

Switzer Ranch/Calamus Outfitters

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My family's story in the Sandhills begins in 1904 when my great-grandfather utilized the Homestead (and later, the Kincaid) Acts to settle in Loup County. Like most settlers, they started as a small, mixed operation and grew into what we now consider a "traditional" cow/calf operation. The ranch continued in this fashion, with enough land and income to support three families, until approximately 20 years ago.

When my brother, Adam, and I were in high school, we witnessed the economic strain that our parents endured. We also saw our ranch that had supported at least three families for many years now struggle to support one family unit. After graduation from high school, with encouragement from our parents, my brother and I both left the ranch in search of that so-called "better life" we kept hearing about.

Fast forward to the present. We once again have three families back on the ranch: my parents, Bruce and Sue Ann Switzer, as well as Sue Ann's mother Eula Scherzberg; Adam and Teresa Switzer and their three children; and Mark and Sarah Sortum and their two boys. The secret for our family to return to the ranch (and the REAL "better life") was diversification.

Thanks in part to a tornado that killed 50 head of 2-3 yr. old cows in a single day (2001), the ranch was forced to look at alternate revenue streams. Currently, the Switzer ranch employs three main business lines: custom grazing, backgrounding and short-term cows. While selling the ranch herd was a heartbreaking decision for my parents, going from their cow/calf operation to a diversified system has proven to be much less of a financial risk, facilitates advantageous reactions to market trends, and allows more flexibility in management decisions on the ground. Some of the current management goals of the ranch are to employ ecological processes of grazing and fire, graze for heterogeneity, maintain natural hydrology, and control invasive species. These goals were put in place in recognition of the importance of managing our natural resources in sustainable ways, which ultimately keeps the ranch going.

Another major diversification for the Switzer Ranch was Adam's creation of Calamus Outfitters in 2001. This nature-based tourism business runs alongside the ranching operation, generating more income off of the same acres through lodging, hunting, rivertrips and jeep safari tours.

Diversification has allowed us to view our resources differently. While our grass and water are still of utmost importance to our ranch operations, we recognize that the wildlife, scenery and experience of our resources are also valuable and worthy of thoughtful planning and management. In 2010, the Greater Gracie Creek area was the first privately-owned land in the

state to be designated an Important Bird Area by Audubon Nebraska. This was an important first step for us in thinking about taking our wildlife management planning to the next level.

Near the same time as the IBA designation, my father, Bruce, and I had the opportunity to participate in a study tour (sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund) to the African country of Namibia. The goal of the trip was to experience strategies of market-based conservation that promote rural development. Some of the main lessons learned from the trip were: 1) the cooperation of the private sector, government and NGOs can accomplish great things in a short time; 2) eco-tourism can be a tool for rural development and conservation simultaneously; 3) there must be a financial incentive to facilitate widespread change; and 4) land use does not have to dramatically change to allow substantial diversification.

After returning from the trip and plugging these lessons into our own operations here, we have experienced how tourism can encourage landowners to become better managers. The overriding reason for this is that tourism automatically puts more value on the resource, and if something has value, you manage for it. In short, if it pays, it stays. Tourism also encourages constant education and monitoring of the resource to provide visitors with a complete and professional narrative/interpretation of their experience on the land while “outside eyes” motivate timeliness of completing projects and showing progress. Perhaps the greatest benefit is the opportunity to perform positive outreach to the public about the stewardship of private land managers. When persons experience the health of our natural resources first hand and understand how using grazing as a tool supports the overall ecology of the system, many pre-conceived notions are dashed and support of ranching is gained.

After returning from Namibia, we were inspired to reach out to our neighbors in order to have a larger landscape effect and tackle common problems. Thus, the Gracie Creek Landowners was formed. The landowners have umbrella goals pertaining to biodiversity and sustainability that each operation autonomously works toward through hydrologic maintenance/restoration, management for grassland birds, grazing, and fire and hay management. The landowners have chosen three focal species to base their goals around: the greater prairie chicken, sharp-tailed grouse, and the federally endangered blowout penstomen (endemic to the Sandhills).

Some of the specific management practices on the ground have included deferment to encourage warm-season perennials, reduction in stocking rates and/or deferments to allow fuel buildup for prescribed burns, the use of prescribed burns, the improvement of water resources (mainly the installation of solar wells), invasive tree removal, blowout cleanup and penstomen plantings, stream bank stabilization, improved range monitoring, and monitoring of the prairie grouse population through annual counts. The landowners hope to use prairie grouse as an indicator of system function and health by interpreting population trends within the context of management practices.

On the Switzer Ranch, we employ 4-5 pasture deferred rotation systems as well as season-long grazing. We cannot see an advantage of one system over the other when strictly considering production. However, we really like what the deferred rotation systems allow us to do—incorporating rest, allowing different species to express themselves, and building prescribed fire into the system, to name a few. When considering the needs of grassland birds, we simply aim to create a dynamic system that supports the life stages of multiple species. Although it may not be as pleasing to the eye to have different stages of range condition rubbing shoulders, we understand that our goal is not to have the perfect “calendar prairie,” but a sustainable system that meets the needs of a wide array of species while supporting our grazing operations.

This means, for example, that we aim to provide prairie grouse: nesting zones (1.5 mile radius of known leks) with enough cover (leftover from the previous year) for nesting; a strong enough forb component to attract insects for the diet of baby chicks; vegetation that the chicks can easily travel through while still offering adequate protection from the elements and predators; and the absence of predatory perches; plus, enough grass to support the intended stocking rate. We continually try to avoid managing for one specific goal. Rather, we try to look at the “bird’s eye view” of the landscape as a whole, understanding that there are many niches and working parts that make meaningful contributions to overall sustainability.

The benefits of landowners working together are many. One of the major benefits for our group has been successful fundraising and partnerships for our projects. We have been very blessed in the past and present to work with many organizations including the Nebraska Bird Partnership, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (through the Nebraska Legacy Project) and the Nebraska Environmental Trust. In addition to on-the-ground projects, we serve as a type of community planning (what kind of opportunities do we want our children and grandchildren to have on this landscape?); we strive to educate ourselves and promote education of natural resource management in our area, and firmly believe that demonstrating individual *and* community-based stewardship to the next generation will have a positive impact for our area in the future.

We are thankful for many, many things. One of those things is the prairie grouse that we share our home with. These little birds have done a lot for us, including helping our families accomplish the goal of staying on the land together. In recognition of that, the landowners helped create the Nebraska Prairie Chicken Festival in 2012. One of the main goals of the festival is to promote education, conservation and appreciation for prairie grouse species and the habitat they live in, and to foster a positive conversation about these topics between the public, NGOs and ranchers. We believe it’s important and beneficial for people to make a positive connection between managers of grazing lands, graziers themselves, and conservation. Oh, and we also have a lot of fun!

In summation, success means something different for everyone. We are excited about many things -- being able to continue our ranching culture, utilizing grazing as a tool, protecting species of concern, and putting conservation to work for us. However, we feel our success is measured by family. Being able to raise our children on the ranch is our standard. We have five kids running around who want to grow up to be just like grandpa, and we think that's just all right. It helps prove the point that conservation is not truly meaningful if it doesn't improve the lives of people as well.

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