1. Responsible Management

Welcome to the world of Duane and Nancy Pelster of Malmsten Ranch and Pelster Angus.

On a ranch held in the family for nearly 80 years through six generations, the Malmsten headquarters is located along the beautiful Big and Little Cedar Rivers in the Nebraska Sandhills in Garfield County.

Purchasing the start of the ranch in Garfield County around 1934, Carl Malmsten and his son Marden, added land as the years went by and slowly grew the ranch to what it is today. They both were determined to preserve the natural integrity of the ranch.

Duane Pelster and Nancy Malmsten, who married in 1961, were raised within 20 miles of where they farm and ranch today. The young couple began ranching with Nancy’s father Marden who ran both Angus and Herefords. They eventually bought the cow herd and it “grew blacker” as the years passed. As they continued to work for Marden, they shared his focus on the value of the land. Marden viewed the impact of native sod being plowed and farmed, as he believed his ranch would flourish if left in native Sandhills grass. His approach to land management was, “If you’re good to the land, the land will be good to you and future generation.”

In 1971, the Pelsters purchased land west of Ericson in Garfield and Wheeler counties on the Dry Cedar Creek, adding to it over the years, to the point that is now encompasses pastures, 290 irrigated acres, as well as natural hay meadows. The two ranches are operated with the same land management philosophy.

After two years, Duane and Nancy leased part of the ranch until Marden began to retire, at which time they leased the whole ranch followed by ownership in 2001. Currently they employ one hired man, Elton Dearmont and his family, to help with the operation. Duane and Nancy’s three daughters and their families all have roles on the ranch. Tara and her husband Steve McKay and children, fourth and fifth generations, rent a portion of the ranch where they maintain their own cow herd and custom graze cattle. Lezlie and Marshall Wier, live on the ranch and operate a performance horse enterprise and Vonda and Dr. Roy Schnell, a state veterinarian and family of North Platte, live off the premises but remain involved. All family members pitch in as needed, especially at branding time.

Sitting over the massive Ogallala Aquifer, the Nebraska Sandhills covers close to 20,000 square miles. Covering one-fourth the area of Nebraska, it is a unique area of the world. Following the last ice age, the wind blew the loose sand into vast dunes. Later, rainfall allowed grassland plants to take root in the shifting dunes, holding them in place.

Subsequent periods of drought and loss of vegetation allowed the dunes to shift, creating massive bare areas. Due to dramatic losses of grasslands across the U.S. in the past 100 years, the Sandhills region has become even more ecologically significant. Savvy stewards of the land, such as the Pelsters, have learned from history and managed their grassland to avoid the blowouts that erode the fragile soils and thus hinder their livelihood. Their management plan fits the resource, rather than forcing the resource to fit a particular plan.
2. Sustainable Revenues

The Pelster headquarters is located just a few miles from the tiny Sandhills town of Ericson. It’s to the north, however, about 18 miles up the Cedar River, where the Pelster cows reside on the Sandhills range.

Although the Pelsters have used other breeds of bulls in the past, for the past 30 years they have used only Registered Angus bulls and have maintained a black cow herd. Calves from the commercial Angus cow herd are backgrounded on the ranch. To feed the livestock, they bale a large quantity of prairie hay every year with the assistance of fifth generation grandchildren Coy Wolf, Jace and Bailey McKay, as well as additional extra help during the haying season. Coy’s young son, a member of the sixth generation, is learning about ranching at an early age.

All the heifers and cows are bred to calve in the spring, heifers around March 10 and cows around March 22. Duane calves later now than he used to, due to the weather and matching up forage supply with nutritional needs. First and second calf heifers are summered at the home place and then moved to the ranch; where they are kept separate from the other cows but on the same wintering program. Three weeks before they calve, the heifers return to the home place.

After the calves are weaned in the fall, the cows are moved to hay meadows to graze the after growth. The herd remains there and utilizes the open range until it’s used up or covered up, usually sometime in December, at which point they are hayed. Along with wintering his cows on prairie hay, Duane also feeds alfalfa and commercial cake. The cows will calve during March and April, and by the time fall comes, October weaning weights will range from 550 to 575 pounds for steers and 475 to 525 for heifer calves. The calves are weaned on prairie hay and a corn/distillers mix.

