



WENDY PRATT WRITES ABOUT LIFE ON A RANCH AND CONSERVATION IN *THE PASTORAL MUSE*

By Steve Stuebner

Wendy Pratt has deep roots as an Idaho rancher. Just 10 miles from her existing home in the Blackfoot Valley, she can still drive by the ranch where she grew up. She and her husband, Mark, have raised three solid kids, Callie, Anna and Seth while running a cow-calf operation with Hereford cattle. She likes Herefords.

"We're kind of old-fashioned that way," she says. "I like their temperament, and I think they're beautiful, pretty against the landscape."

Pratt pens "The Pastoral Muse," a twice-monthly blogpost that she started in 2010 at a time when thousands of Americans entered a new phase of the digital age, sharing personal thoughts, photos and journeys in the social media. It became evident that anyone, including Wendy Pratt, could start their own blog and express their views to the world. Thousands did so nationwide.

At the time, Pratt thought she'd write the blog as a gift for her children. She also wanted to spread the word about ag education, something her kids and

her husband (a former Ag education teacher) inspired her about in a big way with 4-H and FFA. And she wanted to promote conservation from her unique perspective as a rancher.

But ultimately, she says, the blog is personal therapy. It helps her cope with daily living.

"I don't love everything about ranching," she says. "It's not rosy; it's just life."

This is how Pratt describes herself on her blog, "I am a rancher and conservationist. I believe in cows and grass

and the power of us individuals to create our own life experience.”

Pratt also is a public speaker. She’s signed up to speak at an upcoming Tedx event in Idaho Falls on March 9, where she’s going to extol the virtues of grazing the land with livestock via holistic management, in which you try to manage for the health of the land, fish and wild-life, livestock and all kinds of other critters.

“Everyone wants a healthy planet, but with increasing concerns around the loss of species, recurring wildfires, soil degradation and climate change, what can any one individual do to make a difference? Through one rancher’s experience with the age-old relationship of grazing animals and grassland ecosystems, learn how we can utilize the planet’s naturally occurring cycles to help heal our world,” Pratt says in a summary of her Tedx talk. Tickets are available at TEDxIdahoFalls.com

Pratt writes about the challenge of preparing a 10-minute TEDx talk in her blog. She entitled the blog “The Tedx Blues,” dated Jan. 31.



Pratt’s writing has attracted an engaged audience eager to read her perspective on life on the ranch.

I’m in a happy place of late. It’s the margin between Christmas and calving. A cold margin yes, but it has a rhythm and solitude I love ...

So I’m happy except for this nagging TEDx talk to prepare. Seth and Leah talked me into applying to speak at a locally organized event in Idaho Falls in March. I applied as an afterthought and ended up getting a space on the

docket. Now the hard part.

I’ve written and rewritten the talk. And rewritten. It’s not done yet and progress is so slow as to be undetectable. I have a sign on my computer written by J. Heller that says it all: Every writer I know has trouble writing.

I wanted to write that meat is a nutrient-dense health food. I wanted to write that well-managed cows can help with a host of environmental ills: climate change, floods, droughts, wildfires, desertification, etc. I wanted to write how ranchers love and respect their cows and that a happy life and pain-free death for them is our ultimate goal. I wanted to say how private ranches are the buffer between town and wild spaces and that wildlife and cows can coexist quite comfortably. I wanted to write so many things. But the TEDx committee keeps telling me, “No, No, what’s your big idea?” Seems it can’t be all of these things. The audience can’t follow all those tracks. I need to develop one idea and figure out how to appeal to a theater full of city folks. Groan.

I know it’s a great opportunity. Seth (her son) tells me it’s not everyone



Proud son (and 2011-12 National FFA Vice President) Seth Pratt poses with his parents, Mark and Wendy Pratt, who received honorary American FFA degrees.

that gets to face their fears! He also said he had endured years of 4-H and FFA speaking “opportunities” and didn’t feel a bit sorry for me. I didn’t know it would be this hard ... “

But by the time I interviewed Wendy for this story, she had ironed out her talk, and now she can practice it until she’s ready for her big performance in a theater full of city folks.

