

# Wild Animals, Beef Cows Coexist

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Is there room enough on one man's piece of Colorado range for deer, antelope, rabbits, coyotes, porcupines, gophers, mice and ants in addition to the normal complement of beef cattle?

One rancher's "nature program" may not have been in effect long enough to permit full restoration of balance among the grass, browse eaters, and the predators to make an accurate appraisal of the environment possible.

But nothing that's happened in the first 20 years of his experiment has convinced Tom Lasater, Matheson, Colo., that co-existence between native and domestic animals isn't practical on a typical western ranch in dry country. Matheson ranches 50 miles east of Colorado Springs in Elbert County.

With one policy exception, Lasater has followed a no-shooting, no-poisoning, no-killing program on the 26,000-acre property he's built up since moving to Colorado from Falfurrias, Tex., in 1948. As far as he can tell now, although there has been a substantial increase in the number of game animals — notably mule deer and antelope—the population of these presumed competitors with beef animals for forage hasn't become great enough to interfere with his grazing scheme.

He doesn't rule out the possibility that the antelope herd has only leveled off temporarily and that it may multiply to the point where it will be necessary to reduce these natives to a modest number. But at the moment—whatever the reasons—nature seems to have imposed effective population control.

#### LIMITED FORAGE

As for the deer, of which there were hardly any on what is now the Lasater Ranch when Lasater bought the nucleus of the present spread, the philosopher-rancher is sure their population will be restricted effectively by the limited amount of creek bottom brush land available.

His outlook on the other animals—which many ranchers trap, poison or shoot on sight—is that they're welcome if they want to try to make a living on his soil, at least until they prove to him they're up to more harm than good.



**TOM LASATER SHOWS THE GULLY CARVED BY EROSION WHEN LAND WAS CULTIVATED**  
It's slowly healing now that his "nature program" has begun to take effect.

This welcome extends to prairie dogs, the only animals Lasater has exterminated in Colorado. This departure from his live-and-let-live policy toward nature's own was instigated early in his "reign" on the Matheson Ranch at the behest of government predator-control agencies that talked him into getting rid of a prairie dog colony that covered an estimated 20 acres.

#### COLONY DESTROYED

With poison to kill the bulk of the prairie dogs in the first sweep—followed up with carbon monoxide to finish off scattered survivors—Lasater and the government men disposed of the colony. Since then he's decided that maybe nature had put the prairie dogs there for a reason

and he wishes he'd let things alone to find out what would have happened.

The year after the prairie dog extermination, Lasater's new foreman was riding with him and, without any prior knowledge of the rodents, asked Lasater why the grass was so much better in the area formerly occupied by the prairie dog town than elsewhere.

That's one reason Lasater now says, "I hope some prairie dogs turn up. I don't mean I'll let them put me out of business, but I'd like to watch them."

An enthusiastic observer of the Lasater experiment who champions the natural approach doesn't believe the prairie dogs represented any great threat to Lasater or anybody else. He's

Dr. Alfred Etter, Aspen, Colo., an ecologist with the Defenders of Wildlife.

#### DOG DAMAGE

Says Etter of the prairie dogs: "Traditionally they occupy areas which are superficially disturbed, like the Black Hills. There are always certain areas in the condition the prairie dogs like. Prairie dogs didn't do much damage until weeds increased, and then they got out of hand.

"Under Tom's program (no cultivation) the tendency is for weeds to disappear. There's not enough weed growth being produced to foster a growing population of prairie dogs. The tendency is for his land to heal and when it heals, the weeds disappear."



**TOM LASATER**  
Live-and-let-live policy.

Speaking of the situation broadly, the rancher-developer of Lasater Beefmaster cattle breed says, "We know damn little, including our best scientists about the workings of nature. Soil conservation, breeding, y name it, I think nature is smart as hell."

But without professing to know the scientific explanation, Lasater says, "I think you have better ranch (for example) with rattlesnakes. You make more money. I think nature has a reason for putting all these live things here.

#### DIGGING DESIGN

"Take all these things that dig holes—ants, gophers, worms, ground squirrels, prairie dog badgers, coyotes — everything that digs aerates by turning over the soil. They're doing exactly what the farmer does when he plows."

