

Persistence Pays

by Jim Howell

As a young man at the age of 23, Guy Glosson found himself in an enviable position. He was working for Double T Ranches near Ozona, Texas, and had one of those rare hands-off bosses that believe young guys learn the most when they're freed up to make lots of mistakes. This boss was J. Cleo Thompson, and during his 10 years under Mr. Thompson's tutelage, Guy cut his teeth figuring out how to manage big herds of cattle grazing under high density planned grazing in some of the world's more ecologically challenging grassland.

Now, after 14 more years of learning on Mesquite Grove Ranch, owned by Buddy Baldrige and family near Clairmont, Texas (50 miles north of Snyder, in the lower panhandle), Guy has been rewarded with one of those rare acknowledgments most middle-aged men only dream about. He and Buddy and Mesquite Grove Ranch have been named winners of the "Lone Star Land Stewardship Award for the Rolling Plains Region of Texas," awarded by the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife. Most winners of such awards typically own or manage ranches that are heavily subsidized—either by infusions of capital from the owner's outside businesses or investments, or in the form of generous government programs that fund water, fence, and wildlife habitat projects. According to Guy, "we haven't taken any of that." Everything the ranch has accomplished has been generated from the ranch itself, making it a unique recipient of an award most commonly granted to government cooperators.

So how did that happen? It turns out that one of Texas Parks and Wildlife's principal areas of activity is conducting Bobwhite quail and deer counts during the fall. After years of driving by Mesquite Grove, the area biologist finally had to admit there was something drastically different about those 36,000 acres (14,570 ha) at the headwaters of the Brazos River. While the quail and grass were scarce just about everywhere else, the Baldrige place had coveys of quail flushing out of healthy tall

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grass prairie. The area biologist decided he had to get to the bottom of this mystery, so he tracked down Guy to find out what was going on. The result has been a good working relationship with Texas Parks and Wildlife ever since, culminating with the recent award and statewide recognition for excellence in managing for abundant wildlife habitat.

Good Years vs. Learning Years

In 1981, while working at the Double T, Guy met Allan Savory. That encounter initiated a 21-year learning curve that Guy admits he's still ascending, but he's a long way from where he started. Along the way, Guy found time to qualify himself as a Certified Educator in Holistic Management. Those early years of his land management

education were marked by some pretty good weather years—meaning generous arrivals of well-timed precipitation. It's always easy to get over-confident and a little sassy when Mother Nature is so obviously on your side. Those good years bring lots of grass, fat cattle, great re-conception rates, increased ground cover, and healthy bank accounts, especially with a little holistic planning thrown in.

For his first five years on Mesquite Grove, rainfall was above normal, cattle prices were at their peak, and the land was visibly recovering from over a century of abuse. The ranch had pushed numbers up to 1,300 mother cows by 1997 (from a recommended stocking rate of 450), in addition to several hundred head of yearling replacement heifers. Then came the dry year of '93, followed by another one in '94, this time accompanied by a crash in cattle prices. The dry years have continued since, and cattle prices stayed in the basement through '98. In '98, the rain gauge measured a scant 7 inches, or 125 mm (out of the normal 18 inches, or 460 mm), and things were getting pretty tough.

Guy sent the yearlings off the ranch to lighten grass demand, eventually scattering them across five states. But they still had too many cows at home and, according to Guy, "We kept them too long." They sold down to 500 cows that winter, and completely sold out the following spring. When conditions finally improved, they restocked with outside cattle and are now back to 700 head, and have stayed at that level since 1999 (still 50 percent more than the recommended rate).



Certified Educator Guy Glosson manages the Mesquite Grove Ranch, which earlier this year was awarded the "Lone Star Land Stewardship Award for the Rolling Plains Region of Texas" by the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife.

Monitoring is Critical

Animal impact is a critical component of healthy land in brittle-tending environments, but when a zest for creating impact leads to overstocking and bone-thin beasts licking litter up off the ground, the animals suffer, the land suffers, the bank account suffers, and the people desperately trying to make it all work *really* suffer. Stocking rate, animal impact, and animal performance have to be carefully balanced, and the only way to really know if that balance is being successfully attained is through careful monitoring of a well-conceived grazing plan.

