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STEWARDS OF THE RANGE

In a remote corner of southeastern Oregon, the historic Roaring Springs Ranch values holistic, collaborative management to steward the ranch's natural, economic and social resources.

BY ANDRIA HAUTAMAKI



photography by ANDRIA HAUTAMAKI

STEWARDS OF THE RANGE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDRIA HAUTAMAKI

In a remote corner of southeastern Oregon, the historic Roaring Springs Ranch values holistic, collaborative management to steward the ranch's natural, economic and social resources.



FC

Roaring Springs Ranch

At 6 a.m. sharp, the breakfast bell rings and Roaring Springs Ranch buckaroos drift into the bunkhouse kitchen — boots on and spurs jingling.

The cook has already been up for more than an hour; on the counter, she has set out piping hot eggs, bacon and hash brown potatoes. The young men fill their plates, pour cups of freshly made coffee and then sit at a communal table where they swiftly polish off the meal. On their way out the door, they grab snack bars for their pockets and head down to the barn. By 7 a.m., the buckaroos will be saddled and ready to ride out for the day.

The history of Roaring Springs Ranch reflects the many changes that occurred

in the United States in the late 1800s. While settlers marched Westward, looking for land and gold, cattle barons sought rangeland to feed their expanding herds of cattle and conflicts over land and water arose. In Harney Basin, a remote region of the high desert range in southeastern Oregon, clashes also occurred between the indigenous Paiute and Bannock tribes, ranchers and homesteaders.

In 1872, Pete French, a California vaquero, rode into the Catlow Valley with 1,200 shorthorn cows and six hired men. For two months, French, who worked for Dr. Hugh Glenn, had trailed the cattle from Glenn's Jacinto Ranch near Chico, California, and with the help of his vaqueros, traversed 500 miles of rough terrain with the herd. When they finally reached Oregon, a land of white sage, bunchgrass and the Steens Moun-

tains — a 9,700-foot-high rock monolith dotted with lush meadow and mountain streams — French saw cattle country.

Shortly after they arrived, French encountered a squatter named Porter who was down on his luck. Porter sold French the few cattle he owned and his "P" brand. On the banks of the Donner and Blitzen River, French established Glenn's P Ranch headquarters and, thus, began the start of a cattle empire. Over the next 25 years, French would leverage the Swamp Land Act to purchase land across the Catlow, Blitzen and Diamond Valleys. At its peak, the operation had grown to approximately 30,000 cattle and 6,000 horses and mules.

BELOW: The cook rings the breakfast bell at 6 a.m. sharp each morning.



FC

Roaring Springs Ranch



ABOVE: Since 1997, Stacy Davies has been the Roaring Springs Ranch manager.

In January 1883, the French-Glenn Livestock Company was officially formed when Glenn gave French a one-third share in the P Ranch. Less than a month later, Glenn was shot and killed by his brother-in-law. French continued to manage the ranch and was generally revered by his workers; however, he was despised by the homesteaders. In 1897, French's life ended when he was shot by a disgruntled homesteader.

After French's death, the P Ranch property was slowly sold off. A large tract of ranchland was purchased by the federal government to expand the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Later, the headquarters of the P Ranch were relocated to Roaring Springs Ranch, situated 15 miles south of the town of Frenchglen, Oregon. The remainder of the P Ranch, including Roaring Springs Ranch, changed hands multiple times throughout the mid-20th century.

In 1992, the Sanders family — the ranch's current owners — purchased Roaring Springs Ranch. Today, cattle and horses are still branded with the FG brand, and livestock graze on land that was part of the original P Ranch and French-Glenn Livestock Company empire. Under the guidance and supervision of ranch manager Stacy Davies, the ranch aims to be economically, ecologically and socially sustainable.

