

# Three Reports of Unusual Killing and Mutilation of Calves

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## Introduction

NIDS has received dozens of reports of animal mutilations in the past few years, many of which have common characteristics. The animal pathology section of the NIDS website contains reports and essays that summarize many of these common features.

Here we present three reports of the killing of calves with relatively unusual *modus operandi*. Because they are “outliers” and even now can be considered anecdotal, we have hesitated to publish them previously. All three cases involve either newborn or premature calves that had been killed and parts of the animals removed using techniques that do not conform to the “usual” animal mutilation reports that NIDS encounters. Photographs are available for all three cases, however only case #1 can be considered documented by a veterinarian. NIDS obtained the photographs and investigative reports from cases #2 and #3 before we were able to halt the premature destruction of the carcasses. All three cases are being published with three audiences in mind: (i) as an aid to law enforcement, many of whom have begun to monitor our website, (ii) as an information source for veterinarians who examine similar cases and after superficial study may be tempted to dismiss cases as predator or scavenger attacks, and (iii) as a request to ranchers who may discover similar cases on their property to call NIDS.

## CASE #1

### Circumstances and preliminary investigation:

**March 10, 1997 — 10:00 AM:** Two ranchers on a remote pasture in NE Utah began the daily tagging of calves born the night before. The weather was bright and sunny, temperatures in the 50s. The ranchers estimated they tagged and weighed the 87-pound animal about 100 yards from the fence line. There was a ring of snow surrounding the pasture where they tagged the animal.

After tagging the animal, they walked about 300 yards west to another newborn animal and went through the process of weighing and tagging that animal. The two were accompanied by their blue heeler dog. About 10:45 AM, the heeler began to growl and act strangely with a focus on the area they had just left.

**March 10 — 10:45 AM:** The blue heeler began snarling in earnest and arching his back. Without warning, the animal ran west across the fields, away from the direction he had been looking. The heeler was never seen again.

**March 10 — 10:50 AM:** The rancher and his wife, looking back, then noticed a grown cow running frantically back and forth towards the fence line while dragging her leg. Both then walked back to investigate. The rancher reported seeing the recently tagged newborn calf lying eviscerated in the field (see photos), close to where it had been tagged about 45 minutes previously. In a 45-minute period in daylight, 100 yards from any cover, with the rancher about 200-300 yards away, the calf had most of its body weight removed, including entrails, and appeared to have been placed carefully on the ground with no blood present on or near the animal.

**March 10 — 4:00 PM:** In one of the most rapid turn-around times in NIDS' investigative history, two NIDS scientific investigators and a veterinarian were standing over the dead calf only a few hours after receiving the call from the rancher. The photo below (Fig 1A) is an accurate representation of how the animal was found:



**Figure 1A.** The animal was found spread-eagled on the grass with no blood on or underneath.

The investigators confirmed the eviscerated calf as reported by the rancher. The veterinarian began the necropsy. Investigators videotaped the necropsy and photographed the procedure. As the veterinarian performed the necropsy, he said a sharp instrument, possibly a knife, had been used to remove the ear. He also reported there may have been evidence of chewing on the animal. The initial observation made by the veterinarian regarding the use of a sharp instrument on the animal's ear (see photograph below) was later confirmed by an independent veterinary pathology lab. Videotaped footage of the necropsy shows the ear more clearly.



**Figure 1B. The animal's left ear had been cleanly cut with a sharp instrument.**

A detached femur bone from the animal was sent to one of the top forensic pathologists in the country who confirmed that two separate sharp instruments had been used on the bone: a heavy machete-like instrument and a smaller scissors-like instrument.

Within 24 hours, an experienced tracker who makes a living tracking game animals arrived and quartered an area nearly a mile radius from the dead calf. No tracks were found.

No blood was found on or near the animal. The veterinarian who conducted the necropsy opined the animal had been exsanguinated very effectively. In order to test the

hypothesis that blood may have seeped from the animal into the soil, NIDS obtained about 3 liters of fresh blood (the approximate blood volume of the exsanguinated animal, using the standard assumption that blood is approx 7% of body weight) from the local slaughterhouse. The blood was poured on the ground where the calf was found (Fig 1C). Videotapes and photographs were recorded of the blood on the ground at regular intervals for 48 hours following the initiation of the experiment. Even 48 hours after the blood was poured, the bright red stain of hemoglobin was very obvious on the grass (see photo 1D).



