

The Author Behind the Monthly WVS Newsletter



*By Dr. Al Martens
of Waupun Vet Services*

“Who writes this newsletter?” One of the new grad hires asked. I realized many clients may ask the same question. I’m the old guy in the practice. I graduated from vet school in 1978 from Michigan State and came to work in Waupun right out of school. After keeping multiple orthopedic surgeons happy with back surgeries and rotator cuffs and more, I now stay away from cattle. So, to my loss, I don’t get to interact on the farm with our clients. I do miss it, but I still enjoy helping in the clinic and doing management tasks.

I started putting a newsletter together about 35 years ago. At first, I just basically copied articles that I thought were important. I’ve evolved into actually writing articles. I try to summarize the important points and inject a little humor into the notes, which is the most difficult part. If I offend you, I apologize, it’s not intentional. If you’re not sure if I’m trying to be funny, I am trying to be funny, I’m just not always very good at it. If you think I’m degrading government, then my writing is successful. I’m not impressed with either party, it seems politicians should spend some time out in the real world getting dirty, or kicked, or breathing dust, or putting up with ridiculous rules, not just trying to buy votes.

I figure if I can make people smile, they’ll pick up the next month’s newsletter and maybe the serious stuff will be remembered. Or maybe they just smile when they’re in the bathroom in the morning after breakfast, which is why I try to keep it short, so they can read it when they’re in the bathroom in the morning.

I’m incredibly positive about life. Not just my life, but animals and plants and trees. I grew up just north of Detroit, with one classmate out of over 300 living on a dairy farm. I still keep in touch with him, but the cows and barn are long gone. Being a veterinarian, you get to see a lot of death, and it makes you appreciate life. Growing up near Detroit, moving to Wisconsin, especially living and working in rural Wisconsin, also makes me (and my wife) appreciate the quality of our life.

Everything is better in Wisconsin, ask Monty, or Jeff, or Mike. If you don’t believe me, move to Detroit for a couple years, or you could go out into a dairy barn and sleep in the ally for a few days, but Detroit is worse. The cows might shit on you, but at least it’s not intentional.

Teresa Stowell proofs the articles and puts them into a readable format.

Another Exotic Disease in News Invades U.S.

Screwworm is back. Screwworm is the maggot of a fly. It is a lot like the maggots crawling in roadkill, except it starts by invading even a small open wound on an otherwise healthy animal.

Eggs are laid near the wound, and the maggot eats into otherwise healthy flesh. Without treatment it can kill the host animal. The maggots that we regularly see stay in dead flesh, although they do release toxins that can increase the death of flesh adjacent to where they are feed.

The screwworm invades healthy flesh. Screwworm will also infect people. Eradication and control in the United States was achieved by irradiating the pupa of flies in laboratories and releasing millions of sterile male flies. The female flies then fail to breed with fertile males and the flies die out.

There is a line in South America where every year massive numbers of sterile flies are released, and the Screwworm stays south of that line.

Now it is back in Mexico and the United States has closed the border from Mexico for live cattle and horses in an effort to stop the spread into the United States.

Poisonous Plants and Botulism can cause Sick, Dead Animals

Spring brings new growth, and grazing animals love the fresh shoots. Farmers check fences for integrity and let cattle and horses out onto pastures. Or worse, farmers put up new fences around an old woodlot or marsh and turn animals loose. This occasionally ends in tragedy when the wrong plant is consumed (or some discarded chemical).



Two bald eagles are pictured eating a fawn that went through a haybale in a field near Dr. Al's house. Dead animals should be removed from fields.

At first, toxicities can be slow or rapid. Some plants will kill in a couple hours. Japanese Yew, the shrub that I've seen the most poisonings with, kills fast. But some plants cause chronic issues like photosensitization where white areas of skin burn severely. With some clovers that are moldy, the blood fails to clot, and acute death occurs after a couple weeks.

When only one or two animals die suddenly, toxic plants are low on most veterinarians list of causes of death, so sometimes the history provided by the producer is critical. Any new exposure in relation to pasture or feed, especially in the last few days, can be important information. I'm sure I've seen animals die from toxins through the years, and we never even looked for the toxin.

Most animals have an innate sense of not eating toxic plants, the exception is Japanese Yew. But many toxicities occur when animals on pasture are a little short of groceries, so they are hungry. Horses are the most sensitive to toxicity, followed by goats which may be that goats think they can eat anything.

Toxicity is a multi-week lecture series in vet school, so I'm just going to mention a couple of high points.

Japanese Yew is an ornamental that should be illegal to sell. It is toxic to everything except white tailed deer. It has a small red berry and if you have some around your farm, it currently needs roundup fertilizer. People prune their shrubs and throw the clippings over the fence. Or animals get out and start eating around the buildings. There's no antidote, and realistically, the animals should be buried, not sent to dead stock. Yew

toxicity can also occur when an old farmstead is fenced in an animal are released to "clean it up".

Black Cherry, especially if it is wilted. This is a common fence line tree and if one falls in a pasture or a branch falls in a windstorm, the leaves and branches are toxic, especially if the leaves are wilted for half a day or more. Death is fast. Cyanide is produced.

Buckwheat can cause photosensitization. I mention this with the advent of more unique cover crops being used, and in parts of the country buckwheat works well.

When we had a drought in 1988, a couple farmers grew or purchased sweet clover hay. With a course stalk and depending on drying conditions the sweet clover can mold and create a toxin that prevents blood from clotting. We got to see a case.

Botulism is not a plant, but it is a feed toxin. If you hit an animal with a haybale, a turkey, fawn, or raccoon, be sure to get the carcass out of the field. If it is picked up and ends up in silage, it can cause botulism organisms to grow in the feed near the carcass. The botulism bacteria only grows in an absence of oxygen, so your silo is great, and it produces a toxin that is permanently in that feed, and there is no treatment. Acute death occurs, often just a couple animals, so I'm sure deaths aren't recognized.

Prevention is a state of mind. A visual of a new pasture or woodlot can identify potential injury items like broken fence posts or old equipment. Heavy growth of unknown plants should inspire a little curiosity, and you should identify the plant and risks involved. Look for old lead batteries or half full unlabeled bags, drums or cans and remove them.