

Antelope Creek Ranch



Figure 1 photo by Neal Wilson

By Neal Wilson Co-Ranch Manager

Antelope Creek Ranch

2014 Annual Report

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
Craig DeMaere – Public Lands Division representative
Morgan Stromsmoe – Ducks Unlimited Canada

Ranch Managers

Neal Wilson
Shannon Burnard

A Year in Review – 2014 Highlights

Extension and Outreach

In 2013 the ranch website was rebuilt with a much more attractive and functional site that has generated over 100,000 hits since June 2013. These website visits generated approximately 7 email contacts mostly in the early fall during hunting seasons. Twelve blog entries were made in 2014 to summarize ranch activities as they were occurring with around 300 followers and even a couple followers on twitter.

ACR ranch managers attended and participated in two Prairie Conservation Forum (PCF) meetings and the summer tour throughout the year, Neal also joined the board of directors for a 3 year term starting in January 2014, this provides opportunities to promote and showcase the ranch to a wide audience. This past January the ranch managers attended the PCAP Reclamation and Remediation workshop in Regina to learn about different reclamation practices.

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).

In 2014 this project continued with the wicking of crested wheat grass along the edge of pipeline plots and the seeding of native species of grass to the small plots. We are waiting to see the results of this seeding as there was limited moisture at seeding time and very little growth on the sites through the rest of summer.

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. In 2014 we once again hosted a LandEKG workshop with 24 attendees in some very hot weather.



Figure 2 preparing to seed native grass species on small plots for CWG conversion. Photo Neal Wilson

We hosted part of the AIA reclamation course led by Ron McNeil and Varge Craig again this year that had 24 agrologists attending and receiving training in the 2010 reclamation tools needed for industry.

2014 brought research to the ranch from the University of Alberta that is studying the rate of breakdown of different species of native grasses across the province and has two sites on the ranch with ongoing grass studies.

September once again brought the 9 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 effect on wildlife as well as water structures and water management on the ranch.



Figure 3 Land EKG landowner workshop participants learning to estimate basal plant cover on transects. Photo Don Watson.

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 2 cows death during the summer and 3 calves succumbing to scours and pneumonia. Cattle herds were grazed separately for the whole season this year in order to try and avoid sickness problems and to better impact the crested wheat grass on pipelines.

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 management plan was completed in the fall of 2014 and presented to the technical committee in November this plan 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. Photo Neal Wilson.

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 2014. 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.

2014 was also the third 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. Unfortunately when things greened up in the spring these sites were accidentally sprayed which killed off the seedlings.

Recreational Users

During the summer we were able to construct the new boat launch on Lake San Francisco located south of the yard site, it was used by a number of boat hunters through the fall. The lead up to hunting season had some more people making contact with us from the website looking for hunting opportunities in the area. 20 contacts were made about pheasant and waterfowl hunting. 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 were approximately 70-80 trucks through the ranch during pheasant season with most of that traffic during the beginning of the season.



Figure 5 Completed Boat Launch on Lake San Francisco. Photo by Dan Buell

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.

No surveys of wildlife were done on the ranch this year.



Figure 6 Hoary Cress infestation on pivot fields. Photo by Sue Michalsky.

Contact Information

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