



# Home in the High Desert

Herefords thrive in the high-elevation of an eastern Arizona ranch.

by *Julie Mais*

**R**ocks peek through the pastures, and mesas dot the skyline in the high desert of eastern Arizona, where a Hereford cattle herd grazes. Deemed “rough country” by even those who live there, White Mountain Herefords, Springerville, Ariz., has thrived in this low-precipitate, high-elevation environment for years.

Daric and Patty Knight have been raising Hereford cattle for nearly two decades on the Little Colorado River Plateau at the base of Arizona’s White Mountains north of Springerville. While White Mountain Herefords was officially established in 2004, the herd’s genetics and Hereford heritage go back much further.

In the late 1940s, Daric’s grandfather, Robert Hooper, chose to leave the Texas lumber business



and to relocate to Nutrioso, Ariz. In 1952, along with his wife and children, Robert settled outside Springerville and began the Hooper Hereford Ranch.

Robert’s daughter, Roxanne, and her husband, Galyn Knight, purchased land next to Robert’s and started an operation of their own — they raised their three sons, Daric, Lance, and Traegen, in the ranching way.

“A few years after we got married, my wife said it was time for us to get cattle of our own,” Daric says. “We purchased a majority of our herd from my grandfather as he was getting older in age. We got our start out of the Hooper Hereford Ranch cow herd.”

After establishing their herd, Daric and Patty began influencing their herd genetics with bulls from Hutchens Herefords, Fallon,

Nev.; Colyer Herefords, Bruneau, Idaho; Holden Herefords, Valier, Mont.; and Churchill Cattle Co., Manhattan, Mont. “This is the base of our cow herd today,” he says.

### White Mountain Herefords

Today, the Knights live in Daric’s grandfather’s house, and White Mountain Herefords operates out of the old Hooper Hereford Ranch headquarters. “We run our cattle from the headquarters east and back to the other half of my parent’s land,” Daric says. “My brother, Lance, runs cattle west from headquarters. We work closely with my parents on their cow herd and help my brothers on and off with their cow herds.” Daric and Patty also have off-ranch employment — Patty is an ICU nurse, and Daric runs a hunting business in addition to a few additional jobs.

White Mountain Herefords consists of 120 Hereford cows, which are mostly natural-bred to purchased bulls and a few of their own herd sires — with only a small portion of the herd artificially inseminated.

“We try to breed them and keep them straight-bred Hereford until the first of June,” Daric says. “All cattle go to high country on Forest Service Term Grazing Permits. At that point we pull Hereford bulls and run Angus bulls to clean up. Anything born after the middle of March is a black baldie calf.”

The Knights sell 12 to 20 Hereford bulls a year via private treaty. These bulls tend to remain in the Southwest — an environment they are acclimated to. “We market a large number of our bulls to Native American tribes in the area,” he says. “They are a major bull market for us.”

Daric and Patty have also found a strong market for heifers, especially black baldies, in ranches in Arizona and New Mexico. “Our black baldie heifers have had a tremendous amount of interest even into southern California,” he says. “Especially in western Arizona, there’s a lot of ranches after replacement females, black baldie or straight bred.”

Steer calves are preconditioned for 45 days and sold at two nearby sale barns. “We usually sell at the top of the market for black baldie steers,” Daric explains. “People are looking for them.”

### A tough environment

The Knights run their cattle on tough terrain year around. Their winter grazing land and headquarters near Springerville sit at 7,000 ft. elevation. At the end of May, cows are moved to high country at 9,000 to 10,000 ft. “These are high-elevation acclimated cattle,” Daric says. “We have no problem with brisket disease, because the cattle are raised here and those types of problems have weeded themselves out.”



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The dryland gramma grass and malapai rock winter pastures see, on average, only 11 inches of rain a year. “We don’t need a lot of rain to make good grass if it comes at the right time,” Daric says. Each year they depend on snowpack in the mountains for water and annual monsoons out of the Gulf of Mexico for summer rains.