**Figure 1C. Blood from a local slaughterhouse was poured on the ground to see if it stained the grass.**



**Figure 1D.** Even 48 hours after pouring blood on the grass, the red stain was plainly visible.

### **From the Veterinarian's Necropsy Report**

The animal was lying on his back, with the legs stretched laterally. Both forelimbs had been detached from their natural connections to the body. They were still bound to each other by a piece of hide of about three inches wide. The scapula and muscles of the scapular belt had been eaten. The right humerus had been detached by dislocating it from the humero-radio-ulnar and humero-scapular joints and was found about 10 feet away. The joint cartilage at the extremities partially chewed and had some teeth-like prints. The lower part of the rib cage, including the sternum, and all internal organs (from the abdominal and thoracic cavities) were missing. The remaining ribs looked unevenly chewed, with irregular ends. The muscles surrounding the ribs, the vertebrae and the upper part of the rear legs had been chewed up, leaving thin tendon fibers and nerves hanging. The right femur was still attached through the coxo-femoral ligament, but the left one had been dislocated. The head was intact but most of the neck muscles had been chewed. The eyes were both intact. While removing the skin from the head no lesions were seen in the facial connective tissue and vicinity. The tongue was also intact. Interestingly, the left ear was missing and in contrast to the appearance of the remaining tissues it was clear that it had

been cut with a sharp instrument. It was a regular cut affecting the skin, muscles and ear cartilage.

The plastic ear-tag was never found. No signs of tooth marks on the skull and facial bones. The muscles from the neck and the dorsal areas along the spinal cord had been chewed up to the vertebral bones.

Ear cartilage, muscles and hide samples, from different parts of the body, were collected for histology.

### **Case #1 Laboratory Findings**

The ----- Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory of the ----- State University confirmed similar histological features, suggesting that tissue trauma occurred after death, with no evidence of inflammatory change or cellular infiltration. The margins of the ear, including the cartilage, appeared to have been cleanly severed with no significant irregularities, suggesting a cut with a sharp instrument.

A West Virginia forensic laboratory established that the bone had both teeth marks and metal marks caused by a sharp instrument on its surface. The forensic pathologist, one of the most esteemed in the country, identified a meat cleaver or a “machete”, and secondly a fine scissors-like instrument, as having possibly caused the marks on the bone.

### **Additional remarks from the veterinarian who conducted the necropsy**

“The first impression that we had when we saw the carcass of the newborn calf, was that we had to handle a strange situation.”

“When we arrived at the scene we could not see any blood around, on the soil, grass or skin. No traces of food from stomach or intestines that could have been spread around during the eating of different parts of the digestive tract.”

“A good part of the hair on the head was white, but it had no blood staining on it to suggest that the animal had been bled by cutting the large neck vessels after being hung by its rear legs. No blood was found in the buco-pharyngeal cavity.”

“The left ear had been removed by using a sharp instrument, but most of soft tissues (muscles, internal organs) seemed to have been removed by tearing and chewing. The remaining tissues looked irregular, torn, with tendons, vessels and nerves hanging unevenly.”

“The ribcage was completely open, with uneven ribs having irregular ends. Several ribs were removed entirely, from their vertebral joint. None of them showed clear-cut ends.”

“All four legs were covered by skin up to the scapulo-humeral and femuro-tibio-patellar joint, respectively. No subcutaneous or bone lesions in the lower part of the legs, speaking for traumatic alterations pertaining to immobilization or ante-mortem struggle, were seen.”

“The neck soft tissues seemed to have been chewed away, leaving only the vertebrae and remnants of nerves, vessels and some ligaments. The trachea, jugular veins, arteries, glands (thymus, thyroid, parotid) had been removed, but no signs of sharp instrument use were present.”

“Several investigators thoroughly examined for several hours the whole environment surrounding the scene and could not find any suspect signs (blood, hair, tracks or any objects involved in the process).”

“In this particular case, there is no evident explanation as to how the animal was killed. No traces of blood suggesting an ordinary exsanguination were found. The use of a sharp instrument was, however, clearly suggested by the left ear remaining tissues. It might be possible that the first part is the result of human intervention and the chewing, tearing and eating of soft tissues are the work of predators and scavengers.”