MANAGING A MILLION ACRES

The Roaring Springs Ranch headquarters are nestled at the base of Catlow Rim, a vertical basalt cliff that parallels Oregon Route 205, the only paved road in the Catlow Valley. This cow-calf operation runs 8,500 cows across 1.2 million acres comprised of deeded land, private leases and BLM grazing allotments. For the past 26 years, Stacy Davies and his wife, Elaine, have managed the ranch.

"I would say most young people go into ranch management because they love to ride horses, they love to cowboy, they like working with cattle and they want to make animal science decisions," Stacy says. "I figured when I became ranch manager that I was moving to the end of the road, and I wouldn't ever have to talk to people again. The realization is a majority of my time and mental energy is spent working on land-related issues, human relations and politics."

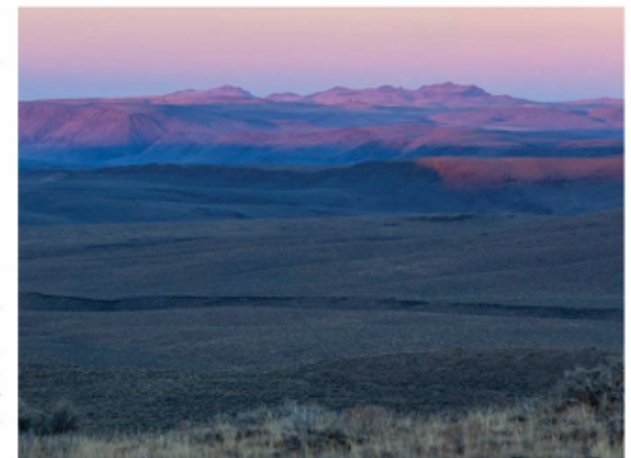
Stacy grew up in eastern Utah and then attended Ricks College, now Brigham Young University - Idaho in Rexburg, Idaho, where he studied beef production ranch management and met his wife. His first job out of college was with Doc and Connie Hatfield, the founders of Country Natural Beef, a co-op of family ranches. In the mid-'80s, "natural beef" was a new concept, and the Hatfields aimed to bridge the divide between bureaucrats, ranchers and environmentalists, while improving the education of city dwellers about sustainable public land grazing.

It was under the mentorship of the Hatfields that Stacy was exposed to the

mindset of how to maintain the overall economic viability of a ranch, while also taking into consideration other important issues, ranging from endangered fish and bird species to wild horses. After six years with Country Natural Beef, the Davies moved to Central Florida for more than three years, where Stacy had the opportunity to work for Deseret Cattle and Citrus, a large operation with 45,000 cows. In 1997, the West drew them back, and Stacy accepted the ranch manager position at Roaring Springs Ranch.

"[My dad] is very proactive in his management; he's not reactionary," says 23-year-old Scott Davies, the youngest of six sons. "We can still function at a high level and high capacity, even during hard times, because that's the model he's built."

BELOW: Roaring Springs Ranch operates on 1.2 million acres and stretches nearly as far as the eye can see. To ride the entire ranch, a buckaroo would need to work two years to complete the full grazing rotation with the cattle.



HORSES AND HOLISTIC GRAZING

The buckaroos saddle their horses before dawn to gather a large pasture of cow-calf pairs. The riders trot out, making a large circle to start them moving down the hillside. These buckaroos rely on tough horses to rotate cattle in a timely manner and meet the demands of big country ranching. The ranch's pastures are large, with the largest measuring at 400,000 acres.

"We use a lot of horses," Stacy says. "The colts are raised out in the rocks and brush, in the same environment where they will work. The bloodlines we've chosen give them some cattle handling genetics, but they've got to have bone, structure and size to carry a rider all day."

Because of the sheer scale of the ranch — and the number of rangeland acres required to feed one cow — the distances the buckaroos travel are extensive. When they haul out in the morning to gather or doctor cattle, they need a horse that will last from the moment they step into the saddle until their return to the truck and trailer near dark.

