

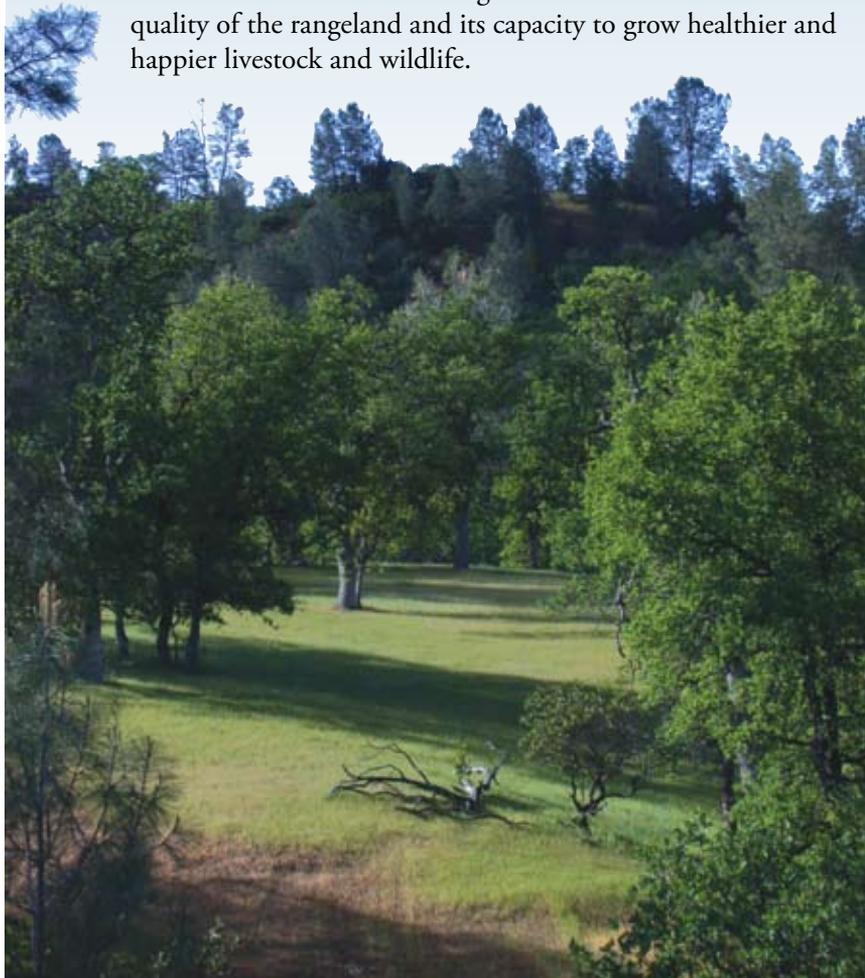
A SENSE OF PLACE BIG BLUFF RANCH

BY TYLER DAWLEY

SPRING

Life on our ranch revolves around the humble grass plant. All life on earth comes from a plant or plankton that can turn sunlight into food. As you walk and talk, interact with your friends and family, you could be fueled by that humble grass plant that grows on our ranch, but certainly you are being fueled by a plant from somewhere. As a steward of a small piece of our planet, I have the responsibility to encourage as much growth of life-giving plants as possible. Our typical spring activities revolve around growing grass; everything we do is based on the spring growth in our rangeland of grasses.

Big Bluff Ranch is a third generation, sustainably managed ranch about twenty-five miles west of Red Bluff. That may not sound very far, but let me put it in perspective. We are so far out that we make our own electricity, our nearest neighbor is three miles away, and when we see more than two unfamiliar cars per month on our road we know that it is deer season. We manage the ranch to enhance the quality of the rangeland and its capacity to grow healthier and happier livestock and wildlife.



In a cross section of soil with a plant growing in it, the leaves of the plant will be reaching up to the sun and the roots mining deep into the soil for minerals. Each new leaf that I encourage to grow creates more feed for our animals and wildlife and, eventually, more food for you. So my job is to grow as many green leaves as possible to encourage as much life as possible.

A cow in a field of all these wonderful growing plants will take as big a bite as possible. Then the plant, that great big solar panel turning sunlight into food, will look worse for the wear. This is where my job of growing grass becomes interesting.

How do I manage to encourage the grass to grow, when I have herds of animals hungry to eat it down? It all comes down to timing: how long I let the animals graze in one paddock before I move them to the next. I let them eat only half of the plant before I move them. When a plant has just half of its leaf area removed during the growing season, it can keep on growing as if nothing happened. If I let the animals stay in the paddock until the leaf area is more heavily grazed, that plant has to work pretty hard just to get back to square one before it can continue to grow. To maximize leaf growth, I don't want to graze past that 50% removal target I set for the pasture.