### **Case #1 Additional Remarks from the forensic pathologist who had examined the bone**

Upon viewing the videotape of the animal's remains, the forensic pathologist remarked:

“All of the meat was gone from the upper leg area and flank area. The ends of the ribs were cut through the cartilage, consistent not with chewing, but with a crude instrument. Two people working together. It looks like a field dressing. The hide was pulled down over the upper legs.”

“They took so much muscle, but why did they take the entrails? The bone that we originally received has puncture wounds like a scissors or a sharp instrument.”

“It does not look like anything wild. The inside of the animal was too cleaned out.”

“I cannot explain why there was no blood. Why would they have gone to the precaution of making sure there was no blood? Was it a ritual slaughter?”

“I firmly feel that it was not wild animals.”

“The tagged ear was clearly cut off.”

## Unusual Aspects of Case #1

- The animal was killed in the open, in daylight, with two potential eyewitnesses about 300 yards away. The killing was silent.
- Over 60% of the animal's body mass was removed in about 45 minutes.
- No blood, entrails or any other evidence was found in the vicinity. The large, bright yellow ear tag on the animal was never recovered.
- In spite of the use of a professional tracker, no tracks or other evidence were found within a one-mile radius around the animal.
- Sharp instruments were used on the animal to remove the ear as noted by the veterinarian who conducted the necropsy and independently confirmed by a veterinary pathology lab. In addition, a forensic examination of the bone concluded that two separate sharp instruments had been used on the bone: a heavy machete-like implement, and a fine scissors-like instrument. There was also evidence of chewing on the carcass.

## Case #1 Possible Logistics

The following is a brief hypothetical examination of the logistics and a possible scenario (including some extreme logistical problems) that might have been necessary to accomplish the killing of the calf in Case #1. [In the brief scenario below, the use of a silent helicopter to accomplish this in daylight would have been judged too risky since at any moment the rancher and his wife could have turned around and spotted the helicopter.]

**Personnel:** *4 people involved. One perpetrator was located as a spotter on nearby high ground with walkie-talkies and a pair of binoculars.*

**PROBLEM 1:** Tracks should have been left on the high ground. However, a seasoned and experienced tracker climbed to the high ground and searched extensively for tracks but found none.

*The remaining 3 perpetrators, knowing that the neighbors were not around, drove to the outside gate of the property that was padlocked.*

**PROBLEM 2:** This whole operation would have been less risky during the night and the same message could have been sent. The perpetrators would had to have parked there right outside the gate, perhaps hidden behind the bushes on the track that is right next to the gate.

Then, carrying walkie-talkies, a couple of tarps, two large buckets with seal tight lids, and a backpack full of surgical/butchery instruments, the 3 hiked across the neighbor's property, still in communication by walkie-talkie with the spotter, and stealthily crept up while the rancher and his wife were tagging the calf.

It is noteworthy that the 3 perpetrators would have had to see the ranchers actually tagging the animal in order to be sure that they precisely identified the correct calf that had been recently tagged.

*The perpetrators were hidden in the bushes about 100-150 yards from where the ranchers were tagging.*

**PROBLEM 3:** There were several inches of snow throughout the area and there should have been tracks within 10-15 feet of the fence line.

*The perpetrators saw the ranchers leave once the calf was tagged and go west towards the next field. When the ranchers were about 300 yards away the ground dipped very slightly, so they were out of view. The clock now started running. Three people on the signal from the spotter on the high ground, ran quickly across the field, immobilized the mother with a combination of violence and drugs (a quick jab with a syringe full of a drug that would disorientate the mother), grabbed the 87 pound calf and dragged/carried the animal over to the fence line.*

**PROBLEM 4:** The method of immobilization is crucial because the cow, which admittedly had given birth just a few hours earlier, was found panting with tongue hanging out and dragging one leg.

**PROBLEM 5:** Cows are notoriously aggressive just after calving, so it would not be unusual for other cows to launch an attack on the perpetrators. Fending off these attacks could delay the operation. Such activity would also set off a lot of bellowing/noise that the ranchers might hear. This was a very high-risk procedure.