The ranch currently has a remuda of 75 broke geldings, and each buckaroo is assigned seven horses — one horse for each day of the week. Due to the wild horses that also graze on the ranch's BLM allotments alongside the cattle, geldings are preferred in order to avoid conflicts with wild herd stallions.

"We need a horse that can climb straight up a hillside, gather 400 cows, bring them down and then drag calves

all day," says Scott, who manages the Quarter Horse breeding program along with his wife, Mylee. "We call those horses 'rock pounders' — a horse that's big and able to go all day. Our mares have the size and the ability of rock pounders, but our studs have cutting horse and cow horse bloodlines."

The ranch has 60 broodmares and four stallions with bloodlines that include Blue Valentine Two, Joe Hancock, High Brow Cat, Playgun and Peptoboonsmal. In December, the ranch holds an annual colt sale where they sell 30 weanlings; the sale is held at Dry Creek Corral in Frenchglen.

To promote the horses, the ranch also donates three colts each year to the Horsemanship program at the University of Montana Western in Dillon, Montana,

and six colts each year to a local 4-H program to give high school students an opportunity to start a young horse.

Horses and buckaroos are key to the good management of Roaring Springs Ranch and its cattle. The ranch practices holistic grazing management, which uses targeted and rotational grazing to utilize the forage and strategically promote the long-term health of the range. The herd base is currently Red Angus, Tarentaise and Beefmaster; however, the ranch is shifting the genetics toward Black Angus and Wagyu for increased marketability.

To ride the entire Roaring Springs Ranch, a buckaroo would need to work for two years to complete the full grazing rotation. Old homesteaders' cabins often serve as cow camps along the route.

As the morning's gather progresses,

the cows begin their downhill march, and the herd grows to nearly 800 cows as the buckaroos bring in the cow-calf pairs. The cows, content with their calf by their side, walk forward at a steady clip as they curve effortlessly around rocky outcroppings. At the back of the herd, the dust is intense. Kolby Moore, a recent hire, rides drag on a steady gray gelding. A handkerchief is snugged tightly over his nose and mouth.

The ranch emphasizes low-stress livestock handling methods. Stacy instructs the buckaroos on how to keep the front of the herd moving while preventing the cows from bunching up in the middle. Stacy also directs the riders where to position themselves to keep the herd flowing forward through a gate without a backup or a change in direction. Dogs

are not used on this ranch to keep with the low-stress livestock handling culture. They're proven unnecessary, though, because with good stockmanship, and the knowledge of how to apply pressure to the cattle while horseback, the cows and calves quietly and willingly trail down the mountain on their way to fresh range.

LEFT: Stacy Davies, riding the blue roan, gathers the crew and gives instructions before gathering cow-calf pairs. **BOTTOM LEFT:** The ranch emphasizes low-stress cattle handling. This herd of cow-calf pairs is stretched out for miles, but with good stockmanship, the cattle trail steadily and quietly to the next pasture. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The ranch crosses foundation-bred mares with stallions that have cutting and cow horse bloodlines.



TRAINING UP BUCKAROOS

Most of the buckaroo crew is young, but Stacy doesn't seem to mind; he approaches coaching and mentoring young folks as part of the job.

"Stacy gives chances to a lot of guys who don't have as much experience," says Mitch Bailey, a 17-year-old buckaroo. "I feel he tries to help out the ranching community by taking on greener people to keep the lifestyle going."

Bailey, who is from Clatskanie, Oregon, has been working at Roaring Springs for six months. He was attracted to the opportunity to ride bigger country, learn how to read cattle better and the chance to try something new. Saul Scott, from Le Grande, Oregon, was drawn to the ranch for simi-

lar reasons and has been on the job for just two weeks.

"I was looking for a learning opportunity, and I was told by many people Roaring Springs is the place to learn how to be a better hand," Scott says.

There is no cellphone reception at the ranch headquarters, and while the employees formerly depended on just a communal landline, the ranch now provides both internet and satellite TV. The ranch hires single men and women and has some accommodations for families and couples. Burns, Oregon, located 75 miles north, is the closest city.