How do I manage the cows' time in a paddock so that they only eat 50% of a plant and leave the rest? Well, I have really smart animals out here. I wish. No, the answer is building cross fencing, which creates lots of small fields. If I have enough fields to let the animals eat only half the forage per graze, then the plants hardly notice the grazing pressure at all. Thus I move all the animals to a new paddock about once every three days from March through early June. In June, when the dry season starts, I will have an entirely different mindset about managing our forage.

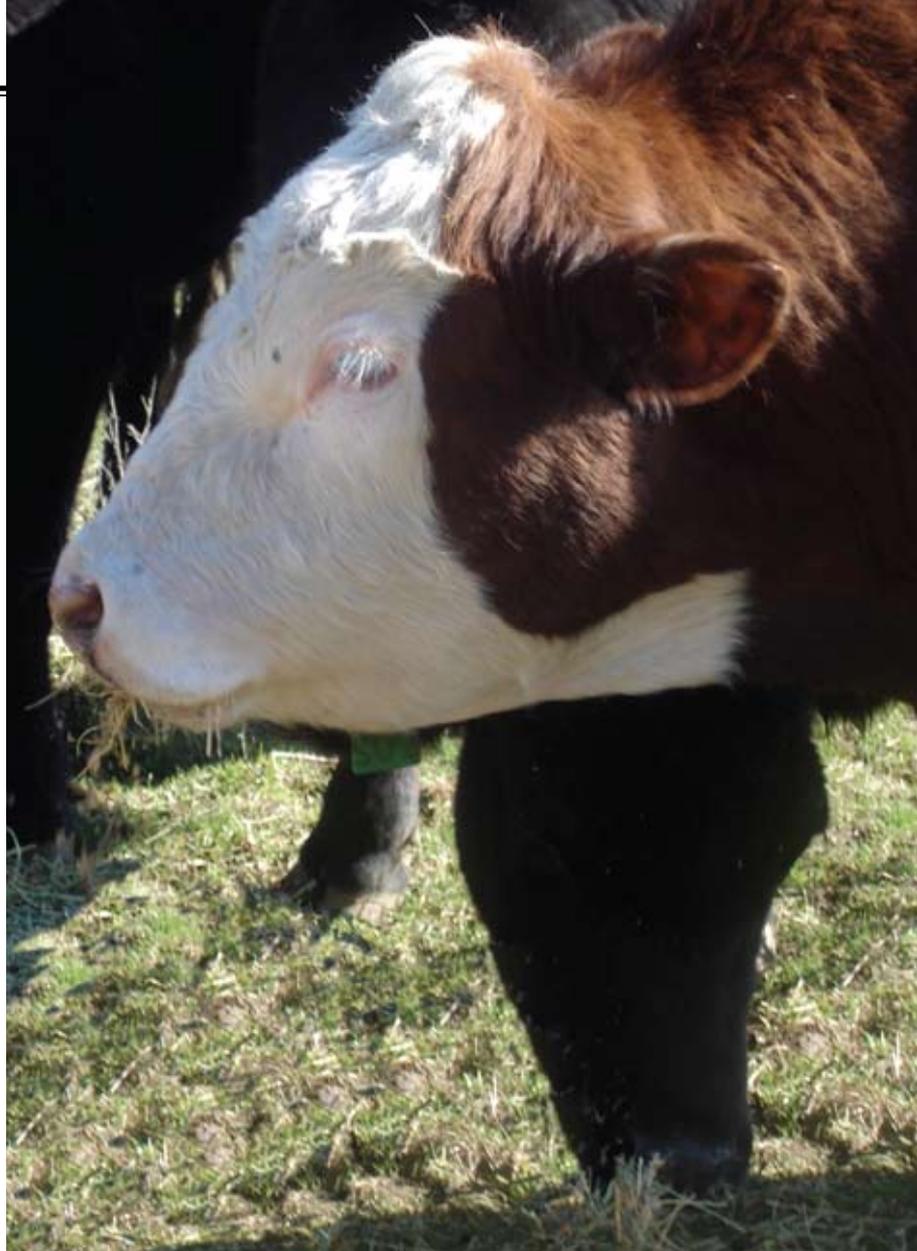
Once the livestock have eaten 50% of the

forage in one of the fenced paddocks, we move them to the next. The way we move our animals isn't like what you see in a western movie with lots of shouting, lathered horses, or bawling animals. We handle our animals with as little stress as possible. I move our animals on foot, walking at their pace, so when I need to move the animals, it isn't a big deal for me or for them.

