

The Birdwell-Clark Ranch— Improved Grazing Benefits Cattle and Wildlife

by HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Emry Birdwell and his wife, Deborah Clark, run stocker cattle on their ranch near Henrietta, Texas. Emry has been ranching all his life, starting with a cow-calf operation on leased lands. “My father was a rancher, and his father before him was a farmer. I trained under Allan Savory in the early 1980s and that’s where our planned grazing started. I’ve been 30 years adapting to it and understanding it,” he says.

Planned Grazing in Action

In their grazing program, the cattle graze intensively for short periods, moved several times a day to new pasture, allowing each pasture a long enough rest to fully recover before grazing it again. The secret to success is flexibility and monitoring, with long-term planning to increase production of these pastures. As the pastures improved, the stocking rate was increased, and animal forage needs could be met without supplementation.

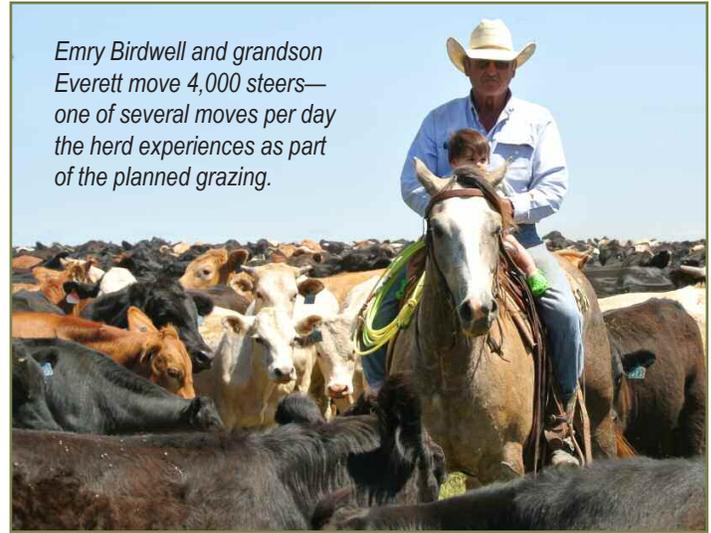
“The cattle are able to get by on what’s out there in the pasture. Emry hasn’t fed any hay since the 1980s,” says Deborah. Some supplemental protein is fed, but there’s been no need for hay.

“Being able to get by without hay is a tremendous testimony to this type of grazing, and how it can work,” she says. This becomes very obvious during drought years like Texas has been experiencing. Just the fact that the cattle can continue to graze, without need for dramatic herd reductions in the dry years, is a big plus.

In 2004 Emry and Deborah purchased their present ranch (more than 14,000 acres) and began to improve the range pastures. “When we first moved here to Clay County, Emry had the opportunity to put into practice what he had learned, and he became very aggressive and creative with planned grazing. Owning this piece of property allowed him to maximize what he had learned over the last 30 years,” Deborah says.

“When we first came here, we ran only 2,400 head,” says Emry. “We’ve had as many as 6,400 cattle in here, in 2010, but we’ve been in a drought since then. We had 5,300 head last year, and we’ve backed off to about 4,000 this year on grass. The rest of the cattle are on wheat pastures,” he says.

They buy stocker cattle each year, starting in July and August. “Some of them go to wheat pastures and the rest of them stay here on grass.



Emry Birdwell and grandson Everett move 4,000 steers—one of several moves per day the herd experiences as part of the planned grazing.

“We run 5,000 to 7,000 cattle a year, with an average of 4,000 on the place at any one time. These are all sale barn cattle,” he says.

With the planned grazing system, Emry, Deborah, and one hired helper are able to take care of it all. Having the cattle in one large herd concentrates the management efforts into a small area, making it easy for one person to do the pasture moves. And when supplement is fed, one person can feed all the cattle.

Infrastructure Investment

Emry became interested in Holistic Management in the 1980s after one of his neighbors went to a grazing school and implemented some of these principles to improve pastures and stocking rate. Emry began using these methods on leased lands with his cow-calf herd and a few stockers, and then changed completely to stockers to have more flexibility.

“On our ranch today we have 120 permanent paddocks, fenced with electric hard wire, and we divide each of those 3 to 5 ways with poly wire. The 120 days from March through June, we probably moved the cattle on average 4 times per day—sometimes 6 times per day and a minimum of twice a day,” says Emry.

“Since 2011 we’ve been putting in a pipeline system for water. We’d been watering in dirt tanks that collect runoff from rainwater. Due to lack of rain in the current drought we put in the pipeline so we can pump from those dirt tanks into water troughs. Most of the cattle are now using water troughs,” he says.

He also utilizes a mobile water trough, pump and generator. These are on a trailer and can be moved from one water hole to another. “This enables us to pump from a water source we couldn’t use, into a trough, and make it usable. This helps stretch the water supply. We’re watering 3,800 cattle right now out of one 24-foot trough,” he says.

Deborah explains that the pipeline allows them to move the mobile trough to wherever they want the cattle to be. “Emry can move that trough anywhere in a paddock, in order to achieve new results on stocking density and pasture use,” she says.

