

Hope on the Range

Ranchers, predators and trust in Montana's Blackfoot Valley.

By Melissa Mylchreest

A rancher, a wolf biologist and an environmentalist walk into a bar.

In many valleys in the West, people would hold up a hand, and tell you to stop right there; the statement is a joke, all on its own. The notion of getting those three parties in a room together – let alone a bar! – is laughable. But here in Montana's Blackfoot Valley, it's no joke.

Despite the iconic status engendered by Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, the Blackfoot Valley remains more or less as it has for generations. The 1.5 million-acre watershed is home to only 2,500 households in seven small communities, and land use is still predominantly agricultural. In many ways, this valley is much the same as many others in the state: cattle roam river bottoms and range into hills, and the local economy is inextricably linked to beef prices, weather, range science and luck.

But here, there's something different happening, as well.

Outside of Ovando, on this late October day, the cottonwood are pulling out all the stops before winter, their yellow riotous in the autumn sun. The Blackfoot itself meanders south of town, looping lazily in this wide, glacial valley. Tawny hills run off toward the mountains, and creeks are lined with red foliage. Clouds

pile up on the horizon and, here and there, the landscape is punctuated with dark shapes in the distance: horses, cattle, barns.

"What was that?" says Eric Graham, stopping and throwing the truck into reverse on a deserted dirt road.

"Can you see it out your window?" he asks. "Was it bear, or just horse?"

I peer over the edge of the passenger-side window at the pile along the roadside. Though mashed flat, from this view it's clear it's a pile of horse manure, not bear scat. We drive on, and soon find ourselves parked in front of a gate, overlooking a field full of grazing cattle.

Getting out of the truck, Graham cautions me, "Now, don't touch the dang fence! I got zapped the other day, and they have it cranked way up." His sun- and wind-weathered face cracks into a self-deprecating grin, the dark beginnings of a winter beard shadowing the lower half of his face. He hoists a backpack, pulls a fleece hat down over his ears, and heads toward the pasture.

Safely through the gate, we survey the cows as they eye us disinterestedly, and Graham explains how he found himself out here in the first place, looking for animal scat, getting shocked by fences, and learning the back roads. As he does, it becomes clear that his presence is only one piece in a much bigger story.

"Back before conservation was sexy," says Jim Stone,



photos by Melissa Mylbreest

The Blackfoot Valley is quintessential Montana cow country. Cattle roam river bottoms and range into hills, and the local economy is inextricably linked to beef prices, weather, range science and luck.

a born-and-raised Blackfoot rancher, “there were all these conversations around the valley, and they were landowner-generated.”

In the 1970s, the Blackfoot was on the verge of being named one of the top 10 imperiled rivers in the country, a designation that would’ve likely triggered federal management and restrictions. On hearing the news, locals sat up and took notice.

“We didn’t want outside people dictating how we were going to manage one of the most critical resources in the valley,” Stone says.

Locals also knew that they wanted to maintain the rural, agricultural character of their valley, and to

address longstanding access issues for hunters and fishermen. At that time, distrust ruled the day between ranchers and government employees.

“Nobody had ever talked to the Fish, Wildlife and Parks guys,” says Stone, “because nobody really liked them.”

Showing incredible foresight, especially in a state known for its staunch individualism, landowners understood the need to work collaboratively with agency representatives in order to ensure the success of their vision for the valley. Little by little, lines of communication opened. In due time, agency folks came to the table as well.

“Our general human nature,” says Stone, “is that we



love to fight and butt heads. And then we walk away and we don't have to do anything about it. Fighting is an easy out. But we realized it's really about communities and people. We don't have to agree, but we can have the same values. Trying to do the right thing is pretty powerful."

By 1993, a collaborative – and unique – partnership had evolved, and the Blackfoot Challenge was born. A nonprofit organization, the Challenge aims to conserve and enhance natural resources and a rural way of life throughout the watershed through cooperation and conversation among all stakeholders. Committees within the organization reflect this all-inclusive approach.