When it is time to move them, I drive out to the new paddock that I want the cows to move into and open the gate. I walk out to find the cows in the old paddock, and I give a gentle pressure to their flight zone to nudge them towards the new paddock. They will pair up if they have a calf and start walking calmly toward the gate. They know the drill. They all like moving to new pasture, and once a couple cows realize they are going to get new feed, the whole herd gets up and moves, and I don't have to push any of them. The sheep are a little different. They don't split up as much as the cattle do. When I find one sheep, I will have found them all. I like to move sheep with my herding dogs, because sheep like to follow a leader. I use the dogs to gather the sheep and bring them to me.

As the sheep get close, I walk toward the gate, allowing the sheep to follow me, just the way they like to. As soon as all the animals get into the new paddock, they stop walking and put their heads down to graze. For them, the grass is greener on the other side. I wish that my life were that simple.

Along with moving the animals, I have been building fences this spring. In general, ranchers don't seem all that excited about the prospect of building fences. I, on the other hand, like it for a number of reasons: range management possibilities, government cost share assistance, and the satisfaction of building a straight solid fence. But the most important reason is that fencing improves my ability to manage how our animals graze the range. The better I can manage that, the better the health of the range will be, the happier the cows will be, and the better tasting meat I can sell. Also, there is a wonderful synergy about managing rangeland for livestock, and that is that wildlife flourishes. We have number of rare and endangered species here on the ranch, and they flourish because of our livestock and their



effect on the range.

The government recognizes this fact and, through grants, encourages private landowners to manage for range health. This spring's fence building foray has been funded in part by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I am building about five miles of fence alongside our portion of Red Bank Creek in order to improve the riparian habitat for neo-tropical migrant birds. These birds look like little tweety birds and love/need the riparian zones to feed in on their way from Mexico to Alaska. The fence directly benefits the birds *and* creates even more paddocks to help manage the livestock in the uplands. The better I can manage the uplands, the more grass I can grow, so the soil retains more rainfall that slowly percolates out over the summer, "irrigating" the riparian jungle that the tweety birds live in. These fences illustrate the synergy between livestock and wildlife; if it's good for one, it's good for all. The riparian habitat for the tweety birds only exists because the grass is growing in the uplands.

What else does that humble grass plant mean to us in the

spring? It means harvest season for our beef. When you think of meat, you should remember that we are what our animals eat. At Big Bluff Ranch, our animals eat nothing but grass from our sustainably managed grassland for their entire lives. Spring is the season when our grass is mining the minerals deep in the soil and exploding upward in an unbridled race toward the sun. Grass is never fuller of vitality than in the spring. If we are what our animals eat, doesn't it make sense to harvest our beef in the spring when they have eaten grass at its highest level of vitality? Just as you can taste the ability of a farmer in his veggies, you can taste the stewardship abilities of the rancher in his steaks. The better tasting the steak, the better the ranch it came from.

Our humble grass plants are also part of our spring birthing season. We choose to lamb and calve in the spring because the demand on the mother's body is greatest at parturition and the vitality of the grass is greatest right now. To us, it makes sense to match the two so that the momma is getting the best feed possible when she and her baby are the hungriest. Spring babies also will miss most of the cold nasty weather of winter. Would you want to be a new born baby and then have a winter rain storm dump on you? We guess not and try to have the babies on the ground when it is nice and sunny. We can't be all that wrong, because our wildlife give birth in the spring, too.

No matter what we are doing in the spring, somehow we will be trying to grow more grass. Not just because we can raise more cows, but because we know that photosynthesis is the basis of life. I am never quite sure how to answer the question, "What do you do for a living?" I could say cowboy, but I lack the boots and horses. I could say rancher, but that doesn't really capture all of what I do out here. The best answer really is that I am a stockman grass farmer, a clunky title, but very accurate. I care about our livestock, for both my ease of mind and theirs, but I also care deeply about that humble grass plant that makes most terrestrial life possible. In this spring season, I am constantly looking down at my feet to check out how my grass is growing. I can see how well my cows will feed this year, I can see how much water I will have in the creek for my neo-tropical migrants, and I can see where I can do a better job for next year, all from that grass at my feet.

Tyler Dawley and his parents Frank and Vicky manage Big Bluff Ranch. They use a thought model known as Holistic Management (HM) to help them make decisions that honor all of the bottom lines: ecological, economical, and societal. Under this model, they have created a healthy rangeland that supports a passel of happy healthy animals, and they sell their healthy products at various farmers markets around the northstate. See www.bigbluffranch.com or email grassfed@bigbluffranch.com for more information.

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