

Antelope Creek Ranch

2013 Annual Report



1 Jennifer Richman Summer of 2012 photo by Duane Radford

By Neal Wilson ACR Ranch Co-Manager
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What is the Antelope Creek Ranch?

The Antelope Creek Ranch (ACR) was established in 1986 through a multi-agency partnership. Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division, Wildlife Habitat Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Alberta Fish and Game Association were the purchasing partners of the Antelope Creek Ranch. ACR is located in southern Alberta, west of Brooks. The land base is managed to provide productive plant cover for livestock and wildlife, and adequate nest cover for waterfowl on mixed grass prairie and wetland margins. Crested wheatgrass, irrigated pasture and native rangeland are incorporated into a complementary, deferred-rotation grazing system to achieve the management goals.

The Antelope Creek Ranch serves as a demonstration project for producers and resource managers in the mixed grass prairie region. ACR research focuses on range improvement through specialized grazing systems to benefit both livestock and wildlife. ACR has been a valuable tool in assisting several M.Sc. thesis research projects from the University of Alberta the University of Lethbridge and the University of Regina. In addition, ACR supports independent studies concerning wetlands, industrial reclamation, and tame grass production.

Research at ACR consists of a co-operative, multi-disciplinary monitoring program to document changes in range vegetation and range condition, forage production and utilization, litter reserves, cattle performance, soil chemical and physical characteristics, and changes in relative diversity of wildlife.

Vision

To improve the health of Alberta's prairie ecosystems while maintaining the benefits which society derives from its use of these landscapes.

Mission

Use the ACR as a demonstrative and educational tool to show land users and resource managers how to manage and integrate agricultural, recreational and industrial use of the prairie landscape while maintaining its health and the integrity of its ecosystems.

ACR Management

Antelope Creek Ranch is managed by two very different and distinct committees. They are the management committee and the technical committee. The committees consist of members from Alberta Fish and Game Association (AFGA), Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), Alberta Fish and Wildlife (ESRD) and Wildlife Habitat Canada (WHC).

The management committee is responsible for managing the financial aspect of the ranch and setting policy of overall management. The Technical committee is responsible for the management of the habitat and anything that applies to the ground work of the ranch. This is all implemented with the grass roots contribution from the ranch managers.

The ranch managers work closely with the technical committee, and manage the day to day operation of the ranch with consideration for cattle and range management, wildlife, oil and gas development, as well as monitoring recreational activities on the ranch.

The People and Partners of ACR

Management Committee

Ron Bjorge – Chairperson, ESRD
Duane Radford – AFGA representative
Wayne Lowry – ACR Finance Chair
Perry McCormick – Ducks Unlimited representative
Doug Stewart – Wildlife Habitat Canada representative

Technical Committee

Joel Nicholson – Chairperson, ESRD, Fish and Wildlife Division
Colin Kure – AFGA representative
– Public Lands Division representative
Morgan Stromsmoe – Ducks Unlimited Canada

Ranch Managers

Neal Wilson
Shannon Burnard

A Year in Review – 2013 Highlights

Extension and Outreach

In 2013 the ranch website was rebuilt with a much more attractive and functional site that has generated an impressive 7117 visits in the last 6 months of 2013. These website visits generated approximately 20 email contacts mostly in the early fall during hunting seasons. Twelve blog entries were made in 2013 to summarize ranch activities as they were occurring.

ACR ranch managers attended and participated in two Prairie Conservation Forum (PCF) meetings through the year, which provides opportunities to promote and showcase the ranch to a wide audience. This past February the PCF along with the Alberta Society of Professional Biologists hosted the Prairie Conservation and Endangered Species Conference in Red Deer, the ranch was able to promote our message too many different individuals and organizations through our new display in the booth and the various networking opportunities that were available during the conference.

ACR staff and technical committee members also attended the annual AFGA conference in Red Deer. The new display was well received by the Fish and Game members in attendance.

