

## Have you seen this killer?

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Have you seen this killer? It is called Prairie Larkspur (*Delphinium carolinianum*) and it can be devastating to livestock. Sometimes it may also be referred to as plains larkspur. Typically one would not anticipate seeing this member of the buttercup family in northeastern Colorado; however, with the wet summer that we have had the prairie larkspur plant has had a great advantage and is abundant in many rangeland pastures of the Golden Plains Area this summer.

The plant may range from one to four feet in height. They may or may not have flowers on them. If present, the flowers will be white and may have a blue or purple-like hue especially towards the “spur” end of the flower. The flower’s spur will extend backwards from the petals up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch. The plant’s flowers will present in a group as a raceme, or spike-like feature. The raceme can

contain 5 to 50 separate flowers, over a distance of 4 to 10 inches.

The fruit of this plant forms in pod groups with three pods in each group. They will contain numerous seeds. The leaves are harder to describe. They generally remain low on the plant and will have a palmate-lobed appearance and be up to 3 inches long. Personally, the leaves strike me as a cross between kochia and something you would find in a fancy salad.

While most poisonous plants are relatively unpalatable to livestock, members of the larkspur group are an exception. Livestock find the leaves and particularly the flowers to be very tasty. It is said that very few people will ever notice the signs of larkspur poisoning as it is a quick killer. The plant contains polycyclic diterpene alkaloid, which causes paralysis of the respiratory system. Basically, the animal suffocates. Research has shown death can occur between 5 minutes and 4 hours following a lethal dose. And that lethal dose is half a percent of bodyweight for cattle and two percent of a sheep’s bodyweight. Horses are also susceptible to larkspur poisoning but at a lesser rate than cattle.

While researchers have looked at management techniques for grazing animals where larkspur is present, few have proven to be realistic options for range operations. The best suggestion is to scout ahead for the plant and do not turn livestock onto pastures that contain it until after the plant has lost its flowers and dropped its seed.