Deborah and Emry been on this ranch nearly 10 years and have changed a lot of things. “We’ve taken out miles and miles of permanent fence, to enable the cattle to get to the water that we had,” says Emry. “We still have some more fences to take out, but with our current



The mobile water trough that can handle 4,000 head of cattle.

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grazing system we've seen a dramatic increase in our perennial grasses. Recently we found several stands of Eastern Gama grass, which is virtually extinct in north and west Texas. We just found some in here this spring. Our switch grass and Indian grass has spread tremendously also," he says.

Considering the past 3 years of drought, the forage increase has been dramatic. "In the second year of the drought we were running one herd of 5300, but we experienced the most significant gains in that set of cattle—more than we'd had in the previous 8 years that we've been here," says Deborah.

Dealing with Drought

Drought is a common situation in this part of Texas, but with planned grazing it becomes much more manageable and not as frightening. The grass is healthier and has strong root systems, and provides enough ground cover to help catch whatever moisture does come. Soil temperatures never get as high when there are plants to shade the ground. This slows evaporation loss and also enables the plants to keep growing and not go dormant so readily in the hot weather.

"We are just starting to ship cattle right now, and the cattle we weighed the other day outgained the cattle we've had in the past," says Emry. The ranch easily produces more than 120 pounds of gain per acre, on average. A major contributing factor to the overall gain and improvement in animal performance is due to the multiple moves to new pasture each day.

"Our grass this year is higher in quality than quantity just because we did have a little rain. We had 3 freezes in April—which we never have—and that set it back. But the fact we cut back on our cattle numbers this year kept us in the game," he explains.

"We've run cow-calf pairs on the other places we've been, but a person needs to run yearlings or steers with the cows in order to be flexible. Being in a stocker operation now enables us to add or subtract numbers whenever the situation dictates," he says.

"We've changed our paradigm. Up until 2010 we were not running the cattle on wheat. Now we can use that as a safety valve. We can take those cattle to wheat or bring them back to the ranch. This year, with the market the way it was in May, we brought the cattle back here to be on grass for a month, and this allowed us to sell the cattle at a higher price," he says.

Deborah did not grow up with ranching so there's been a learning curve. "Ranching is a difficult occupation to learn," says Deborah. "Moving to the ranch was a new experience, like a baptism by fire, but it was thrilling and new, and a terrific opportunity for Emry and me to work together—and we are beginning to see the fruits of our labors these past 9 years. The impact of our management, and the changes that I can see on the landscape, as an uneducated person, just make me want to go out and do even more—be better at it, and do it with more vigor and commitment." 🌿

One of the new stands of Eastern Gama grass that Emry and Deborah are now seeing on their ranch.



Cows & Quail

On June 7-8, 2013, Deborah and Emry hosted HMI's Cows and Quail program on their ranch. Over the years they've been improving quail habitat. "These birds have always figured into our plan, because we have 9 bird dogs and we like to hunt quail. The quail are important to us but we don't do anything exceptionally special for them—except that our grazing plan generally leaves some nesting cover for them to survive," says Emry.

Deborah says she's been to a lot of workshops where they say you can't manage for both cattle and quail. "We have a different view and feel we can manage for both, but usually one will trump the other, depending on your priorities. We are also firm believers in thinking that what we do with our grazing impacts the habitat for our wildlife. We are not proponents of deferred grazing. We think a person can do more beneficial things for wildlife habitat by how you manage your cattle rather than taking the cattle off," she explains.

"We have quail, and a lot of wildlife in general. We do put a few food plots around the ranch, primarily for deer. We also hunt turkeys here. We also have some dedicated riparian areas that we keep for the wildlife and have those fenced off to keep the cattle out. We monitor the quail and wildlife; we just finished a quail census for our spring call count. There are practices and protocols we follow throughout the year to monitor what's going on with the deer and quail populations," she says.

They have one hunting lease on their place, for deer and quail. "This is a group of hunters we've known for a long time and they are friends of ours," says Deborah. "They also do a little bit of supplemental protein feeding for the deer, along with the food plots that we've put in."

When the Cows and Quail class was held at their ranch, the focal points for the participants were the plant diversity and overall-favorable habitat, rather than just the high-density grazing. "Thankfully, we'd had a rain just before they got here. We took them to some good areas and some poor areas. We do have some areas with bare ground and places that need more time and effort. But wherever we went, we heard quail calling and that was a good bonus—proof of the pudding," she says.

The ranch has a healthy quail population. "The overall quail population state-wide and region-wide has declined dramatically in the past 2 decades and we are trying to mitigate this decline by our grazing management. So everybody is talking about the fact they've been hearing more quail than we have heard in recent years, and no one seems to know why. We've had a few advantageous late spring rains, but we didn't have much rain last year—and had more quail than we thought we had. Everyone is tickled about the increase in quail numbers, but we don't know why they are doing better," she says.

"There are two key elements that are crucial to the success of planned grazing resulting in improved forage for cattle and improved habitat for wildlife," says Deborah. "Those elements are rest and animal impact, with proper timing and amount of each." 🌿