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## A West that works

# Ranching with wolves



Todd Graham says wildlife come first on the Sun Ranch in Montana.

—Courtney White photo

A rancher in Montana's wildlife-rich Madison Valley puts wildlife first and creates a healthier ecosystem for wolves, elk and cattle

By Courtney White  
for Headwaters News

When Todd Graham took over as manager of the Sun Ranch he didn't realize that camping with cattle was part of the job description.

But that's exactly where Graham found himself less than a month after starting work – sleeping in a tent in a pasture amidst a herd of yearling cattle. And he was there for a good reason.

He had a den of gray wolves as neighbors.

He decided to place himself between the den and the cattle. If the wolves came for the livestock, they would encounter him first.

"Since the den was only half a mile away, the chances of action were high," recalled Graham. "I crawled into my sleeping bag and inventoried my gear: bear spray, 12-gauge shotgun loaded with rubber bullets, two monster flashlights capable of lighting up the mountain, hunting knife, and running shoes for sprinting."

For three years Graham had been consultant to the owners of the Sun Ranch, which is located in Montana's wildlife-rich Madison Valley, northwest of Yellowstone National Park, so he knew that wolves were a potential part of the equation.

Graham also knew that the owners of the Sun Ranch didn't view wolves as the enemy, but as an important part of the ecosystem. In fact, they had tasked him with the challenge of running livestock in the presence of wolves. But so soon?

**"After zipping up the bag, turning off the headlamp,**



Courtney

**White** writes a monthly column for Headwaters News that focuses on people who embrace a sustainable approach to western resources.

White is executive director of the Quivira Coalition, a Santa Fe-based group devoted to collaboration as the approach to an ecologically healthy region.

Much of Quivira's emphasis is on ranching, but its principles of education, cooperation and innovation apply to many of the region's biggest issues.

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– Todd Graham,  
Madison Valley ranch manager

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"After zipping up the bag, turning off the headlamp, and settling in, two thoughts raced through my mind," he said. "First, I have no idea what I'm doing. Second, there's no way I can pull this off alone.

"The next day I asked for help and began learning the power of collaboration," he continued, "not only in dealing with wolves, but in managing a landscape."

## **Mission**

The upper Madison Valley is justly famous for its wildlife.

Wolves, grizzlies and mountain lions inhabit the surrounding ranges, 2,000 to 3,000 elk winter on the ranch, and world-class fishing draws thousands of fishermen to the Madison River during the summer.

It is also spectacularly beautiful country, which, combined with the wildlife appeal, is why so much of the upper valley has been purchased by wealthy, out-of-state admirers, including the owners of the Sun Ranch.

Boasting one of the oldest brands in Montana, the property was called the "Rising Sun Ranch" until World War II. Its previous owner was a Hollywood star who damaged the land by overgrazing it with livestock in an effort to maximize profits. When the ranch changed hands in 1998, the new owners had a different mission in mind: to integrate wildlife and livestock ecologically and economically so that both are sustainable over the long term.

"We think livestock should not be the centerpiece of the operation. Wildlife should," said Graham. "Usually it's vice versa. That's a very interesting challenge, and one of the reasons I took the job, to see how to make it work."

When Graham took over, nearly one-third of the 25,000-acre ranch had been dedicated as an "elk reserve" – where cattle were off-limits. However, the elk had stopped using the pasture as well. The grass was old and rank, recalled Graham, and the elk didn't like it.

He decided to "freshen up" the forage with cattle.

Employing a single-strand polywire electric fence, Graham and his staff created four pastures of 500 acres each and then turned out 240 pairs of cattle for six to eight days in each pasture early in the grazing season.

"Our goal was to increase the quality and quantity of forage for the elk by making the cattle disturb the old, unused forage," said Graham. "We can make cattle trample the old stuff by bunching them up with electric fencing for a few days. The results were outstanding. We grew a great deal of new grass and the elk returned in big numbers."

Graham noted that a temporary polywire fence can be installed at a rate of 1 1/2 mph by two employees. Best of all, when the grazing rotation is completed, the fence can be rolled up and removed – leaving not a trace.

"Polywire is an amazing tool," said Graham. "In addition to being just right for planned grazing, elk can see it easily and will jump over it, deer too.

Antelope go under it."

Bunching cattle together with electric fencing and moving them frequently has another advantage: It is a good defense mechanism against predators.

"Our death loss is one-half percent in my two years here," said Graham. "And wildlife are as abundant as ever. In addition, we're seeing strong regeneration of aspen that had been severely browsed by livestock and wildlife."

## **Economics**

From an early age, Graham has enjoyed a challenge. Born and raised in Big Piney, Wyo., where his parents were schoolteachers, Graham worked on a nearby ranch that employed progressive ranching methods. Intrigued, he pursued these ideas at the University of Wyoming, where he studied range science. He also enrolled in a Holistic Resource Management class taught by Kirk Gadzia.

"All of a sudden a door came open – it was like four years of college in three days," he recalled.

After graduation he took a job as the assistant manager of The Nature Conservancy's Red Canyon Ranch near Lander, Wyo. Afterward, sensing a business opportunity, he launched a consulting and monitoring firm in partnership with Tony Malmberg, a neighboring progressive rancher.

Between 1996 and 2003, he worked as a feed salesman as he built his consulting business. Today he has five businesses going concurrently, including a company that manages two ranches in Wyoming. It all came together on the Sun Ranch where Graham saw an opportunity "to put all my skills into play."

"I want to manage livestock to improve wildlife habitat and document it," he said. "If you can ranch to improve wildlife habitat, your chances of coexisting with wolves dramatically improves."

Financially, the cattle operation is entirely self-sustaining, partly due to the ranch's decision to custom-graze neighboring cattle, and partly due to his ability to lower costs dramatically. He has 1,300 head of cattle on the ranch and only one other full-time employee.

In June 2003, he joined the board of directors of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, a 21-year old conservation organization with 13,000 members and a lengthy history of confrontation and litigation. Graham hopes to help the organization learn the importance of collaborative approaches to conservation.

"GYC is developing a dual role in its conservation practices. On one hand, the organization devotes resources and skilled staff to helping ranchers and communities adapt to changing times and challenges. On the other, GYC gets aggressive where ranchers and the agencies are demonstrably doing a poor job of managing the public's lands. I like both approaches."

## **Future**

The question still remains: Can wolves exist in an agricultural valley such as the Madison? Graham thinks they can, but the key is communication and collaboration, as well as innovative management. To that end, Graham has been assigned the task of writing a grazing plan for the entire valley for a local collaborative group.

It will be no small task.

"Valley residents hold diverse opinions on wolves, livestock, ranchers and hunters. Such diversity makes management a challenge. But it's also an opportunity. If we can coordinate public and private ranges for the benefit of all, everybody wins."

"It is one of my dreams to create an economy based on wildlife and conservation," he said. "We've got to find a way to capitalize on the intense interest out there. A great deal of research is being done on wildlife and ranching here in the Madison Valley. One idea I have is to get people to assist with wildlife research, something I call 'vocation vacations.' Will people pay to be part of actual wildlife research? I hope so."

In the meantime, there's plenty of work to do. For one thing, there's another den of wolves on the ranch.

"Wolves are yet another challenge facing ranchers today," said Graham. "Succeeding in their presence will require us to work together. We must learn as much as we can about their behavior and adapt our practices with new knowledge. Today, our teachers may be predator lovers and wildlife biologists, rather than other ranchers and universities. Welcome to the New Ranch."

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Center for the Rocky Mountain West  
at the University of Montana.