Though Herefords seem to thrive in any circumstance, he says it’s important to make sure cattle fit the environment.

“The cattle are moderate sized and adapted to rocks,” Daric says. “The high-elevation summer grazing ground is rough country, as well. These Hereford cows can go from 7,000 ft. elevation dry gramma grass ground to 9,500 ft. elevation lush green grass ground in high country and do not lose a bit. I can sell bulls into southern Arizona desert ranches, and these bulls will stay with a cow herd for 4 to 5 years and adapt to those lower elevations. Hereford is a good all-around breed.”

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Daric and Patty Knight established White Mountain Herefords in 2004 in eastern Arizona.

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Daric Knight says Hereford is a good all-around breed and does well in the high desert.

## The Wallow Fire

In 2011 Arizona witnessed its worst wildfire season on record. The Wallow Fire, which began May 29, burned 538,000 acres in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona and into western New Mexico until it was contained July 8.

Daric and Patty Knight of White Mountain Herefords, Springerville, Ariz., found themselves in the middle of Arizona's largest wildfire in state history. "The fire burned completely through our Forest Service Term Grazing Permit," Daric says.

As the fire broke out, Daric, along with other ranchers in the area, sent their cattle to high country. "We were one of the first ranchers to move our cattle to high country," he explains. "There's a succession — back in the old days the ones who were the furthest up the mountain went first. We're at the top so we've always been able to go first."

Daric says cattle, along with wildlife, lived through the fire in the bottom of green meadows. "You couldn't see 100 yards in front of you, but if you dropped into a low meadow, below where the smoke hung 3 ft. off the ground, you could look across the ground and those meadows would be solid full of elk, deer and cattle bedded down with heads on the ground so they could breath."

The Knights gained permission from the Forest Service to leave cattle in certain areas of the high country for three to four weeks to utilize what was left of the lush, green meadows before relocating the herd.

White Mountain Herefords marked zero casualties due to the fire, though Daric says breeding season was pushed back 45 days — a gap they are still working to close six years later.

"The ground bounced back and there's twice as much forage due to opening up that canopy," Daric says. "It burned older, tough grass and the land is doing really well." **HW**

## Trials of the Southwest

In addition to the challenging landscape, Daric says a limiting factor for Arizona ranchers wanting to grow their business is obtaining new pastures.

"In order to expand numbers, we must buy a lot more land or lease more land," Daric explains. "In our area of eastern Arizona and western New Mexico, that's tough to do. We'd like to get our herd size to 100-150 registered Hereford cows and another 150 straight-bred cows to be able to produce several loads of calves that can be marketed through a branded beef program like Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®)."

Daric says there is very little private property in his area as most of the land is owned by the state. The Arizona State Land Department manages approximately 9.2 million acres of State Trust lands. The Knights lease State Trust land in addition to the Forest Service grazing permits.

"It takes so much ground to run a cow," Daric says, estimating around 100 acres needed per cow. "There are also a lot of older ranching families in the area. They don't turn over very often so it's difficult to find more grazing land. We have to keep our eyes open and work the local politics," he laughs.

In addition, because the Knights utilize state and federal ground, Daric says they experience a push from certain groups to remove cattle out of the Southwest. "There's always a fight to maintain grazing on Forest Service allotments and State Trust land. There are groups that want cattle off the land. Our state cattlemen's association has been very influential in helping protect our ranching interests."

They are also witnessing urban encroachment. "We've got nice weather and interesting wildlife and environment," he says. "We're feeling pressures from urban communities."

Though there are many external factors challenging White Mountain Hereford Ranch, one thing has remained constant in the high desert of eastern Arizona: Daric says, "The Hereford cow is most adaptable in any environment we have and the most economical on this ground." **HW**



The White Mountain Herefords cow herd base originated from the Hooper Hereford Ranch.