In 2012 ACR was approached by Alberta Agriculture and Food about being part of a study with the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) titled Field scale conversion of crested wheat grass to native species in the Dry Mixed natural region of Alberta. The objectives of the study are to:

1. Develop and evaluate a practical and cost-effective approach for conversion of CWG stands to a native species mix at several sites in the DMG natural sub-region of southern Alberta.
2. And to develop a risk/benefit evaluation tool to assist ranchers and land managers with identifying priority CWG stands for conversion to native species (based on risks for invasion and benefits – both livestock production and ecosystem services)

While attending the Western Canadian Grazing Conference in Red Deer in December 2012 the ranch manager attended a presentation by LandEKG founder Charlie Orchard. This presentation highlighted some easy methods of pasture data collection which land owners and managers can use to determine if a pasture is over or under-grazed. Upon speaking with the presenters after the conference, the ranch was offered as a host venue for a workshop that was led by Ted Sutton in July, 2013. There were 9 attendees ranging from Bassano to the Cypress hills as well as two agrologists from Special Areas for the two day workshop. During the workshop attendees learned their method of production clipping and setting up transects and photo points. All of this was very well received by the landowners that attended.



Figure 2 Transect on control field during Land EKG workshop July 2013

In August due to a tip from a participant at the workshop Barb Glen of the Western Producer phoned the ranch about doing a story about ACR. We met and toured her around the ranch with the result of a very nice 2 page article in The Producer at the end of the summer.

September once again brought the 8 students of the RRM 386 Wildlife Habitat Management class led by Richard Quinlan from the Lethbridge College out for a day long tour that was well received and covered the normal range of topics from habitat types, vegetation management, industrial and agricultural activities affect on wildlife as well as water structures and water management on the ranch.