*The perpetrators then crossed the barbed wire fence line, carrying an 87 pound calf, then proceeded about 100 yards out into the bushes on the neighbor's land. **Elapsed time 10-15 minutes.** One person held the calf, two tarps were spread out on the ground and the animal's throat was carefully slit so that all of blood flowed into the bucket. **Important note:** Not a drop of blood was found on the hide of the calf. A low noise vacuum pump would probably have been needed to remove every drop of blood. The animal was then laid out on a tarp. The bright yellow ear tag was removed with a sharp knife and placed into a bag and pocketed. The animal was then cut open partially with knives and partially by ripping to simulate tearing the hide.*

**PROBLEM 6:** This cannot be done with bare hands; the histology ruled out cutting with sharp instrument. [Note: Calculations of elapsed time are extremely generous.]

*Next, the sternum (with ribs) was cut open using a series of pliers to simulate chewing. Eight of the ribs were cut/twisted with pliers at varying distances from the spine.*

**PROBLEM 7:** This would be a very slow procedure.

*The internal organs were then removed into another plastic bucket/ plastic leak-proof bag. The entire contents of the abdominal cavity were removed. The hide was stripped with a knife/tearing instrument and torn down to the two rear knee joints. Using a knife/machete, the bone from the left rear leg was removed, the tendon was cut. The bone from the right rear leg was torn out with the tendon intact. The flesh was stripped from the bone with a knife. Then, all the meat right next to the spine was stripped with knife and nearest the vertebra was pulled with forceps/pliers to simulate predator tearing. This included all the way up to the skull of the animal, since the neck was missing most of the muscle, blood vessels nerves etc. All that remained were the vertebra (see photos 1A and 1B). Very little meat was now left on the upper part of the animal except on the legs.*

**PROBLEM 8:** This procedure involved dragging material to simulate tearing along the whole length of the spine and is very time consuming. **Elapsed time 30-40 minutes.**

*The bagman then needed to gather up the two buckets, one containing 3 liters of blood, the other containing the entrails, the tarp containing the meat plus any spillage and begin making the three hundred yard trip to the vehicle carrying the entrails, blood and extra meat. The trip with at minimum 60 extra pounds would take about ten minutes. It may even have taken two trips for one individual.*

**PROBLEM 9:** Too much time to make two trips.

*The other two perpetrators then gathered the calf remains, carried it back 100 yards to the fence line, over the fence, and across the field for 100 yards, located the spot that the ranchers had tagged the calf and carefully placed the calf on the grass. The animal was placed on its back with its 4 legs spread. They tossed the bone from the left rear leg about 10-15 feet away from the corpse.*

**PROBLEM 10:** The two perpetrators would have had again to engage the mother, who was now doubly enraged and bound to try to again attack them when they return with the remains of her calf, possibly by inflicting violence, or making her run away-enough to exhaust her. **Elapsed time 45 minutes.**

*Then, hearing over the walkie-talkie that the ranchers are on their way back, the perpetrators run for the tree line 100 yards away. They run across the neighbor's property to the vehicle where the bagman is waiting.*

**PROBLEM 11:** Tracks should have been visible across several inches of snow made by 3 people, in a great hurry, going to the fence line from the vehicle, returning with the calf across the fence line, tracks of two people coming back with mutilated animal across fence line, and finally tracks of the same two people going back to the vehicle. In short, 4 trips, multiple tracks across snow that is several inches deep.

**PROBLEM 12:** At every point during the mission it would have to be aborted because there was no way of predicting when the rancher and his wife would return. If the perpetrators had to run for it at any time, the game would have been over.

**PROBLEM 13:** The entire mission would be based on arriving at the scene on the off-chance that rancher and his wife would tag a calf and then go down into the next field. The perpetrators would never have any chance of predicting when the ranchers would tag a calf, because those decisions were made on the spur of the moment. Admittedly because it is in the middle of calving season, there is a probability of them tagging calves, but according to their testimony, sometimes they went a couple of days without doing so. The team of perpetrators would have to have been in the bushes a long time, waiting for just the right opportunity.

**PROBLEM 14:** Finally there is the problem of motive. Why would such a highly trained team spend so much time and effort to inflict this kind of damage, apparently randomly, on a rancher and his family?

## **CASE #2**

Northern California, 11/10/2001. The Black Angus calf had been born the night before.

**Details:** As in Case #1, most of the body weight was gone. The left eye had been cored, an area around the mouth of the animal had been cut out (see Figure 2A).



**Figure 2A. The animal's left eye and muzzle had been cut off.**

The animal's left eyeball had been left intact on the grass, facing the animal (see photographs 2A and 2B).



