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Eye on the Environment: Fences Don't Need To Be Deadly

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The elk calf hung head-down on a tall four-strand wire fence. The back legs were caught between the top two strands. The yearling had thrashed and torn the ground with its front hoofs. But by the time people arrived. The struggle was over; the calf was dead.

This accident, along with some gruesome Web site photos I've seen lately of wildlife tangled in fencing, have prompted the following strident remarks.

It's sickening to see the senseless suffering of any living thing, especially our native species. Young elk aren't the only animals vulnerable to fencing. Full grown elk and moose are killed this way. Occasionally, deer get caught. Unlike horses, when an ungulate jumps, its back legs go over first. If the fence is too high, the hind feet get caught between the strands, which twist when the animal falls. The harder the animal struggles, the tighter the wire gets.

No one wants a fence to be hazardous to wildlife. We can adopt wildlife friendly solutions. As people continue to move to the Swan Valley, more fences go up and more animals are at risk. The Colorado Division of Wildlife and the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation have guidelines that can be found on their Web sites to help us

reduce existing hazards and prevent future disasters.

There are plenty of good reasons to fence. We erect them around our yards so children and dogs can play safely. We pasture horses, and we keep cows in—or out. The Swan Valley is open range, where cows can roam unfettered. It's our responsibility to fence the bovines out of our property if we don't want to share our land with them. For cows, and most horses, a 38-42-inch tall fence is all that is needed. Anything higher is a hazardous to wildlife, unless it is so tall it can't be jumped.

Every Swan Valley gardener has been amazed, and subsequently dismayed, watching deer leap garden fences, four-feet high or more. We know elk and deer are remarkable jumpers and can clear high obstacles. But they often have trouble seeing the strands in wire fences. Large birds like sandhill cranes and owls get tangled in wire, too. An ideal fence is one that fast moving animals can see in all light conditions.

If you already have a wire fence that is dangerous for wildlife, replacing the top strand with a wooden rail will help make it visible. Or flagging can be hung along the top wire. Wire should be stretched tight, and the bottom strand should be high enough off the ground to allow wildlife to crawl under. Sixteen inches above ground is a good height for the bottom wire or for a wooden crosspiece on a post-and-pole fence. The second, third and fourth strands of a wire fence can be closer together. The distance between the top two strands or rails should be at least 12 inches. Post-and-pole fences should only have three rails.

For protecting haystacks and gardens, mesh fencing with sturdy wooden posts

and a wooden top rail works well. The fence should be clearly visible and too tall for elk and deer to jump.

The traditional jackleg fences are popular where the ground is rocky and lodgepole rails are plentiful. These fences are attractive in our wooded environment. But their widespread bases make it difficult for wildlife to clear. While deer and smaller animals can crawl through the jackleg rails, elk and moose often run parallel to the fences for long distances before leaping. I've watched moose lope the length of the airstrip across the road from our office before risking a jump. If the fence is next to the highway, it can trap animals in the right-of-way longer than necessary, increasing the likelihood they will be struck by cars.

A jackleg or rail fence intended to identify property boundaries can be made safe by creating a few well-spaced gaps. Sections of fence can be built with lay-down rails that are dropped in the places where animals are most likely to cross. Wire fences can be laid down at wildlife crossings after cattle and horses have been moved to other pastures.

Migrating animals like elk are especially vulnerable to new fencing. Deer that spend their lives within a few square miles learn to negotiate the fences in their home range—if the fences are permeable and safe. Our white-tailed deer don't migrate far. In fact, due to the mild winters of the last several years, the deer in my neighborhood have chosen to stay in their summer territory all winter long. They used to leave for the warmer east side of the valley by Christmas and not return until the snow melted.

We haven't had a hard winter since 1996. But in tough weather, the energy that

animals must burn negotiating or traveling around fencing while trying to reach feeding areas can drain vital reserves, especially if they are already stressed by harsh conditions.

People put up decorative fences made of native lodgepole rails, solely to identify property boundaries. But many of us have learned the hard way that decorative fencing loses its appeal after a few windstorms drop trees across the rails. Ask my neighbors what they think of the rickety fence I've been slow to dismantle. I'm also guilty of taking too long to wind up and remove the old barbed wire fencing that used to hold in our horse. (It's down now.) Fences that have fallen into disrepair and are no longer needed should be removed.

Without a fence, how do you delineate your property line? Well-placed, unconnected posts can serve as markers. A line of trees helps define boundaries, and the trees make nice privacy screens. Evaluating our property will help us make sensible choices. Streams, ridges, gullies, and corridors of dense forest are better left unfenced for wildlife to travel.

We should ask ourselves if we really need a fence. Then we should place the fences where they make the most sense for us and for wildlife. Wild animals should be able to travel safely around or through fences, and fences should be clearly visible. When wildlife exclusion is the goal, the fences should be so high they can't be jumped.

If we build fences thoughtfully and fix or remove all existing hazards, we'll never have to see another dead elk hanging in the wire.