Utilizing what their ranch produces while making minimal outside purchases has been a long standing philosophy for the Pelsters. This provides flexibility in managing grass in years of low rainfall or drought. When Duane and Nancy acquired the ranch, most pasture sizes were two to three sections. Since then, they have reduced their average pasture size to 600 acres by adding cross fencing and watering facilities to better improve the grazing distribution in order to achieve their goal of economically utilizing their ranch produce. The yearly goal is to graze half and leave half of the grazable grasses and forbs produced in each pasture. This provides for optimum cattle grazing while maintaining the general health of the Sandhills range vegetation.
Cattle earning a living out on the range.

Monitoring picture showing the diversity still present during the 2012 drought.
Winter Feeding
3. Leadership

The Pelsters both have been involved extensively in the agricultural community.

Duane’s involvement includes:

- Wheeler Central School Board, past member
- Garfield-Loup-Wheeler Extension Board, past member
- St. Teresa’s Church Board, past member
- Ericson State Bank Board, past member
- Nebraska State Rodeo Association, past member
- Ericson Livestock Market, former co-owner for four years
- FFA State Farmer, 1958
- Nebraska Army Nation Guard, past member
- Sandhills Cattle Association, current member, past President, Director
- Nebraska Cattlemen, member

Duane and Nancy’s involvement include:

- Nebraska Angus Association, member
- American Quarterhorse Association, member
- National Rifle Association, member
- Former 4-H leaders
4. Overall Land Health

The Pelsters moderate approach to grazing has proven effective, especially in extended periods of drought. As grazing fads lure some managers' away from conservative stocking rates. Duane's steady approach has resulted in overall good plant vigor across the entire ranch. In addition, Duane has made a special effort to maintain healthy stands of riparian vegetation along the entire length of the Cedar River within his ownership. This became especially evident in 2010, when over 10 inches of rain fell upstream and wide spread flooding resulted. Healthy stands of soil-binding species such as willows and false indigo slowed down water flow across the floodplain, resulting in minimal damage downstream. Furthermore, the quality of habitat on the Cedar River has attracted rare species such as the northern river otter and various imperiled native fish species. The fish and wildlife species along with native plant species function as the primary indicators of healthy watersheds.

The Pelsters incorporate pasture rotation when possible, using 45 pastures in the rotation. "It's rotations that allow rest, that help heal the sandy spots," says Duane. They use a three, four or five pasture deferred rotation grazing system. After attending a Ranch Practicum grassland education class in 2006, Duane altered their program and has been going through just once in the dry years. According to Duane, "This just seems to work better." The five pasture rotation actually works the best in his view since the sandy spots heal better on the fragile hills. The cattle are never started in the same pasture two years in a row. With this rest-rotation, combined with on-going cedar and weed control, increased wildlife and grassland health has occurred. Since they leave standing grass for nesting and fawning, this has enabled them to allow limited hunting on the ranch. Prairie chickens, deer, ducks and geese abound on the ranch, in addition to a pond of otters. The Pelsters feel they have been able to find the right balance between livestock profitability and the health of the land.
Steve and Jace McKay (4th and 5th generation) show off a nice buck acquired on a hunting trip on the ranch. Excellent grass management, combined with on-going cedar control, is leaving more standing grass for nesting and fawning, enabling the Pelsters to allow limited hunting on the ranch.

One of the many shelterbelts on the ranch planted for livestock protection. Nearly 80,000 trees have been planted since Nancy's father, Marden, began planting in the early 1960s.
5. Innovation

Over the years, the Pelsters have installed over 25 miles of pipeline and installed numerous tanks through programs such as Great Plains and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). Marden began hand planting trees around 1962. This would be the first of nearly 80,000 coniferous trees that were later machine planted to provide shelterbelts on the ranch. Today these trees comprise 24 windbreaks on the ranch.

On three separate occasions, Duane has signed agreements with the Sandhills Task Force, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Each of the agreements were ten years in length and provided cost share for practices including cedar removal, developing alternative watering sources and restoring a stream.

