

Chicken slaughter at UBC a mystery: 39 hens dead, 23 missing after attack by unknown animal; [Final Edition]

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The UBC Farm is looking for cash donations to help replace 62 laying hens that were either slaughtered or are missing after being attacked in their pen earlier this month.

On Aug. 1, farm staff discovered 39 of its 79 chickens had been killed by a dog or coyotes, and another 23 were missing.

David Shackleton, acting dean of Agriculture Sciences, said a human likely had a hand in the massacre because a hole was cut in the electric fence.

Shackleton said while it's hard to prove exactly what happened, the most likely scenario is that an off-leash dog dug its way under the electric fence and the dog's owner then cut a hole in the wire to let it out.

"There were some digging marks under the fence, so we suspect a dog got in that way. We don't believe it was a coyote because the teeth marks were too big," he said. "But at this point, it's just speculation."

The free-range chickens were part of a new program at the farm where students care for the hens and sell the eggs at the UBC farm market--on average, the hens were laying 79 eggs a day. Shackleton said the cash-strapped program is now finished for the summer, but the department hopes to start it up again next spring. That's where the donations come in.

"People have made offers to help restore the flock [by donating chickens], but we can't do that," he said. "There's too much risk of potential disease, so we need the cash to buy more birds from dealers we know."

Shackleton said some of the hens and roosters that survived the attack were injured but are recovering. Since the incident, security has been tightened to include more patrols.

"And people are generally just keeping more of an eye out," he said.

Jamie Lawson, chief animal health officer for the BCSPCA, said while dogs, raccoons and coyotes are all capable of such a frenzy killing, the hole in the fence points to a domestic animal as the culprit. The situation is unusual, however, he said.

"Even though dogs are predators, they usually only act spontaneously. If a dog is walking by some chickens, it will probably attack. But they usually won't stop and think chicken/fence, chicken/fence. This dog really had to work to get in there. That was one determined dog."

Lawson said he doubts the dog simply got away from its owner. "It would have taken some time for that dog to dig, so I suspect the owner and the dog weren't there together."

While there is no strong correlation between a dog killing livestock and attacking a smaller dog or child, it would likely attack livestock again if given the opportunity, he added.

Stanley Coren, a canine expert at UBC, said without seeing forensic evidence, he can only guess at what might have killed the chickens, but he suspects it was the work of a pair of hungry coyotes. "Coyotes teeth marks look larger because they slash when they bite. They don't bite and hold like a dog. They bite, pull, release, bite, pull, release over."

He said a dog would probably only kill a few of the birds. Since chickens usually fight back, most dogs would back off after being pecked and bitten a few times, while coyotes would persevere. "And it would have to be one King Kong of a dog to do that kind of damage."

He said if the bird's necks and vertebrae were crushed, that would be proof the culprit was a big dog, such as a Rottweiler. As for the hole in the fence, Coren speculated it was cut by a human wanting to steal chickens, leaving an opening for whatever arrived later to kill the birds.

But Lawson disagrees. "Have you ever tried to catch a free-range chicken in the dark?" he said. "It would be a lot easier to pay \$1.29 at the store."

Anyone interested in donating to the program can call David Love at 604-822-8910.