In a nutshell, she wants to explain to people how grazing animals can be beneficial to the landscape if managed correctly. “We forget that the basis of life comes from the nutrients and energy produced by the soil and the sun,” she tells me. “I’m going to talk about ruminants and how they make a miraculous conversion from eating plants to producing a nutrient-rich source of protein. It all works together so beautifully, but nobody talks about that!”

She also marvels at the soil and the grass and other living plant materials that grow in the soil and how grazing animals can benefit the land by pruning the plants ... again, in a well-managed environment. “Of course it’s got to be managed correctly,” she says. “We ranchers have certainly created problems where we kept livestock in one place too long.”

But you can’t over-react to overgrazing to the point where grazing is eliminated. “If you eliminate grazing from the landscape, the whole thing can collapse – it’s happening all over the world,” she

says.

Conservation

Wendy and her husband, Mark, who also has deep roots in ranching in Eastern Idaho, have been practicing holistic grazing management for about 25 years. “It’s our True North – it guides how we look at the land,” she says. “Holistic Management changed the way we view the world.”

The Pratts trail their livestock onto state and private lands along with 40 other ranchers in the 70,000-acre Eastern Idaho Grazing Association in the Blackfoot Mountains each summer. The lands in that area are at around 6,000 feet in elevation. Land managers have described the area as one of the best ranges for livestock grazing in Eastern Idaho.

“It’s some of the best rangeland in Idaho and probably the West,” said



Pratt cattle trailing onto the range in the Blackfoot Mountains.

Heath Hancock, range management specialist for the Idaho Department of Lands in a Life on the Range story

What’s Holistic Management?

Simply put, it’s a systems-based way to “manage relationships between land, grazing, animals, and water in ways that mimic nature.”

HolisticManagement.org

about the Eastern Idaho Grazing Association (lifeontherange.org).

They have put in water developments, rest-rotation grazing systems or deferred-rotation systems. The Pratts try to do their part to improve the range, but it’s harder to change things when 40 other ranching families also are grazing in the same area, Pratt says.

“You can change what you’re trying to do but you can’t change everything,” she says. “You start out thinking you’re going to do everything great, and it just doesn’t work out like that exactly. We all have to work within the guidelines of what the agencies want to do, and what Grandpa used to do. It’s not perfect.”

Pratt is candid and humble as a lifelong rancher. Weird weather, invasive weeds, floods, drought and many other factors can mess with your plans. At one time, they were focused on herding their cattle as much as possible to keep them on the move, but they didn’t have enough budget for extra riders

and decided to build more fencing for rotational grazing pastures instead.

The herding project was funded by a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant. “Any government program generally wants something to look at,” she told Melissa Hemken in a May 2018 article for Working Ranch magazine. “They don’t want to pay for just labor. They want a water development or a fencing project. That’s the killer; how to pay for range riders?”

Pratt would like to see more opportunities for range riding and herding. “Herding is ancient knowledge across the world,” she says. “And we’re losing it. And today we can combine it with the new technology of electric fencing and cell phones to make it a dream job. It could be a new way of improving the water cycle, controlling invasive species, and addressing fire issues. And maybe if we ranchers address those issues with herders, there would be some money to pay them from agencies and conservation organizations.”

Open dialogue between ranchers and biologists



Pratt cattle grazing cover crops on farm fields in the valley.

As a conservationist, Pratt likes to keep an open dialogue with trained biologists and people who work in the conservation community. She writes about that in an Oct. 9, 2017 post.

“We ranchers and farmers need to try harder to mix it up with the scientific community,. I’ve learned both parties can be skeptical of the other. We cowboys can be intimidated by the scientist’s unfamiliar names of our common plants and their sometimes

superior attitude. Likewise, I’m guessing biologists are suspicious of the cowboy culture and don’t think they can relate to us. Truth is, a richness comes to the conversation when both disciplines are included. And in my opinion, our resource issues will only be successfully addressed when the two “sides” come together.”