Newcomers to holistic planned grazing frequently fail to adequately monitor (or even plan in the first place), or at least fail to react appropriately to what their monitoring is telling them. It seems that

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most of us have to suffer through at least a couple wrecks before we learn to control and replan so things don't fall apart on us. Seasoned managers understand this, and monitor carefully should adjustments or complete replanning become necessary.

After 20-plus years of planning and replanning, Guy, now 47, is well and truly seasoned. Since backing off to 700 head, the ranch has turned a profit every year, and even though abundant rainfall has stayed scarce, the ranch is rebounding ecologically from those dry, overstocked years in the '90s. The springs that began flowing in the good early years are still flowing, despite the low precipitation. Eastern gamagrass, a broad-leaved, super-productive native warm season perennial, is establishing vigorously along the ranch's riparian areas—an incredible event, given that conventional wisdom says eastern gamagrass “doesn't grow in that part of Texas.”

Geography and Ecology

Geographically, this chunk of the Lone Star state is at the southern edge of the original tall grass prairie belt of the North American Great Plains. The native grasses are dominated by a wide array of the productive bluestems, in addition to sand lovegrass, tall dropseed, and sand paspalum—all productive warm-season perennial natives. These grasses are especially prevalent on the upland sandy areas of the ranch, which also support abundant thickets of shinnery oak, a brushy form of oak found throughout much of the interior West.

In addition to the upland shinnery country, the ranch also contains nearly 13,000 acres (5,260 ha) of low-lying riparian country along the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River, and along Butte Creek, which drains into the Salt Fork of the Brazos. These areas are characterized by a much heavier soil type, and are dominated by mesquite, a brushy legume that has taken over much of Texas. The same tall grass prairie species can be found in these lower reaches of the ranch, but so can a wide diversity of less productive but higher quality gramma grasses.

Grazing Planning Basics

When Guy took over management in 1988, the ranch was already

pretty well fenced into about 25 pastures, but stock water severely limited herd size and effective grazing planning. Pasture numbers have increased to about 40, but the main focus has been the development of an extensive stock watering plan to alleviate this bottleneck to improved grazing planning. All the poor producing, high maintenance wells have been abandoned, and the ranch now relies on one reliable water source at the bottom of a 350-foot (107 m) well. Twenty miles of 2-inch (50 mm) pipe radiate out from this well, delivering a voluminous supply of water to most corners of the ranch out and away from the riparian areas.

Grazing planning centers on the management of the two unique ecotypes—the harder, bottom mesquite ground, and the lighter, sandy, shinnery uplands. The most significant rainfall in this part of Texas comes in the spring during March, April, and May. The native prairie grasses, being warm season perennials, will start to green up with the rains, but don't really take off until June, when the mercury really starts to rise. The shinnery ground contains the best tall grass prairie component, so that's where the cows go beginning May 1. The oak is poisonous when budding throughout most of April, so they can't go there till then anyway.

The cattle stay on the shinnery all the way through December, when the frost has taken most of the punch out of the native prairie grasses. During their time on the sandy uplands, Guy manages with recovery periods ranging from 60-120 days. Most pastures are cattle-free during the growing season peak, and many don't get grazed at all during the growing

season, especially if growth rates are slow due to scarce rain and exceedingly hot temperatures.

The rest of the ranch in the mesquite bottoms is used during the winter and early spring months. The gramma grasses, which are prevalent in this area, hold their value better through the winter than the bluestems, and the mesquite pods deposited from the previous summer provide a valuable protein and highly digestible energy source. To avoid stressing plants during the slow growth period in the early spring, Guy plans to graze different pastures in successive years during March and April, when most of the grasses are starting to green up with spring rains. He says it's not always possible logistically, but he does the best he can. The cattle move through this country till the first of May, when the shinnery is safe to go back onto.

These mesquite bottoms are in rough, broken country. The tough



Buddy Baldrige standing in a patch of eastern gamagrass which, according to the experts, “shouldn't be growing” in his part of Texas but is flourishing on the Mesquite Grove Ranch.

terrain poses a difficult management challenge, but Guy, being a long time practitioner of Bud Williams-style stockmanship, is up to the task. Guy says he usually “has the pleasure of working by myself,” which means the cattle have to be worked right. The correct positioning and the appropriate amount and timing of pressure are critical if one guy expects to move several hundred rangy cows out of several thousand acres of brushy breaks along the Brazos.

