

Canadian Luing Cattle Association Newsletter



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Message From The Secretary

Iain Aitken

Welcome to our 2017 summer newsletter.

Hopefully you are enjoying a good year despite drought having returned to some areas of the Prairies.

We had a trouble free calving season on our ranch this spring and it seems that after two years the cows are finally adapted to the new environment. My only complaint was getting two male calves for every female which sets back our plans to increase our herd and put more females on the market at the same time. We will have plenty bull calves to select from however and look forward to a very strong bull pen in 2019.

The Luing Association is greatly saddened to report the deaths of two long-time Luing breeders: Mr. Burns Thomas and Mr. Wilf Chelle.

Burns Thomas (of Cloudy Ridge Ranch, Twin Butte, Alberta) passed away in February 2017. With its rugged beauty

and magnificent setting at the base of the Rockies, Cloudy Ridge Ranch is a throwback to the pioneer era. Burns was a real cowboy skilled with his cattle, horses, mules and dogs. He was also perfectly at home living amongst the bears, wolves and cougars that inhabit this wild corner of Alberta. Burns Thomas was a unique character and great representative of our western ranching heritage. To his partner Lucy and family we offer our sincere condolences.

Wilf Chelle (of Buick, British Columbia) passed away in May 2017. After a career in the aviation electronics industry, Wilf, his wife Alana and their children carved a ranch out of the bush on the Blueberry River in the north Peace Country of British Columbia. In addition to his Luing cattle herd, he was a keen practitioner and advocate for ranch-scale woodlot management. He was a true steward of the land and a pillar of the local community. Wilf had

served as a Director of the Luing Association for the past decade. His sharp wit and wide knowledge-base ensured that conversations with him were always both entertaining and informative. Our sincere condolences are offered to Alana and family.



Water galore! - Lake Dauphin, MB

Breeder Profile - Dane Guignion, Pine River, Manitoba

Iain Aitken

Dane Guignion grew up on the Gaspe peninsula of Quebec where his Grandfather had farmed but he had to build his own farming operation from scratch. This is no small feat to achieve but like many who come into agriculture from the outside Dane is more willing to research and try new and innovative production methods than many multi-generational agriculturists who are bound by tradition.

Dane and his wife Jackie bought their first cattle in 1993 while they were living in the Big Valley area of east central Alberta. Like many they found the price of land in Alberta overpriced relative to the profitability of a cattle enterprise.

After searching extensively across western Canada for a more affordable land-base the Guignions moved to their current property east of Pine River, Manitoba in 2001. This area is towards the northern edge of the agricultural land in the province and is dominated by bush pasture interspersed with land that was cleared by the settler's axe. The bush reminds me of the area between Winfield and Drayton Valley in Alberta being a mixture of willow, poplar and spruce interspersed with clearings and sloughs.

Rural depopulation has hit northern Manitoba hard and in recent years there have been a considerable number of ranches come on the market at prices that look incredibly cheap compared to other cattle producing areas in Canada, or around the world, for that matter. In addition to deeded land there is a huge amount of vacant Crown land available for lease that would only cost around \$1.50/acre per year for bush pasture.

However in true ranching tradition the best opportunities do not come without accompanying challenges! The biggest one in this area (and much of agricultural northern Manitoba) is excess water given the naturally high water table due to the proximity of the large lakes as well as generally flat topography. The small rivers and creeks in the area are apt to flood large areas of land any time there is a heavy rainfall event or from spring runoff. A large beaver population further contributes to flooding issues as they try to engineer their own water control measures.

Unlimited low cost, leased Crown pasture sounds like every cattleman's dream but it is offset by the high cost of erecting and maintaining fences relative

to the productivity per acre. Ranchers in this area also have to contend with predation losses from wolves and black bears. After a few years here Dane relinquished his lease on some of the Crown land he had been using and is concentrating now on increasing production on his open land through cross fencing and rotational grazing. This also allows him to keep a closer eye on the cattle than is possible in the denser bush areas.

The main winter feed source for cattle in the area is hay put up from either tame fields or native hay. Given the higher rainfall climate and the humidity coming from the lakes it can be a challenging area to make hay. Depending on rainfall events some of a rancher's hay land may be inaccessible to cut some years. In years when rain delays hay making it can be late in the fall before haying is complete by which time it will be mature and of lower quality. Dane uses a Tubeline bale wrapper to conserve some silage in years when the weather won't allow for hay. This also ensures some higher quality feed to meet the herd's peak nutritional demand periods.

Alfalfa does not do well here due to the high water table so fertilizer or clover are required to boost hay yields. Spreading fertilizer or working up a field to reseed it can be an expensive proposition if you subsequently get a flood and can't get back on the land until the next year.

There are some higher sandy ridges that get cropped in the area and Dane is growing corn on one of his this year planning to graze it as an alternative to feeding hay. The soil in the area is of sufficient quality, and with enough heat units, to grow corn, soya beans or canola but when low lying areas of fields can get drowned out it really makes for

marginal cash crop land given today's high input costs.

The area as a whole seems best suited for grazing beef cows and given the large volumes of poorer quality grasses and browse available it should particularly suit breeds like Luing. Dane was the first rancher to experiment with the breed in his area but a neighbour has since started using Luing too.



Limousin cow (left) Luing cross cow (right) on rotational pasture at Pine River.