In 2008, Duane participated on a landowner panel as part of a Range-Wildlife Class hosted by the Sandhills Task Force. The class was geared towards providing education to Sandhills ranchers regarding grazing plans, wildlife habitat, and plant identification. Duane’s perspective regarding grazing plans, wildlife, and invasive species was insightful and inspiring for the audience,” according to Kyle Graham, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist.

In 2010, Duane enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) which encourages producers like Duane to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by improving, maintaining and managing existing conservation activities and undertaking additional conservation enhancements. Duane felt CSP would enable him to further his conservation efforts. To Duane this is what conservation is all about; take care of what nature gave us. CSP has helped Duane manage the land responsibility so it can be passed on to future generations as Carl and Marden had planned. Duane feels CSP made him a “Keeper of the Land.” The Pelsters chose several enhancements, like wildlife-friendly haying on all the meadows. They harvest hay using conservation measures that allow wildlife to flush and escape. They also wildlife-friendly graze leaving some pasture idle during the nesting season.

This devotion to the health of their grasslands earned the Pelsters the Nebraska’s Outstanding Grassland Conservationists by the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts, nominated by the Lower Loup Natural Resources District. This award based on their 30 years of grassland conservation including planting trees, reseeding sandy areas, using planned grazing and managing a natural wetland for wildlife habitat.
Above: Always a hands-on guy, Duane is helping install one of his pipelines. "Duane won't ask you to do anything he wouldn't do himself," said Stan Foster, one of the many people Duane has mentored over the years.

Below: Duane's contractor plows in a section of pipeline. Duane chose plowing-in the pipeline so the fragile Sandhill soil would not be disturbed as much as with traditional pipeline trenching.
Left: This undated photo shows Nancy's father, Marden Malmsten, at one of the flowing wells at a newly-constructed fish pond.

Right: Another flowing well on the ranch in 2001.

Tank retrofitted with a wildlife escape ramp that allows for the escape of wildlife.
Top: Installing a flood control weir on the dry cedar creek.

Finished view of the weir installed in 2011 for flow control and stabilization.
6. Outreach

The Pelsters feel they are blessed to have good neighbors who help each other out, a common way of life in the Sandhills. The good neighbor policy accounts for the additional and outside activities that Duane and Nancy have been involved in.

Duane attended the UNL Gudmundson’s Ranch Practicum over ten years ago after 40 years of ranching, and has attended numerous grazing symposiums over the years, eager to learn and determined to find methods to enhance their operation. Duane has also employed and mentored numerous young ranchers over the years that have then proceeded to apply what they have learned in their own operations. Grandson Coy Wolf spent summers at the ranch, and grandsons Coy, Jace McKay and granddaughter Bailey McKay were Ag majors in college. Son-in-law Steve McKay also worked for Duane before marrying Tara. “Without family, where would we be?” says Nancy. Part of the family, employee and young rancher Elton Dearmont also run cows on the ranch, benefitting from the Pelsters years of experience.

Duane and Nancy’s desire to see the land stay in ag production drives their practices and decisions. Their main goal of seeing the next generation enter and succeed in ranching is well on the way to becoming reality, due in large part to the commitment dedication and vision of the Pelsters.
Pendulum swings other way

By Doug Rich

Spring is calving season for ranches in Nebraska and the Pelster Angus Ranch is no exception.

The Pelster Angus Ranch is a family operation—Duane Pelster and his wife, Nancy; two daughters and their families; and one full-time employee. Pelster and his wife were raised within 20 miles of where they farm and ranch today, in Wheeler County, NE.

Although he has used some other breeds of bulls from time to time, Pelster has maintained a black cow herd. Calves from his 650 head commercial Angus cow herd are backgrounded on the ranch. To feed his livestock, he irrigates 290 acres of corn and alfalfa. Half of the corn crop is cut for silage and used in the backgrounding operation and 90% of the alfalfa goes back through the calves in the lots. In addition, the Pelster family bales a large quantity of prairie hay every year.

All of the cows and heifers are bred to calve in the spring. Heifers begin calving around March 1 and cows around March 15. First and second-calf heifers are summered on the home place and then moved to the ranch, where they are kept separate from the other cows, but on the same wintering program. Three weeks before they calve, the heifers are driven back to the home place. Pelster brings them in from corn stalks to a 40 acre calving pasture close to the barn.