The Mesquite Challenge

The rough nature of the country isn't the only difficulty. The mesquite itself poses a major management dilemma. Most of central Texas' overrested ranges are plagued with an infestation of this brushy legume. Millions and millions of dollars have been spent in eradication efforts, but there remains more than ever. Millions more have recently been earmarked by the federal government in the new farm bill—*up to \$450,000 per producer in Guy's part of Texas!*

The main problem (from the government's point of view) is the mesquite's incessant thirst for Texas' scarce water, combined with a burgeoning population in east Texas. East Texas needs the water, and the mesquites of Texas' western half are allegedly sucking it all up before it can recharge major river flows. Mesquite Grove Ranch, being located at the headwaters of the Brazos River, is right in one of those critical spots.

Guy admits it's a major problem, and his experience tells him that just controlling the time and timing of grazing to minimize overgrazing of grass plants isn't enough to control mesquite. Tim McGaffic, a friend of Guy's and fellow Certified

Educator and low-stress stock handler, figures that it takes an enormous amount of energy to suppress mesquite. Before European immigrants arrived in central Texas, massive herds of migrating bison supplied this energy source. Today we have resorted to bulldozers, but that's expensive as heck.

Can cattle fill the same role as the bison? Guy believes they can, but not under the current economic and herd management structure that typifies Texas ranching. With 700 cattle on 36,000 acres, Guy says he would have to make a daily effort to stir up the cattle with stock dogs to create significant patches of herd effect. Since the ranch can only afford one manager/laborer, and since Guy is usually lined out with plenty of urgent daily jobs to accomplish, heading out to create herd effect with the dogs usually doesn't happen.

“Ideally,” says Guy, “we would run 10,000 cattle on here through the winter. That's what this country needs, but it's just not feasible to do at

this point.” The inability to water herds of 10,000 animals is the main practical barrier, but so is the independent mentality of most Texas ranchers. Bringing together herds of different ownership, and running them across ranchlands under diverse ownership, just isn't realistic today. If the will was there, however, imagine the stockwater systems that each producer could develop with \$450,000 apiece! The capacity to water large herds could be developed incredibly quickly, and the root cause of the mesquite invasion—overrest of the plants and soil surface—could be sustainably addressed. Fossil-fuel-burning bulldozers could be replaced with bison-mimicking, dunging and urinating, protein-producing livestock.

Income Diversification

In addition to the custom grazing enterprise, Mesquite Grove Ranch also generates substantial income from hunting. During Bobwhite quail season (this part of Texas is one of the last remaining strongholds of the Bobwhite), 20,000 acres of the ranch is leased to three different

groups, each of which pays \$3-\$5/acre. These groups have a strong conservation ethic, and are committed to hunting in line with the ranch's strong wildlife values.

The ranch also sells deer hunts. Whitetail deer are abundant on the shinnery country. They've at least doubled in number since Guy took over 14 years ago. On the harder riparian country, mule deer are common. The deer are sold by the head. One guide service is allotted 10 head per year, while the rest are allocated to individual hunters at \$1,500 each. You can do the math, but between the quail and the deer,

that's a pretty lucrative income from a self-propagating, 100 percent renewable (if managed wisely) natural resource.

After 14 years on Mesquite Grove Ranch, Guy Glosson feels he's got a pretty good handle on what it takes to run a holistically sound central Texas ranch. His combined experiences from both the good and bad years have yielded a realistic perspective from all three points of view—ecological, economic, and social. The learning continues, however, and probably will never stop. A big challenge still to be addressed is mesquite management. Guy knows what needs to happen—figuring out how to make it happen will consume much of the remainder of Guy's career. I once heard Guy quoted as saying “the most significant factor of success is the right attitude and the right intention.” Thankfully, leaders like Guy are addressing these issues with the right attitude and intention. Congratulations, Guy, on your recent award and well-deserved recognition. Keep up the good work.



Luxuriant growth of perennial grass along one of the ranch's riparian areas.