"The make-up of the Challenge represents the realities on the ground," says Seth Wilson, Blackfoot Challenge wildlife coordinator. "All of our committees are made up of landowners, representatives from all seven communities in the valley, and all the agencies – the Forest Service, BLM, DNRC, USFW, county weed districts, everyone."

"It took some coming together," says Stone. "We ranchers went out and learned about fish, water temperature, stream dynamics. And the biologists had to learn what a cow looks like, and the needs of a cow. They learned about irrigation and weed control."

In this way, a "ridgetop-to-ridgetop" management developed, based on transparency, cooperation and realistic, on-the-ground strategies.

While many agricultural valleys throughout the West remain vehemently divided, the Blackfoot has seen collaborative progress. Not all landholders are interested in partnering with others, but most are. Several ranchers have put their land in conservation easements, which restrict development, but support agricultural practices. Easements also allow for hunting and fishing access; today, more than 30 miles of the Blackfoot River corridor are open for public recreation. Rare bull trout

and westslope cutthroat are receiving the protection that they need to rebuild populations. Wetlands are thriving at the same time as cattle operations. For the most part, Stone says, it's a good system.

"I don't care how educated you think you are," he explains, "these places are dynamic as hell. We've had to neighbor up, and build on partnerships. We've got a Rolodex of resource management now, and I can call up all these folks. I think it's critical to survival."

And on any given day, it's possible to find a rancher, a wildlife biologist, and a conservationist drinking beer together at Trixie's, the local watering hole. While they may have their differences, they all agree on one thing: the Blackfoot Valley is a pretty special landscape, and not a bad place to spend some time.

The only problem is, they're not the only ones who think that.

"Oh, now here's a good one," Graham says, pointing down at a clear, four-toed paw print. We're walking in the ruts of a ranch road that loops around a handful of man-made ponds, and the wolf track is a small one, but distinct and unmistakable.

"This is only the second time I've seen a wolf sign up here all season," he says, "so this is interesting."

Graham works as a range rider for the Blackfoot Challenge, a malleable and growing job currently in its fifth year. A grant-funded position, the general goal of the range rider is to reduce negative encounters between livestock and predators. For those familiar with ranching, the notion of a range rider is nothing new; historically, this was the realm of the cowboy, and earlier, the semi-nomadic pastoralists who moved and lived with their herds. But in the Blackfoot Valley, the range rider had long been gone from the landscape.

The absence wasn't an oversight; there simply hadn't been a need. With big predators eliminated from the valley in generations past, cows were largely safe to



Blackfoot Challenge range rider Eric Graham aims a radio-telemetry antenna toward the mountains to pinpoint the location of radio-collared wolves.

wander as they pleased, free from supervision. But to wolves and bears, the Blackfoot watershed is a natural paradise, and following reintroduction and protection programs of the 1990s, carnivores came back home.

“By the late 1990s, we had grizzly bears, and confirmed losses of livestock,” says Seth Wilson. “There’s this great natural river-bottom habitat, and on top of it bears were finding bone yards, carcasses, beehives, garbage, pet food.”

When a grizzly killed a hunter in the Blackfoot in 2001, the community was galvanized. Through a long public process, the Challenge identified problems – bear attractants, prime grizzly habitat, public safety concerns – and solutions.

Because grizzlies are known for snatching newborn calves, the Challenge procured funding to provide

permanent electric fencing for 18 calving areas. Given that carcasses are a primary attractant, and many ranches have long disposed of carcasses in designated bone yards, an innovative carcass removal program was implemented: When ranchers have a mortality in their herd, they can call a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks representative, who will discreetly remove the carcass and transport it to a fenced composting facility. Since 2003, more than 1,700 livestock carcasses have been removed from the project area. Despite such measures, though, it soon became apparent that grizzlies were not the only returnees to the valley, and they weren’t the largest threat to livestock.

“The Blackfoot was one of the final big watersheds in the western part of the state without wolves,” says Wilson. “But the first pack showed up in 2007, and now we have 11 or 12 confirmed packs.”

In an effort to get ahead of the curve, keep wolf depredation numbers low, and help ranchers as much as possible, the range rider program was born.