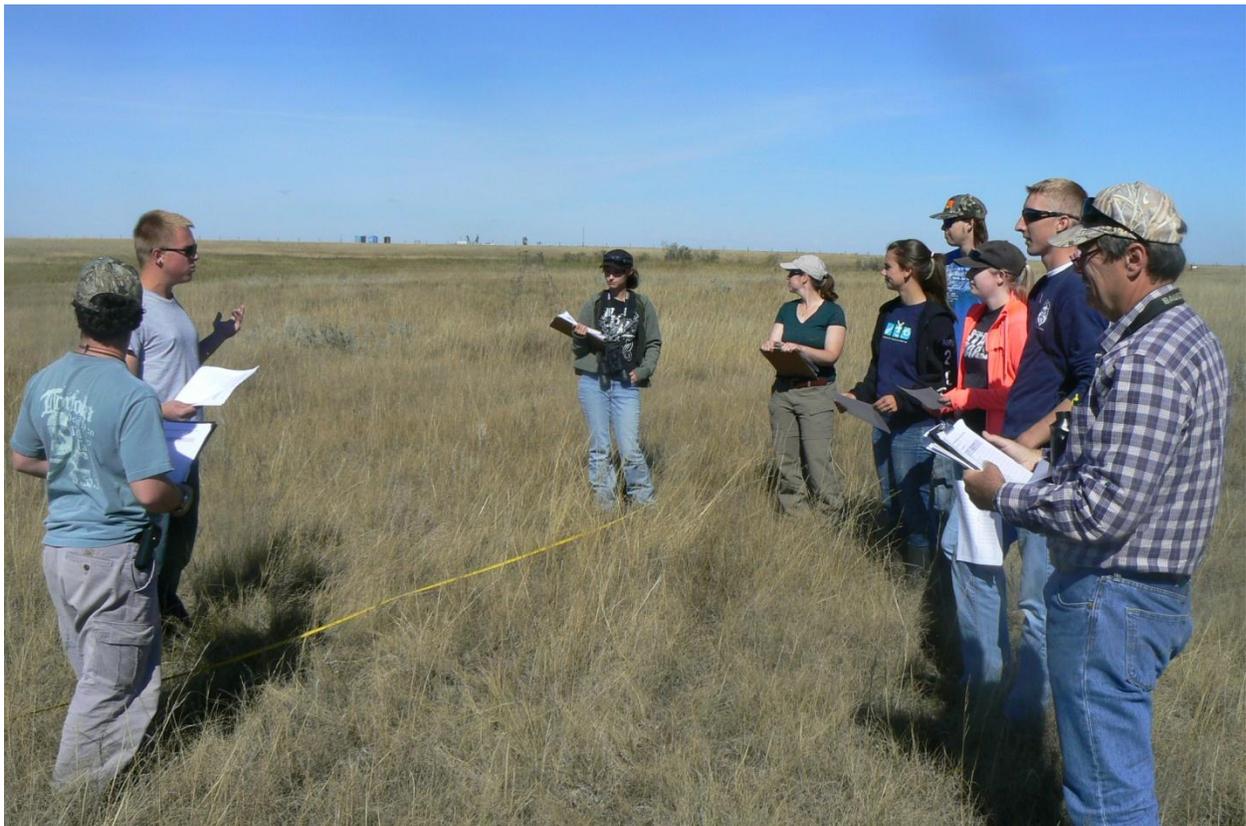


Figure 3 Students of the RRM 386 Wildlife Habitat Management Class from Lethbridge College learning about the Daubenmire frame

Grazing

There has been high grass growth over the last few years on the ACR, resulting in litter values that were much greater than the optimal 750lbs/acre. This allowed the ACR to increase the cattle stocking rate to 300 cow/calf pairs. We held the number of AUMs steady again this year, and were able to graze from May 15th until the 26th of October this year. Patrons were complementary of the condition of cattle coming out of ACR this season and seemed very satisfied. Stock mortality was 1 cow death during the summer and 2 calves succumbing to scours

and pneumonia. Cattle herds were grazed separately for the first two weeks in order to impact crested wheat grass (CWG) on pipeline right of ways and for cattle disease control.

A contract to develop an invasive species management plan for the ranch was awarded in the spring to Paskwa Consultants Ltd and M-Over-C Land and Cattle Co. Field surveys were conducted in June and July of 2013 after consultations with the ranch managers and meeting with The County of Newell weed inspector. The completed Management plan is expected in the spring of 2014 which will enable the ranch managers to implement practices to slowly control and in the case of some invasive species eradicate them, depending on the risk assessment that has been completed. Included in the plan is a monitoring program so the ranch will be able to react quickly to new infestations.



Figure 4 Cattle on native prairie

Oil and Gas

There has been a relatively low level of new oil and gas activity since 2009. There were no new wells drilled in 2013. Activity has generally been maintenance traffic to producing wells on the ranch. Cenovus continues to work on reclamation of “B pool” and are finally at the point where they will be reseeding in 2014 if everything goes according to their plan.

2013 was also the second year of Peggy Deserud’s project investigating the feasibility of native hay crimping on lease sites as a restoration tool. Results showed quite a few weed species growing in the trial areas. These were controlled with mowing and then baled up and removed

with the hope that the desirable native grasses and forbs will take over in 2014. Monitoring will be ongoing in July 2014.

Recreational Users

The number of birders that were out in the spring seemed to be down but this could be due to the late and sporadic migration that seemed to occur. We had two couples come out for the day from Calgary just to explore the prairie and look for wildlife.

The lead up to hunting season had some more people making contact with us from the website looking for hunting opportunities in the area. 13 contacts were made about pheasant hunting, and 1 hunter was looking for a place to hunt rabbits. At least 4 different hunters were out to hunt coyotes on the ranch this year. The pheasant release occurred on the ranch this year although it was in doubt and tracking someone down that knew what was going on proved troublesome. There were quite a number of hunters out again this year and were generally happy with hunting out here, there was one hunter out from BC that told everyone he had shot a large number of birds and ended up getting caught for poaching.



Figure 5 Migrating geese waiting for spring thaw

Wildlife

Personal observations this year saw a rise in the numbers of coyotes on the ranch and surrounding area as they became a bit of a problem this year, once again chasing calves that were old and strong enough that they should not have been a target of predation. All the bird numbers seemed to be down on the ranch this year possibly due to the cold wet spring we experienced.

Sarah Ludlow finished her M.Sc. at the University of Regina this summer based on the research she completed on the ranch in the previous two summers. Her thesis is titled: Breeding Biology of Grassland Songbirds and the Effects of Oil and Natural Gas Development on Their Density and Reproductive Success.



Figure 6 Bee Plant

Contact Information

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