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Research Note

Toxic Alkaloid Concentrations in *Delphinium nuttallianum*, *Delphinium andersonii*, and *Delphinium geyeri* in the Intermountain Region

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Abstract

Low larkspurs (*Delphinium nuttallianum* Pritz., *Delphinium andersonii* Gray) and plains larkspur (*Delphinium geyeri* Greene) often poison cattle grazing on western North American rangelands. The dominant toxic alkaloid in larkspur is methyllycaconitine (MLA); other very toxic alkaloids in low and plains larkspurs are nudicauline and geyerline. Toxic alkaloid concentrations in larkspur near or above $3 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ present significant risk to grazing cattle. *D. nuttallianum* from Utah and Colorado, *D. andersonii* from northern Arizona, and plains larkspur (*D. geyeri*) from Wyoming were collected for analysis. Concentrations of MLA in *D. nuttallianum* ranged from 0.8 to $4.5 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ in Utah and Colorado; total toxic alkaloid concentrations were often above $3 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$. *D. nuttallianum* differed ($P = 0.09$) in MLA concentration between locations but not phenological stages ($P = 0.41$). Concentrations of nudicauline ranged from 0.7 to $4 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ in *D. nuttallianum* and were different ($P = 0.01$) between locations and phenological stages ($P = 0.004$). *D. andersonii* was consistently toxic because the total toxic alkaloid concentration fluctuated from 3 to $6 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ over the growing season. The concentration of geyerline in *D. andersonii* was equal to or greater than MLA at each phenological stage, thus adding to the toxicity. The concentration of toxic alkaloids in *D. geyeri* was typically highest ($2\text{--}4 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$) in immature plants, although toxic alkaloid concentrations in plants during the pod stage of growth sometimes increased. Only trace amounts of nudicauline were found in *D. geyeri*, as most of the alkaloid fraction was other N-(methylsuccinimido) anthranoyllycoctonine (MSAL) alkaloids. Total alkaloid concentration (MSAL and non-MSAL alkaloids) in *D. geyeri* sometimes exceeded $15 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$. Concentrations of toxic alkaloids in *D. nuttallianum*, *D. andersonii*, and *D. geyeri* often did not significantly decline during the growing season as typically found in tall larkspurs. Thus, risk to grazing cattle may remain high until these plants are dormant.

Resumen

El “Low larkspurs” (*Delphinium nuttallianum* Pritz., *Delphinium andersonii* Gray) y “Plains larkspur” (*Delphinium geyeri* Greene) a menudo envenenan el ganado que apacienta los pastizales del oeste de Norte América. El alcaloide tóxico dominante en “Larkspur” es metilicacontina (MLA); otros alcaloides muy tóxicos presentes en “Low larkspurs” y “Plains larkspur” son nudicaulina y geierlina. En “Larkspur”, las concentraciones de alcaloides tóxicos cercanas o superiores a $3 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ presentan un riesgo significativo para el ganado en apacentamiento. *D. nuttallianum* de Utah y Colorado, *D. andersonii* del norte de Arizona y “Plains larkspur” (*D. geyeri*) de Wyoming se colectaron para análisis. Las concentraciones de MLA en *D. nuttallianum* fluctuaron de 0.8 a $4.5 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ en Utah y Colorado; las concentraciones totales de alcaloides tóxicos a menudo fueron superiores a $3 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$. La concentración de MLA en *D. nuttallianum* difirió ($P = 0.09$) entre localidades, pero no entre estados fenológicos ($P = 0.41$). Las concentraciones de nudicaulina variaron de 0.7 a $4 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ en *D. nuttallianum*, y fueron diferentes ($P = 0.01$) entre localidades y etapas fenológicas ($P = 0.004$). El *D. andersonii* fue consistentemente tóxico porque la concentración total de alcaloides fluctuó de 3 a $6 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$ a través de la estación de crecimiento. La concentración de geierlina en *D. andersonii* fue igual o superior a la de MLA en cada uno de las etapas fenológicas, aumentando así la toxicidad. La concentración de los alcaloides tóxicos en *D. geyeri* (2 a $4 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$) fue típicamente mayor en plantas jóvenes, aunque las concentraciones de alcaloides tóxicos en la etapa de formación de vaina algunas veces se incrementaron. En *D. geyeri* se encontraron solo cantidades traza de nudicaulina, la mayoría de la fracción de alcaloides la conformaron otros alcaloides N-(metilsuccinimido) anthranoyllycoctonine (MSAL). La concentración total de alcaloides (alcaloides MSAL y no-MSAL) en *D. geyeri* algunas veces excedió los $15 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$. Las concentraciones de alcaloides tóxicos en *D. nuttallianum*, *D. andersonii*, y *D. geyeri* a menudo no disminuyen significativamente durante la estación de crecimiento, como ocurre típicamente en los “Tall larkspurs.” Así, el riesgo para el ganado en apacentamiento puede permanecer alto hasta que estas plantas están en dormancia.

Key Words: diterpenoid alkaloids, cattle, larkspur, poisonous plants, methyllycaconitine

INTRODUCTION

Low larkspurs (*Delphinium nuttallianum* Pritz., *Delphinium andersonii* Gray) and plains larkspur (*Delphinium geyeri* Greene) are toxic plants that often fatally poison cattle on western North American rangelands (Majak 1993; Pfister et al. 2003). Larkspur species contain norditerpenoid alkaloids

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