Elaine, Stacy's wife, plays a vital role on the ranch. She has worn many hats over the years, ranging from the ranch's substitute cook to providing first aid, and even serving as a listening ear to the buckaroos or their partners.

"If a buckaroo comes to the ranch with a girlfriend or his wife, it's important she also feels supported, especially if she's adjusting to remote living," Elaine says.

The single folks, or the bunkhouse crew, are often 18 to 25 years old, and the romance of buckaroo life pulled them to the desert. The ranch doesn't advertise online for buckaroo jobs, so it relies on word-of-mouth recommendations to attract buckaroos.

LEFT: Cows and calves are quietly trailed to the next pasture in the grazing rotation. **BELOW:** Buckaroos Mitch Bailey, left, and Saul Scott, right, traverse the sagebrush. They are trained to look at what's under their horses' feet to know what the horse is stepping on so they can fix it.



The young buckaroos and buckarettas are often a transient group, just as most cowboys have been throughout history. They typically ride for six months and then become restless to see new country. At first, this bothered Stacy, but then he changed his outlook.

"I decided I'm going to teach them and help them as much as I can. When they go out in the world, I want them to be glad that they worked here," Stacy says.

With this approach to mentorship, Stacy initiated a program where the buckaroo, if they ride all the horses in their seven-horse string equally, including the young horses, can gain half ownership in one of the horses after one year. The designated horse is then sold, and the rider keeps half of the profits. One horse trained by a Roaring Springs buckaroo became the second-highest-selling gelding at the Red Bluff Bull and Gelding Sale.

"The program is designed to be an incentive for the employees, so they can become a better horseman or horsewoman and make some money; it's also to produce horses that can cover a lot of ground and handle the work," Stacy says. "It's a program that's made a lot of difference for a lot of people."

In this corner of the Great Basin, flat hats, long ropes and slick fork saddles are the norm. Saddle horns are usually wrapped in leather or mule hide to be able to slip a lot of rope when branding cattle. Slipping rope helps save the horse's back by limiting jerking and pulling. Occasionally, you'll see someone swinging a rawhide reata, but most buckaroos opt for a waxed cotton, poly or poly-blend rope.

TOP: The ranch maintains a remuda of approximately 75 broke geldings; the buckaroos select their saddle fork horse for the day's work. **BOTTOM:** Scott Davies, the youngest of the Davies' six boys, sorts cattle in the corral. Scott and his wife, Mylee, manage the ranch's Quarter Horse breeding program.



In the springtime, the calves are branded, castrated, vaccinated and receive parasite control. When buckaroos rope a calf, they must catch both hind feet, which is safest for the calf. Stacy will let the calf loose if someone drags a calf to the fire with only one hind foot roped.

Over the years, Roaring Springs has also attracted an assortment of international employees, with buckaroo and buckarettas hailing from Norway,

Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and even Italy.

"People are fascinated by the buckaroo lifestyle," Stacy says of the attraction to the work.

The ranch is a good fit for those who want to be a better horseman and stockman, understand the ecology and economics of ranching and enjoy being on a horse behind a cow. The buckaroos who show up dedicated and inquisitive are the ones who learn the most.

OUTCOME-BASED GRAZING

In 2018, the BLM started a new outcome-based grazing program to assess a more collaborative approach with grazing permittees, increase flexibility in responding to on-the-ground range conditions and to address place-specific land management goals. Roaring Springs Ranch was one of 11 ranches selected for the pilot program.

"Across BLM land nationally, a lot of permits are very specific; they say you can graze [a specific] pasture [between specific] dates, and they don't offer any adjustment," says Autumn Toelle-Jackson, Assistant Field Manager, Andrews/Steens Field Office, Burns District, OR/WA BLM. "They developed outcome-based grazing to say, 'We care about the outcome and have to be able to meet our standards and guides, but there's a lot of different ways and rotation methods to meet those goals.'"

