the planned move. I had been traveling for my "day job" nearly solid for the three previous weeks. To my surprise that Wednesday evening a cow was birthing a calf. I had gotten home often enough in previous weeks to keep the animals fed and watered but obviously not enough to check the animals closely. It had been cold and wet all day with freezing rain coming after dark.

There just wasn't anything I could do for the calf. Even if they were near the farmstead I don't have handling facilities. We sell our meat directly to consumers and we pasture harvest. We're not set up to capture or hold bison. I would just have to leave it up to the cow, the calf and nature.

My biggest concern was not the calf itself however, at least not directly. If the calf died in the prairie I might not be able to move the herd home for weeks. I figured that if I tried to move the herd on Saturday under those conditions I'd get the herd a pasture or two away and then they would start splitting off to be with the cow. Unless the calf was alive and strong enough to keep up with the herd by Saturday, the drive was off.

It was near dark and there was nothing to do. On the way home a doe and two fawns watched from the shadows of the woods.

Gail W. and I talked about the calf that night. She was concerned too, so before dawn she rode with me to see if the calf had lived. As we drove the field road, cottontail rabbits scurried in the headlights.

We parked on a hill that overlooked the prairie and waited for light. Gail brought hot coffee. We could see the dark shapes of the bison in the distance but could not make out details. Mature prairie grass clumps are about the same color as a bison calf. We would need to wait for pretty good light.

Soon after we parked, Sandhill Cranes, ducks and geese began flying over the farm as they do every fall morning. The flocks travel from their night quarters in the Sherburne Wildlife Refuge beyond the northeast corner of the farm, to the corn fields southwest of the farm. The husky ratcheting sound of the cranes is awesome. At this time of the year, there are many hundreds every day.

As the light improved we located the cow we were looking for. She was standing past the far side of the herd. We didn't think to bring binoculars. Binoculars would have helped.

A clear, crisp, beautiful fall morning opened up and soon we could both confirm the new calf nursing. The calf was strong and frisky. The herd will move to winter pasture on schedule.

On the way home we stopped to watch a flock of wild turkeys.

Life is good.

See you at the auction.

Tom