Etter, who strongly opposes eradication of most, but not a predators hunted by man, agrees with Lasater, pointing out that although "nobody wants rattlesnakes in his back yard snakes are great consumers insects —"not that all insects are bad but it's just one more connected link in the machine.

Although a detrimental overpopulation of a species is always possible—at least temporarily — nature, working as Lasater's unseen partner, seems to have been able to correct imbalances without undue delay. The rapid building of coyotes that followed Lasater no-shooting program soon re-



# on Colorado Ranch

duced the two-abundant population of jack rabbits and cottontails that had come about because of the scarcity of natural enemies.

But with the rabbits cut down to a "normal" number within three or four years, evidently the surplus coyotes moved on to better hunting areas, leaving only a rear guard behind to prevent a new overpopulation of rabbits. Since then Lasater has seen no sick rabbits. They were common when the species was numerous.

## GOOD HUNTERS

As efficient as the coyote is in controlling the rodent-rabbit population, he's not the only good natural hunter around. The coyote often is given undue credit, according to Etter, who says it takes all the species working together to do what needs to be done.

"The coyote works one time of the day, the badger at a different time. Hawks work during the day, owls work at night, weasels go down holes after mice."

Sparrow hawks eat grasshoppers and small rodents, and large birds such as eagles and red-tailed hawks hunt rabbits. "That's the real balance of nature—having someone there ready to do any kind of job."

Lasater was apprehensive for five or six years after relocating on the Matheson Ranch that he was going to have to abandon his nature course when porcupines invaded the creek bottoms. He knew of their liking for bark, and he didn't want to lose his developing young cottonwood stand, nature or no. Why they came and why the bulk of them left he doesn't know, but after "working" the bottoms for awhile most of the porcupines moved on—without having done appreciable damage as far as Lasater could tell.

"They just limited themselves. The whole point is, nature brings in an army to accomplish a job. She will bring in a horde then leave occupational forces on hand."

## PLANT POLICY

In the plant world, Lasater also tries to "roll with the punches of nature" rather than fighting it, although he'll improve on natural conservation methods by building flood-control levees and redistributing water resources.

The key to his successful range improvement plan has been a marked reduction of grazing pressure on what had been seriously overstocked pasture. Where previous owners had been stripping the range most years, Lasater allowed 46 acres an animal unit to permit the range to build up to the good original condition it enjoyed when it was pastured primarily by buffalo, antelope and deer.

In fact, Lasater has come close to restoring the environment that flourished before the coming of the white man, except that he has substituted the Beefmaster for the buffalo.

Much of the land in a country unsuitable for farming had been cultivated—with generally poor results—and the little creek bottoms had been fenced and mowed for hay. Lasater gave the entire acreage back to nature.

## DARK PROPHECIES

Told by some area natives that he'd ruin his ranch, that weeds and inferior grasses would take over the hay meadows, Lasater said he had more confidence in nature "than in you."

The results have been lush growths of grass in some meadows that prove welcome when the snows are deep and cattle can't get to the short grass on the hillsides; and desirable shade trees in other meadows that give the animals relief from summer heat and protection from winter chill and winds.

Aware that in an emergency he may need hay, though he hasn't so far, Lasater says he can't afford to put up hay every year and he'll buy hay if needed.

By refusing to overgraze and by encouraging re-sodding of the once-farmed meadows, Lasater has helped nature in its interrupted program of combatting scars incurred while the cover was being overgrazed. A cursory trip over the Matheson Ranch reveals that Lasater's "light stocking" has given nature a chance to close them off and bind them up with vegetation. Nature is in the process of filtering the soil out of the floodwaters and filling in the pot-holes and head cuts, Lasater says.

## PLAN NECESSARY

Lasater's type of operation is necessitated in his country under present economic conditions, Etter believes. "On Tom's place I'm convinced that doing it the natural way with animals doing a lot of the work for him is about the only way this land of low productivity can be run under conditions that exist in farming today."

How is Lasater's unusual beef operation making its way?

Despite willingness to discuss in detail other phases of his business, Lasater declines to pinpoint "how much money we make." However, he commented, "I believe it's safe to say that there are few ranches, either registered or commercial, operating under conditions similar to those under which we have operated for the past 38 years (in Texas and Colorado) that have turned out anywhere near a comparable profit."