**Figure 2B. The animal's eyeball had been left on the grass beside the animal.**

The eyeball at the time of the photograph was intact and retained the fluid. According to a NIDS consultant, because an intact eyeball would begin to lose fluid through evaporation, the eyeball had been removed only hours rather than days before the photograph was taken. Secondly, according to a forensic consultant who viewed the photographs, Case #2 displayed evidence of a field dressing. Unfortunately, NIDS could not do an investigation because the rancher had burned the carcass prior to mailing the photographs to NIDS.

### **Unusual Features of Case #2**

- The eye was cored out of the animal and left on the grass beside the carcass (Fig 2B).
- The muzzle had been cut off (Fig 2A).
- Over 60% of the animal's body mass, including all organs in the body cavity, had been removed.
- According to the investigator, the chest had been cut in an oval pattern.

- There was no blood in, on or under the animal.
- The animal's mother kept away from the dead calf. The mother or the perpetrator had removed all signs of after-birth from the animal.
- No tracks were discernible.
- Case #1 and Case #2 bore some resemblances. Neither were the result of scavenger/predator attack.

### **CASE #3**

Northern California. 12/29/2001. The animal was a 7-month premature Charolais calf found with the head skinned and severed at the neck (see Figures 3A–C).



**Figure 3A.** The hide from the head had been carefully removed before the head was severed.

According to the investigator who took the photos, other features included:

- The skull and part of the neck, including muscle tissue was removed.
- The left ear was removed with a semi-circle of flexible hide remaining.

- The right ear was removed with a circle of hide remaining.
- The testicles were cut off in a small round circle (Figure 3B).
- The body was clean, with no signs of afterbirth.
- The body was limber and flexible, with no evidence of rigor mortis.
- The cuts appeared smooth.
- No blood on the hide or on the ground.
- The spinal column had been severed cleanly removing the head.
- The neck under the jaw was cut in a smooth oval.
- The ranchers reported that their dogs were barking and upset the night before, a horse came into the yard “for protection”, and the family was awakened on the same night by the sound of a helicopter.



**Figure 3B. The animal's testicles had been removed.**



**Figure 3C.** The hide on the animal's head had been carefully removed from the skull prior to severing the head.

## **Discussion**

The three cases described briefly above are “outliers” and appear to differ from the standard animal mutilation technique. In most reports that NIDS has received and investigated, the focus appears to be on soft tissues, such as lips, tongue, skin and muscles of the lower jaw, rectum and/or genitalia (vulva, vagina, sometimes the entire uterus, even in pregnancy stage), penis, scrotum (with or without testicles), eyeball (with or without eyelids; usually only one, on the upper side, when the animal is laying on lateral decubitus), tail, mammary gland (the whole udder or teats only), and ears. Due to their nature, location and accessibility, the removal of these tissues has historically been attributed to scavengers or predators.

NIDS has documented several cases in the Animal Pathology section of the website (<http://www.nidsci.org/articles/articles2.html>) in which predators or scavengers have been ruled out.

The removal of most of the body weight in Cases #1 & #2 suggest a similar modus operandi, although both cases were separated by several hundred miles (N.E. Utah to N. California) and by nearly five years in time. Both animals were newborn. The removal of

the ear including tag, in Case #1 and the eye in Case #2, are more typical of animal mutilation procedures that NIDS has encountered and that have been reported elsewhere for decades. The severing of the head in Case #3 was obviously accomplished in an unusual way. First, the hide of the animal had to have been laboriously separated from the skull. Next, the head would have had to be removed. The removal of hide from a skull is not an easy task. A recent operation by NIDS to remove the hide from another animal's skull was accomplished with difficulty and the operation took a couple of hours.

In all of the cases outlined above, predators and scavengers have been ruled out as causing the death of the animals. However, Case #1 and Case #2 bore some superficial evidence of chewing in combination with the obvious use of sharp instruments. In all three cases, hostile intent was apparent. According to NIDS investigation, Case #1 was accomplished in daylight hours; it is not known when Case #2 or #3 occurred.

Finally, NIDS encourages ranchers, veterinarians and law enforcement to contact our office in Las Vegas at **702-798-1700** (<http://www.nidsci.org> / e-mail: [nids@anv.net](mailto:nids@anv.net)) should similar cases occur in their area.