“The main purpose of the range rider is to increase herd supervision rates, and to better understand where wolves are in relationship to cattle,” says Wilson. “We communicate across the watershed, and tell landowners where wolves are, and how herds are reacting. When you increase supervision, you can take preventative action. If we find naturally dead livestock, we can remove the carcass. If we find sick or injured animals, we can get them home and doctored. We mend fence. We get lost



calves back to their moms. It's just an extra set of eyes."

Watching over hundreds of thousands of acres might seem a tall order for Graham and his small crew, but he says it's nothing in comparison to the work ranchers do.

"I'm not just the range rider," he says. "I'm a helping hand. These guys get super busy with haying and everything. It's just useful to have someone out there checking their cows on a regular basis."

Standing on a rise over the river, Graham turns on his radio telemetry equipment and aims the antenna into the mountains. Through an agreement with Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Graham is able to track radio-collared wolves in the area he covers. When he picks up a signal, he calls ranchers who have cattle nearby, and alerts them to the presence of predators. He publishes a weekly report that documents where the packs are and what they're up to. He's also aware, though, of the limitations of telemetry, and the power of on-the-ground knowledge.

"I've heard of rangers becoming too dependent on a collar," he says. "They pick up a signal and say, 'The wolves are right there.' But the rancher looks at his cows all bunched up and unhappy says, 'Well, I know your wolf with the collar is over there, but I think there are some wolves over here, too.'"

Graham says he learned early on to trust ranchers' intuition.

"These guys know what's going on," he says, "They've been out here their whole lives. Don't ever come to these guys acting like you know what's going on."

Building trust has been one of the most crucial aspects of the range rider position, a task made easier by the decades-old spirit of valley-wide collaboration.

"Most people around here are great, and that is one of the biggest reasons I was willing to do this job," says Graham. "Try working this job somewhere else,

and it could be ugly."

In a state where the debate over predators regularly deteriorates into fisticuffs and even death threats, people in the valley, for the most part, remain civil. Graham says that he steers clear of Trixie's, the local bar, because "wolves and alcohol don't mix," but he's never felt anything but welcomed by the ranching community. And he's careful, he says, to stick to the middle of the road.

"I see both sides. Somebody's pro-grizzly, pro-wolf? Great," he says. "But on the other hand, it would certainly help the ranchers to have a lot fewer wolves around. And if they get their wolf [hunting] tags and want to go shoot one, I can absolutely see why they would."

In many respects, the range rider is the embodiment of the trust that's grown between vastly different constituencies over nearly 40 years of conversation, compromise, and trial and error. Ranchers in this valley have every reason to fear and hate wolves, and many, if not most of them, still do. But they've agreed to work with agencies, implement available management tools, and trust a stranger to come onto their land and keep tabs on their stock. Likewise, biologists and conservationists have put aside their preconceived ideas and asked ranchers for help and advice.

And so far, the gamble seems to be paying off. For the past six years, the valley has lost around four head of livestock each year to depredation. In turn, roughly four wolves have been removed each year, as well. In comparison to places like the Big Hole Valley, where, in two years, 25 head of livestock and 72 wolves were killed, these numbers are astonishingly low. As for 2013? At this writing, no livestock depredation has been reported for last year.

Standing in a vast field, watching a couple hundred cattle graze contentedly, Graham shrugs his shoulders.

"I don't look forward to the day a cow gets killed

on my watch," he says. "And I'm sure it will happen. But so far, I've lucked out this year."

I suggest that it's not luck, that perhaps it's the result of his own hard work and dedication. He shakes his head.

"There's depredation going on all over the state, wolves killing cattle and sheep everywhere," he says. "And somehow it's not happening here. But it's really hard to gauge our success. Really, I measure my effectiveness by a rancher telling me 'Hey, thank you. You did a good job.'"

Graham looks around and takes it all in, here at the tail end of his season in the field. Ranchers are bringing home cattle for the winter, touching base with him to let him know if they're missing stock. Soon Graham will wrap up his work and be done.

The relationship between ranchers and predators – and the people tasked with protecting each of them – will always remain fraught. But here in this big, wild valley, with the wind kicking up and the cows safely munching away and the wolves keeping to themselves, for now, the picture looks hopeful.



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