



Mule deer bucks like this one on the Kansas ranch have helped make our hunting business, Sagebrush Hunts LLC, successful.



Sagebrush Hunts

Innovatively Adapting

Innovative ideas to utilize resources add profitability and fun to ranching lifestyle.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

Beef production is a tough business to crack into. Even those whose parents, grandparents, even great-grandparents were ranchers find it difficult to make a life on the ranch. That's the challenge my husband, Jeremy, and I were faced with about six years ago when we decided to give it a go. Like many featured in this issue, we knew we would have to adapt and find a way to bring in more income off the land in order to stay on it.

We consider ourselves very blessed. Jeremy's family already owned some land and graciously gave us the opportunity to lease a ranch in the Texas panhandle for cattle grazing. It's a decent-sized ranch with good grass and good water, so we would be all set, right? Fifty years ago, maybe. But, in

today's economy, it's just not quite big enough to keep us comfortable during good years, and too many dry years could make staying financially secure impossible.

That's all right; we could just get jobs in town. The ranch is about 45 miles from three different towns, but all have lagging economies and populations under 7,500 people. Opportunities for a town job that would provide enough income to make it worth driving all that way every day are slim to none. And we're not really town-job kind of people, so we took a hard look at what else we could do.

Other income opportunities

Jeremy is an avid hunter. In fact, he'd already been doing a little guiding for deer hunts on his parents' ranch in

Kansas. So, with a lot of research, hard work and determination, we decided to give the outfitting business a go.

The next challenge was that there's just not a whole lot of anything to hunt on our Texas panhandle ranch. All the traits that make it good for cattle grazing — flat terrain, productive soil and very little brush — make it hard for many deer to call it home.

But antelope are plentiful, and although Jeremy had never hunted an antelope in his life, we saw an opportunity there. We knew his parents' ranch in Kansas had plenty of highly sought-after mule deer and quality whitetail deer and made the decision that it was worth trying to expand that hunting potential as well. Also, on the Kansas ranch are bobwhite and blue quail and pheasant. We felt that was our opportunity.

Now, the challenge came with location. Our plan was to live in Texas, but most of the hunting was in Kansas. Luckily, the ranches are only about two and a half hours apart, and the good possibility for nasty Texas panhandle blizzards on a mostly flat ranch already had us planning on primarily summer grazing.

So, by necessity, more or less, we developed this nomadic lifestyle. Although it's not conventional, for about the last six years, we spend several months a year in Kansas and the remainder in Texas.

Our year goes something like this: February, March and the first part of April give us a lot of downtime and, honestly, not much income. We spend this time primarily on the Texas ranch preparing for summer grazing. We'll turn out customer-owned stockers around the middle of April, assuming it has snowed or rained prior. May, June and July are prime seasons for prairie dog hunting, and we rent out our "bunkhouse" (which is just an extra, older house on the ranch) for those hunters.

We also look after the yearlings and do general ranch work all summer until the cattle are shipped around the middle of September. Then we jump right into hunting seasons.

In Kansas mule deer are our biggest draw, and there is a two-week early muzzleloader season in September that we take advantage of. Then we head right back to Texas for antelope season, which is always the first two weeks of October. The second weekend of November starts pheasant and quail season in Kansas, which doesn't end until the end of January. Also the first two weeks of December is firearm season for whitetail and mule deer. So we spend the majority of November, December and January at the Kansas ranch.

All of our hunts (with the exception of prairie dogs) are sold with meals included. That's where I come in. Although I could barely prepare a meal

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when I got married, I quickly learned how to cook. I, along with Jeremy's sister while we're in Kansas, cook and clean for the hunters. It's nothing fancy, just family style comfort food three meals a day for the hunters and guides, who are Jeremy and his older brother, Jerad. Also for bird hunting, we hire a dog handler, so we feed him as well.

It's not always easy, going back and forth between ranches, and it's something we'll have to minimize when our 1-year-old son, Calvin, gets older, but it works for us. And honestly, it's a welcome change from the isolated lifestyle on the ranch. Like others you'll read about in this issue, we had to find a way to make life on a ranch work, or else we couldn't do what we love. And, honestly, because of the prolonged drought, there have been a few years when the hunting business has generated more revenue than the cattle.

We're not alone

As you'll read in this issue, we're like Daric Knight in Arizona (Page 50), and hunting has become a passion for us as well. We enjoy ranching, and if we could, we would be perfectly happy doing only that. But just like Scott

Woolfolk (Page 62), we weren't going to be able to comfortably raise a family on the ranch with only that income.

We didn't have another family business like tree farming in Phyllis Vollstedt's (Page 68) or Eric Walker's (Page 56) situation. Similar to the Christys and Duvées (Page 84), we carefully evaluated what else we had to offer and enjoy doing.

Like many young people across the U.S., we wanted to make a life on the ranch, just like Jeremy's family has been doing for five generations. But, in today's world, it's become necessary to find other revenue sources.

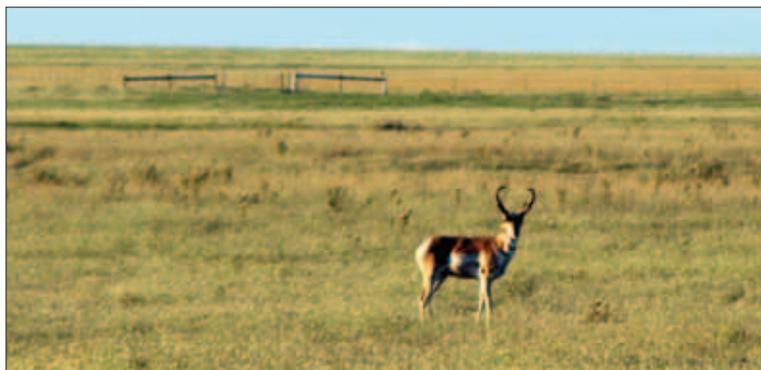
In almost every case, that involves providing some type of service or product to a non-agricultural group of people. That can be both a challenge and a blessing. Dealing with the public isn't necessarily something most cattlemen enjoy. When a client arrives who has never hunted before and can't even hit a stationary target, it's definitely a challenge trying to help him kill a trophy deer. But, at the same time, it's a blessing, because he is a captive audience to learn about the rural way of life and, more importantly, the beef industry.

Scott Woolfolk explains that he spends most of his time at his family's corn maze just answering questions about livestock and farming.

Similarly, we field many questions about the livestock business that seem so obvious to us. For example, one of our clients, a highly educated professional, asked us how cattle were transported from one place to another. He assumed it was by rail.

It's a changing world, and we hope the ranching lifestyle can stay alive and well, but it's going

to take some innovative thinking and diversification. We hope you enjoy reading about how some Hereford breeders are doing just that: adapting, and continuing to do what they love, even though it's "more than Hereford." **HW**



In our part of Texas, the flat terrain makes for good grazing and good antelope hunting.