By adding outcome-based grazing, also known as flexible grazing, into an allotment management plan, the rancher can work with their local resource manager to respond to actual range conditions, whether it be a wet year or a dry year.

"In our district, we have pretty good flexibility built into most of our permits," Autumn says. "With outcome-based grazing, we tied in a monitoring program to give Roaring Springs, our pilot project, the credit for the work they've already been doing."

When Roaring Springs Ranch acquired the Diamond Ranch, due to compensation from the federal government when the Steens Mountain Wilderness Area was designated, the property came with an allotment management plan that included a grazing schedule set 10 years in advance.

"That allotment management plan ignored droughts, grasshopper outbreaks, wildfires or good years," Stacy says. "If nature intervened, you could not adapt. I pulled [that plan] apart, and we wrote

an adaptive management plan that was biologically driven."

With outcome-based grazing, the rancher and the BLM range conservationists are responsible for monitoring range land health to verify that sustainability goals are being met in real-time. The prescriptive 10-year plans use regulatory mechanisms — with specific set dates and fixed cattle numbers — to guide management.

Rick Knox, BLM Range Conservationist for the Burns District, estimates that, at the national level, 90% of permits are still fixed to the 10-year schedule.

While people recognize the benefits of flexible grazing, one of the biggest hurdles is the time it takes to approve a new allotment management plan. The approval process can take years. In fact, one plan at the Burns office is currently in its seventh year of awaiting approval. The BLM is a multiple-resource agency that works to meet the needs of commercial, recreational and conservation activities. For flexible grazing management to scale up, it is often necessary to negotiate common ground between different interest groups.

In 2013, Stacy and the Burns District BLM worked together to use Roaring Springs livestock for "biological thinning." The previous year, the Miller Homestead fire and the Holloway fire, both caused by lightning strikes, scorched over 400,000 acres in Harney County. Then a high-production forage year led to a buildup of invasive annual grasses and fine fuels.

The question was raised as to how livestock could be utilized as a tool to reduce fine fuels and decrease the catastrophic impact of the wildfires when they do occur.

"It's written in our grazing regulations that biological thinning can be used in certain situations, but we couldn't find any other districts that had ever used it," Autumn says. "If reducing those fuels, especially during the winter months when the perennial grasses are dormant, can help reduce these catastrophic wild-

fires, it's hard to argue that's not a beneficial practice."

Autumn and Rick have seen growing support for using cattle to create fuel breaks and reduce fine fuels. They've even had other districts and permittees call in asking about the process to include biological thinning in their allotment management plan.

For grazing permit holders who would like to increase their grazing flexibility, Autumn recommends the permittee reach out to their local BLM office and ask how they can help or what the next steps are to jumpstart the process to get a new document written. Depending on local geography, climate and the rancher's production system, winter grazing can sometimes open new possibilities and grazing rotations.

While outcome-based grazing was set up as a national pilot program, there are steps permittees can take locally to incorporate flexible grazing into their management plan.

COLLABORATION AND CONSERVATION

As Roaring Springs Ranch manager for more than two decades, Stacy has shepherded the ranch through multiple challenges while carefully stewarding the people, the land and the ranch's economics.

The first project he worked on was to create a stable population of the threatened redband trout. The goal was to bring the fish back to 80% of its historic habitat, which included several creeks on the ranch, while maintaining the economic viability of Roaring Springs. The ranch worked through a Candidate Species Conservation Agreement with multiple interest groups and agencies, including the BLM, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

"Some people's way is to hire attorneys; we try to engage," Stacy explains.



F-C

Roaring Springs Ranch

"We worked with a consensus-based, collaborative approach, where everybody's voice is important, and we wouldn't move forward until everybody could support [the decisions]. While it takes time, the ultimate outcome is far better than if you make a quick decision and fight about it."