The cattle herd he brought to Manitoba was mainly Limousin as that breed was popular and well suited to the dry, shortgrass conditions of eastern Alberta. The well muscled calves they produced were always in demand, and usually earned a premium, from fatteners in Ontario. As the Limousin percentage in the herd increased they started to experience reduced fertility and the temperament of some of the animals left a lot to be desired.

In 2010 Dane bought his first Luing bulls to add winter hair coat and rumen capacity, as well as hopefully improving temperament and fertility. Looking at the herd now the Luing influence is easy to see but the beneficial Limousin characteristics of slick hides and heavier muscled steer calves still shows through. Fertility has improved with the

heterosis (hybrid vigour) of the two breed cross as well as management changes involving implementing rotational grazing and more aggressive selection for fertility through a shortened breeding season. Heifers are only exposed to a bull for 30 days and any opens are sold into the Fall yearling market. The cow's breeding period has also been shortened up and Dane's "best" cows by definition are the ones that breed back every year early in the first cycle. Too often producers get sidetracked looking for bigger weaning weights or more milk but fertility always has, and always will be, the biggest determinant of beef herd profitability.

Although Dane has been happy with the Luing influence he realizes that part of his trouble with the almost straight-bred Limousins had been a lack of heterosis

so he doesn't want to change to a straight Luing herd either. So in addition to purchasing Luing bulls he has been retaining Luing x bulls out of some of his best Limousin cows. These crossbred bulls are selected out of the earliest calving cows to build fertility levels within the herd even higher.

In conclusion I must say I'm greatly impressed with the opportunities that exist for beginning or expanding ranchers in northern Manitoba but it's also clear that to be successful it would take hard work, determination and a willingness to adopt alternate methods. Dane has proven he has these abilities and I'm happy that he has found a role for Luing genetics in his operation.



Have you considered Fall calving?

Iain Aitken

The prevailing cattle production system in western Canada is very much spring calving with most calves being sold at weaning in October or November. In this article I want to highlight some advantages of fall calving based on our experiences of the practice over many years, albeit with limited numbers up until now.

Perhaps the most obvious advantage is minimizing weather related issues at calving time. August and September are unlikely to contain many blizzard days and frozen ear shouldn't be an issue! The hottest days of summer and the worst of the fly/bug nuisance also tend to be behind us.

Grazing sweet clover pasture - Belmont, MB.

Another advantage of fall calving which is particularly important where I live now is that we can avoid breeding in July/August, the hottest months of the year. There is much talk about calving in tune with nature - by implication in June, at the same time as the local deer population. With their shorter gestation period however the deer breeding season is early November as opposed to the height of summer. So when we talk about being in sync with nature with our cows we get the choice of being in sync with the breeding season or the fawning season of deer, not both.

The declining photoperiod in November triggers the does to come into heat and as we have always had excellent conception in our fall calving herd I suspect it works on cows too. Very seldom do we have a fall calving cow that doesn't calve in the first cycle. Contributing to this rapid breed back is the fact that the cow is typically in very good body condition. We use the easy fleshing characteristics of our breed to ensure the cow goes into winter carrying a lot of her winter feed requirements on her back. We find this fairly easy as the cows gain so much condition on summer grass

It may seem counter intuitive but I find maintaining a lactating, fall calving cow over winter in this climate does not require better feed than a spring calving cow. The fact that the cow's nutritional needs drop over winter rather than increase like a spring calving cows do further reduce the need for quality feed. We typically start feeding the fall herd around November 1st and turn the bull in a week later. I find that green-feed or lower quality hay keep the cows in good enough, but slowly declining, condition over winter. The Luing's winter hair coat allows them to handle the cold weather and retain condition better than most. As winter goes on creep feeding the calves 2 or 3 lbs of pellets is more efficient than feeding the cow extra to get her to milk more. This results in a well grown calf and leanish cow by the time the grass greens up.

Other advantages of fall calving are that calf scours are not usually an issue due to less protein in the grass. You also completely avoid the weaning stresses, pneumonia and shipping fever usually associated with late fall/early winter weaning. The fall cows typically

wean themselves naturally in June which results in zero health problems and no growth setback in the calves.



Gathering for a pasture move - Belmont, MB

Fall calving opens up some alternate marketing opportunities as you can either wean calves early to hit the demand for lightweight calves to go to grass in May or you can sell yearlings in August/September. Both of these markets are typically stronger than November when the annual glut of cattle overwhelms the market and depresses prices.

In my own situation an additional benefit of fall calving is that it allows me to run larger cow groups in summer. Our breeding program requires that I run the spring calving herd in single sire breeding groups but if I can add a group of fall calving cows to each breeding pasture it reduces the number of breeding pastures I need to run. Having less, but larger, groups simplifies our grazing management. Running both fall

and spring herds also allows for a reduction in the herd bull battery.

Dr Bob Church of Lochend Luing Ranch for many years ran both a fall and spring herd and he would breed his spring born heifers to join the fall herd and visa versa. By giving the heifers this extra 6 months before calving he was able to run his heifers with his cow herd with no extra feed or separate attention. We are in the process of expanding our fall herd and look forward to experimenting with this concept of Bob's.

If we can make it work in our environment I think the cost savings will be considerable compared to babying bred heifers as a separate group and suffering reduced breed back if you didn't feed them well enough through the important growth stages.

I should add a disclaimer that if a rancher has heavier milking, leaner type cows or his pastures are typically like a bowling green by the end of July then fall calving may not work well for him. I think in general though calving in the fall has a lot to offer and I'm surprised that more people don't consider it.



Early April in Manitoba

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

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