“Resource management aside,” says Pratt, the citizen scientist in me is a perfect fit with the artist in me. Knowing their contribution to the ecosystem only makes the species that live here on the ranch more beautiful.”

Pratt is a member of the newly formed Idaho Rangeland Conservation Partnership. She looks forward to more dialogue with folks in the conservation community, hunters, anglers, environmentalists and fellow ranchers to find areas of common ground for improved land management. “I get along great with the conservation crowd, and I also like to maintain relationships with my fellow ranchers,” she says.

“There’s a lot of great stuff happening right now with the BLM, Fish and Game, IDL and conservation groups,” she says. “They’re all interested in



Range riding with the Pratts, L-R, Mark Pratt, Jesse Heath, Josh Oleson, Wendy Pratt and Gary Pratt.



Farmer Sam Chandler checks on his cover crops, which provide excellent feed for livestock and the opportunity for additional income from grazing. Nutrients from the crops invigorate microbes in the soil.

doing things with grazing to help with conservation. I hope we can capitalize on that cooperative climate right now. We could do some great stuff!”

“The “All Hands, All Lands” philosophy that state and federal land management agencies are embracing leads to working together to share financial

resources on multiple land ownerships to benefit the land, she says.

State conservation funds provided by the Idaho Legislature to the Governor’s Office of Species Conservation, for example, has led to a number of conservation projects that benefit sage grouse, other wildlife species

and livestock through the Sage Grouse Action Team.

Pratt wants to see those projects continue and grow. She sits on the Partners Advisory Council for the University of Idaho Rangeland Center, and that gives her access to a multitude of university natural resources professors and researchers who are always looking for new projects. “I have some experience with research, and it’s always an education to rub shoulders with biologists,” she says. “When we can get ranchers and biologists together, it’s just the best!”

Cover crops for the soil and livestock feed

Closer to home, another initiative that Pratt is excited about is the concept of farmers raising cover crops to rejuvenate the soil and prevent wind and soil erosion after grain harvest. The North, South and Central Bingham County SWCD’s are experimenting with cover crops and encouraging farmers to adopt the practice, she says.



The Pratts in their element.

“Back in the 1950s, my husband’s grandfather planted cover crops and now it’s cool again,” she says. “NRCS is leading the way with their Soil Health initiative.”

Pratt notes how the farmland in the Blackfoot area can lose large amounts of topsoil to windy conditions in the spring, following grain or spud harvest, sometimes closing Interstate 15. (See *Conservation the Idaho Way*, Issue 59, May 2018)

“The wind blows something terrible out here,” she says. “We need to have something covering the soil to prevent the erosion.”



Inset: Mark with an Idaho Falls cyclist out on the range. Main photo: Wendy, right, with her sisters, L-R, Janene, Donna, Merle, Becky and Kittie.

Pratt sees the cover crops as a value-add for the farmer, and then when farmers realize they can make extra income to graze the cover crops with livestock, all the better, she says. The Pratts have been able to graze some of their neighbors' cover crops with their cattle, providing an alternative food source to hay in the late fall. "There's still some resistance, but it's catching on," she says.

The Pratts also take pride in flood irrigating their farm in the valley, reducing the impact on ground water pumping from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA), and providing wildlife habitat along the ditches. About 10

percent of their irrigation water seeps into the aquifer.

"We like flood-irrigating," she says. "We used to be the guys who hogged the water, but it's sexy again. We're recharging the aquifer, and we're providing trees and cover for the birds."

She lauds the 2015 settlement agreement between farmers who pump ground water from the ESPA and senior surface water users, which required the pumpers to reduce their consumptive use by 13 percent per year to help restore the aquifer. "I was so happy to see the pumpers step up to the plate with that agreement," she says. "It restored my faith in humanity."

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