The ranch was able to rebuild the red-band trout habitat and bring back deep and narrow stream channels through a combination of changing the grazing rotation, incorporating water gaps and adding additional fencing to protect the recovering stream banks. Within five years, they met their goals of increasing the fish population. Satellite imagery and remote sensing analysis verified that flexible grazing allowed Roaring Springs Ranch to increase riparian vegetation, demonstrating that strategic grazing can be a tool to promote overall ecosystem health and improved wildlife habitat.

For ranchers interested in incorporating more holistic management strategies into their program, Stacy recommends tapping into resources such as the Noble Research Institute, the Ranching for Profit School, the Savory Institute or the Shoehole Holistic Management Group model.

Stacy regularly welcomes range-science research projects onto the ranch. The ranch has worked with Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center, Oregon State University, Brigham Young University and the University of Nevada, Reno. Graduate students have set up test plots on the ranch to study topics ranging from the relationship between stream temperature and fish population, to sage-grouse breeding grounds, to how juniper tree invasion impedes water infiltration in a watershed.

A new research project on the ranch,

TOP LEFT: The ranch engages with land stewardship goals by collaborating with research in range science. This research project is testing the use of activated carbon as a herbicide seed protectant to restore native perennial grasses in degraded landscapes, especially areas with high levels of cheatgrass post-wildfire.

being done in collaboration with the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center, is just getting underway. The test plot exhibits heavy cheatgrass invasion after a wildfire. The research study is testing activated carbon as a herbicide seed protectant to restore native perennial grasses in degraded landscapes.

In 2007, Roaring Springs Ranch won the Environmental Stewardship Award sponsored by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the United States Department of Agriculture. The environmental stewardship success at Roaring Spring Ranch reflects Stacy's overarching approach to engage, whether working on juniper tree control projects and prescribed burns with neighboring ranches or serving on the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management Protection Area advisory committee for the past 20 years.

"Livestock grazing is one commercial use of public land," Stacy says. "As public land grazers, we need to recognize that we've got to work with recreational users and allow them to have their space and avoid conflict."

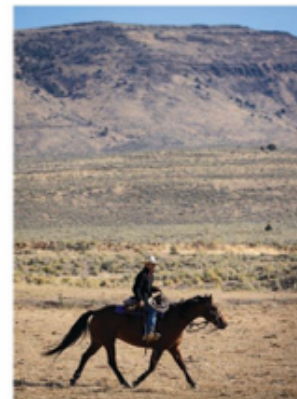
"Millions of people in the cities care about this landscape," he continues. "They come here for emotional and spiritual renewal. At Roaring Springs, we've worked in a very collaborative way forever. As conflicts or perceived conflicts arise, I like to meet with folks and be proactive in finding solutions."

When Roaring Springs Ranch buckaroos trail cattle along a road, Stacy teaches them to approach passing vehicles with a smile and invite conversation.

"When we're trailing cattle down the highway, most tourists don't know what to do," Stacy says. "They're scared; there are cows on the road."

"My instructions to my cowboys are to ride up to the window, put a big smile on your face and say, 'Oh, it's good to see you. I hope you're having a great day. If you follow me, I'll help you through these cows.'" Stacy continues. "Nine times out of 10, the people in the car will start to smile and ask, 'Can we take your picture?' And

TOP RIGHT: Historic Roaring Springs Ranch uses the French-Glenn Livestock Company FG brand. **BOTTOM:** The headquarters of Roaring Springs Ranch is located at the base of Catlow Rim in southeastern Oregon. **BELOW:** Soul Scott long-trots his gelding while gathering cattle.



then, 'Don't worry about us; this is great. We've never been on a cattle drive before.' Because you were genuinely friendly, it turns into a positive experience. They take some pictures and enjoy the scenery. You might be the only cowboy they interact with in their life." 🐾

ANDRIA HAUTAMAKI is a freelance writer and photographer from Colorado. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com. This report was made possible in part by the Fund for Environmental Journalism of the Society of Environmental Journalists.