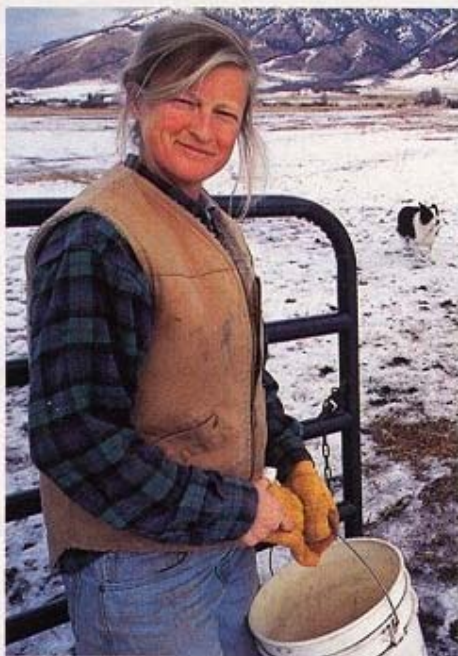


# The Best Coyote Defense Since the Road Runner

**B**ECKY WEED RARELY LAYS EYES ON A coyote as she goes about tending her sheep on Thirteen Mile Farm outside Belgrade, Mont. But at night in her 135-year-old house on the edge of the spread, she can clearly hear the yips and howls of the scruffy predators echoing across the meadows. Were it not for an unusual four-legged critter of her own, the coyotes would have a field day devouring her 240 ewes and lambs.

The protector of Weed's sheep is a six-year-old llama named Cyrus, an animal best known for its thick, shaggy coat and its agility on narrow alpine trails. Here on the flatland expanse at the base of the snow-capped Bridger Mountains, the brown and white beast walks guard duty amid a sea of much smaller brown and white woolly bodies. Deceptively spry despite his goofy appearance, the llama struts and shuffles among the flock, craning his head from one side of the field to another while occasionally stopping to munch on grass clumps in the crusty, frozen earth. Cyrus' presence is intimidating enough to chase off some of the coyotes. Or maybe he kicks at the attackers or swings at them with his long, trunklike neck. Weed is not sure since she has never seen a confrontation. "All I know is that without him, I would have lost dozens of sheep."

Guard dogs, burros and even llamas are popular and effective protection tools for shepherds in the West, but Weed is taking a daring gamble by relying primarily on a lone creature for defense against what the sheep industry sees as its greatest danger. When a threat is serious, most ranchers deal with coyotes and other marauding predators simply by shooting, poisoning or trapping



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them—all perfectly legal in most Western states—or by calling in U.S. Department of Agriculture agents to do the job. Weed, 40, has adopted a gentler stance because she is trying to promote ecologically responsible ranching. She has a genuine concern for the coyotes, mountain lions and bears that roam the Big Sky Country, and she believes they are as important as other wildlife for keeping the environment in balance. "Old-timers talk about how great the Montana country is, but you've got to take care of it," she said. "Killing just doesn't seem to fit."

A former geologist who began ranching full time in 1993 with her engineer husband Dave Tyler, Weed is no wild-eyed activist, and the sorry financial plight of the sheep industry drives them as much as concern for animals. She envisions a consumer demand for lamb and wool from sheep herded in a nonviolent setting, much like demand for organic farm products and tuna caught without endangering dolphins.

Weed admits that her idea has been slow to catch on. She has persuaded only about 10 ranchers to stay in a program to certify that their wool is "predator friendly." And without economies of scale and a strong sales effort, there are few customers for the \$130 sweaters and \$165 blankets. Still Weed is convinced she just needs more time and better marketing. "We're all suffering because the public is trained to think that all ranchers hate the environment," she asserts. "We have to prove that we're good custodians. There are plenty of buyers who will seek out ranchers doing things in a responsible manner." If she's right, what's good for the coyote is good for the shepherd.

—By Richard Woodbury/Belgrade

**LLAMA ON DUTY**  
Weed doesn't lose sheep—or sleep—when big Cyrus is watching over the flock, keeping the predators at bay in an eco-friendly way