Without indicating what his net return has been, Lasater said that in 1968 "on this semi-desert ranch, with two ranch hands, we sold \$140,000 worth of cattle."

For a 600-cow ranch (such as Lasater's) with a predictable production of somewhat fewer than 600 calves annually at about \$120 a calf, a normal income would be considerably less than the amount he quoted.

However, it wouldn't be fair to relate this high gross, and presumably high net, to the fact that Lasater has encouraged wildlife ecology. He is unusual in that he's in the business of selling his own Beefmaster breed, unavailable in quantity anywhere else, and consequently receives a premium price for both his year-old bulls and heifers.

## SAME METHOD

On the other hand, he says the way he handles his Beefmaster breed is identical to the way he'd run a commercial herd. The cattle aren't pampered. They must forage and would still be more profitable than most commercial herds in the area if he simply ran them to produce feeder calves rather than breeding stock.

A big unanswered question is how Lasater's wild animal refuge program would fare if surrounding land were farmed or

hunted intensively. Etter surmises that "if all the land around him were plowed and he had nothing but his own refuge possibly the animals would be inclined to stick to it so tight they'd overgraze it."

"At the present, when the population increases to a certain point the tendency is for young animals to move out when they get a certain age. They may repopulate other areas or many may be exposed to new dangers, including hunters, and be killed."

At any rate, the main danger to Lasater's program, Etter believes, is that his land could become an island with no important travel lanes. However, this isn't as likely now since there's little irrigation in this region and the economics of dryland farming is tending to force cultivated land back into a natural state. Although hunting pressure will continue during the fall seasons outside the Lasater Ranch, it isn't likely to be severe enough to prevent a reasonable number of animals from surviving outside Lasater's preserve.

## INDECISIVE

Are there any long-term advantages accruing to the ranch managed on Lasater's live-and-let-live principles?

As far as tolerance of the larger animals—deer, antelope and coyotes—is concerned Lasater would be hard put to prove that he's money ahead because of their presence. But when you take into consideration the benefits of sound management that emphasizes conservative grazing and a "balance-of-nature" down to the insect-control level, Lasater says "we thoroughly believe that our nature program does result in more profits."

He acknowledges he doesn't have all the answers and that "we have long hoped that some experts in their field would become interested in our operation and really make a study of just what nature has accomplished."

The point that conservationists should understand isn't that the population of game animals, and predators that limit the increase of the foragers, benefits a rancher, but that if, as seems likely at this point in the Lasater experiment, the relatively plentiful native animals coexisting with his domesticated animals don't interfere materially with his ability to run an economically reward-

ing number of cattle on his acreage, why shouldn't nature's own be welcome?

## DIFFERENT FOOD

One theory for the apparent lack of harmful competition between the domestic stock and wild animals—not yet documented on Lasater's place—is that the deer and antelope derive much of their sustenance from browse or native grasses not utilized, or not fully utilized, by the cattle. For example, deer often graze in protected brushy meadows not frequented by the cattle.

Etter commented that a new international Biological Year program in northeastern Colorado intended to determine the production of wild meat on a restricted range will be following Lasater's lead. "It's interesting to know that scientists are coming around to what he's doing."

Although Lasater uses some insecticides to control lice, he regards DDT as a "terribly dangerous" spray. He even goes so far as to say that cattle ought to be able to stand "some lice."

He contends, "all livestock should be bred, born and raised under the conditions under which they're going to be used. If we raise 10 generations of cattle that have never seen a fly they're going to go wild when they see one. We merely want to limit the lice and flies to a 'reasonable proportion.'"

## SUMMARY

Summing up the strength of Lasater's nature program, Etter says it:

—Cuts down on labor by letting nature do a lot of the work.

—Maintains fertility.

—Increases environmental stability by making the place less subject to sudden increases and decreases in different species.

—Protects the soil from water and wind erosion.

"He's just put a suit of thermal underwear on that ranch" Etter says of the grass cover that saves water and keeps heat close to the ground.

Lasater is working at what Etter conceives to be a project that should be assigned the highest priority by the human race—"Learning to work with nature over the long haul—that's the only real answer to man's survival."