After the calves are weaned in the fall, the cows are moved to hay meadows to graze the aftergrowth. "They stay there until this is used up or covered up," says Pelster. That usually is until sometime in December, then they start haying the cows. Usually, the cows are wintered on prairie hay and cake. But this winter, Pelster fed alfalfa to the cows, instead of commercial cake. He figures he saved about $50 a day.

Pelster likes to be done weaning calves by Nov. 1. In February, Pelster will begin selling the steers that have been backgrounded. Normally, 100 of the heifers will be sold with the steers. The rest are kept and bred to calve as 2-year-olds. Half of these will be kept as replacements and half will be sold as bred heifers. Pelster does not hold back any bulls from his own herd.

Herd bulls are purchased from breed sales and private treaty, from ranchers in Wyoming, South Dakota, Iowa, and Nebraska. When selecting bulls that will be used on the heifers, Pelster pays particular attention to birth Expected Progeny Differences. "We also put a fair amount of importance on weaning weight," he adds. Weight, yearling weight and milk EPDs are important traits when selecting bulls that will be used on the cow herd. Pelster prefers bulls with a plus 10 to 12 EPD on milk production and not higher than plus 15. "If they milk too good, we have trouble getting first- and second-calf heifers to breed back," he says. Eye appeal is important, too. "In the sale ring they buy what they see."

The cattle industry has gone through a phase, in recent years, where the cattle have gotten bigger and bigger. Now, the pendulum is beginning to swing in the other direction. Pelster hopes it does not swing too far. "We need cows that will raise a good big, calf and still maintain themselves under our environment," he says. The ideal cow for their environment would have a mature weight of 1,100 to 1,200 pounds.

Pelster also pays attention to the environment, which is one reason he uses as much pasture rotation as possible. "It (rotation) helps heal up the sandy spots," he says. Pelster is using a four- to five-pasture rotation and is working on expanding it to an eight- to nine-pasture rotation. The cattle are pushed through fast the first time, to harvest the cool season grass, and then go through slower the second time, to finish out the grazing season. In Wheeler County, the grazing season runs from May through October most years.

Pelster never starts the cattle in the same pasture two years in a row and has water available in each pasture.

Water for the livestock and irrigation is plentiful, since the Pelster Ranch sits over the Ogallala Aquifer. "We have flowing wells on the ranch and the water is the same temperature all year," says Pelster. The Pelster family put in their first pivot in 1972 and the last one in 1975.

Last summer, Mother Nature provided most of the moisture. "We have had two wet summers in a row," says Pelster. "Some of the low meadows have not been hayed for the two years." The alalfa they put up last season was low quality, because of the wet weather, but most of it was put up in fairly good shape.

"There have been no problems with calves so far this spring, they have been good and stout." Pelster does not run any cattle on the alalfa during the dormant season. "We put an electric fence around it and don't run any cattle on it."

In addition to their own 650-cow herd, the Pelster family will take in up 1,200 cows and calves on a custom basis every summer. When their customers return in the fall, the calves are in the corral, worked and ready for the trip home. "From spring to fall, we spend a lot of time horseback, doctoring and moving cattle," says Pelster.
People & Events

Stewards of our natural resources

At their annual fall meeting, directors of Nebraska’s 23 natural resources districts take time to honor those practicing good conservation. This year, those awards went to: Mr. and Mrs. Duane Pelster, Ericson, outstanding grassland award; Mr. and Mrs. Mervin Ransom, Sr., Osceola, outstanding tree planter award; and Elden Wesely, Oakland, outstanding NRD director. Also at the conference, the Nebraska Tree Farm Program’s 1991 “tree farmer of the year” award went to the Ed Herzog family of Bloomfield.

Family recognized for conservation

ERICSON — Duane and Nancy Pelster of rural Ericson were named Nebraska’s Outstanding Grassland Conservationists by the Nebraska Association of Resources District in September.

The Pelsters were given the award based on their 30 years of grasslands conservation, including planting trees, reseeding sandy areas, using planned grazing and managing a natural wetland for wildlife habitat.

The Lower Loup Natural Resources District nominated the Pelsters for the award. Norm Smith of Ericson is the NRD director representing Wheeler County.