



Baa, Baa BLACK CATTLE

Six thousand ewes rule the range at M Diamond Ranch in Glenrock, Wyo. The mix of Rambouillet and Targhee sheep graze behind a herd of registered and commercial Angus cattle. It's the perfect recipe for success in the unforgiving environment of eastern Wyoming.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

“We have tried to be very diversified,” says Brad Boner of the 20,000 additional lambs they feed out each year. He jokes that “It keeps us out of trouble most days.”

The good-natured cattleman cannot remember a time when his family did not run both cattle and sheep together. Though this type of grazing scenario is mostly secluded to the western United States.

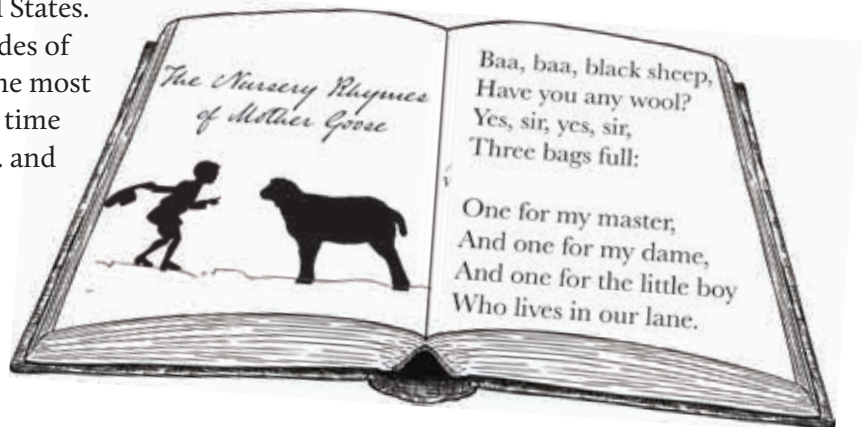
“We have always had sheep on both sides of the family,” Boner continues. “It is just the most efficient practice for this area. For a long time there used to be a lot of sheep in the U.S. and Wyoming.”

Sheep come through a pasture to eat up all the shorter grass growth while the cattle graze the larger forage.

“The sheep eat everything the cattle won't and vice versa,” Boner says. “We can run more total animal units

by combining the two than we could separately of either species. We figure, we have one cow for every five sheep on the property.”

Thanks to the prone-to-drought region they live in, averaging 12 inches of rain yearly, Boner says his family would not still be ranching if it weren't for the cattle and sheep combination.



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“Our cows are truly bred to thrive under the tough range conditions known to Wyoming. Calves are raised on mama’s milk, grass and lots of Wyoming scenery.”

— Brad Boner

PHOTOS BY SAVANNAH SIMMONS

comes to improved pasture practices. Though it is on his mind.

“We are at the mercy of Mother Nature here and the biggest drawback to investing in the pasture is that when we are dry, we can spend a ton of money on seed and nothing will grow,” he says. “But as land gets more expensive that is probably one of the places we will be able to increase our carrying capacity at the cheapest cost.”

Both species are supplemented in the winter to get them successfully through breeding, calving and lambing. Mineral and lick

tubs are also scattered throughout the pens and pastures to balance out their diet.

“Typically, we supplement our ewes in the middle of November with alfalfa and distillers’ grain to help them digest the high-fiber grasses we have here,” Boner adds.

They mostly rely on blue grama and prairie sandreed, especially the latter, for the cattle. The sheep generally eat up the sage brush and forbs underneath all of that.

Three generations full

Boner’s great-great-grandfather found his way to Wyoming by way of the historic cattle drives from Texas. The early 20th century move north resulted in the M Diamond brand that was later passed down from Boner’s grandfather to him and his brothers, Rob and Jeff, in the early 80s.

“I am the fifth generation to live in this county but my parents moved to the home place in 1964,” Boner says. “It was a sheep and cattle operation then, and we transitioned it to my brothers and me 54 years later, and now here we are.”

Have you any tall grass

“The environment very much dictates what we can do here, but it is conducive to this model of grazing,” Boner says. “You could call it a modified rotational grazing system.” Each year brings a new grazing pattern strategy to allow the forage time to grow. It’s fencing, not sheep herders, keeping the M Diamond animals on the 2,000 acres of range land.

“We just have so many head in each and we manage for that, it is not much different than the ranches with 20,000 head of cattle,” Boner explains.

Though they are not the largest ranch in Wyoming, the herds are definitely something to write home about. With 450 commercial Angus cattle and 125 registered Angus cows, the system is built to sustain all species of livestock on low inputs. “We demand our cows utilize available forage and convert it efficiently to be bred back to calve early in the next season and bring in a healthy calf in the fall,” Boner says of how the Angus female is their main focus when it comes to the registered herd. Equipped with both cool- and warm-season grasses, Boner has not explored his options when it

The first Wyoming residents of the family, back three generations, were not ranchers. Boner describes them as “laborers,” building ditches and all that would have entailed.

Originally a Hereford ranch, when Boner came back from college the first Angus cattle were purchased: commercial in 1984 and registered in 1989. Fourteen of those came from Sitz Angus.

Today, the outfit spans two ranches, one farm and supports two growing families.

“In 1992 we bought an irrigated farm east of Douglas, and the next year we were fortunate to buy a portion of the ranch my grandfather managed for 35 years,” Boner says, who lives on the original ranch known as the Coal Creek unit.

Two sons, the fourth generation, are back on the M Diamond, ready to continue the family tradition.

“When you are adding mouths to feed, you have to figure out how to add to the income stream as well,” Boner says. “That is a challenge for anyone in these generational operations.”

Their continued efforts in diversifying their operation, on all fronts, is what will keep this ranch progressing forward.

One for each pasture

Maintaining three separate herds in an intricate rotational grazing system is no small task when all the animals are the same species. It’s even more difficult when they are not, yet Boner continues to do so successfully while adding to the level of difficulty every chance he gets.

“We are involved in a vertically integrated system with the lambs where we own them all the way through until the retail case,” Boner says.

“It really helps because when the cattle market is up usually the sheep market is down and vice versa, it helps us hedge our risk over time,” Boner explains. “It keeps our cash flow from getting volatile.”

The feeder lamb program expanded last year to

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accommodate the progressive growth Boner needs.

An added bonus to raising sheep is having two crops: you get the lambs as well as the wool. More than one crop of lambs throughout the year isn’t such a bad aspect of it either.

The downside to sheep? Predation. Fortunately, the ranch contributes to the Wild Life Services Program that sends trappers and planes out to

control the population of animals eyeing sheep and lambs as their next snack.

“Without that program we would be in big trouble,” Boner says, exasperated.

On the cattle side of things, Boner is expecting a crop of calves to hit the ground in June to meet a specific demand for his customers.

“It seems there is a need for some older bulls [18-20 months] for our customers that do not want to manage the younger bulls,” Boner says of the first-year program.

Continuous expansion of the operation also means snapping up land every chance they get. Though land sales are few and far between.

And one for each bull

Since their focus is the Angus female, a major emphasis is placed on fertility. With a strong customer base of commercial cattlemen, Boner uses his grazing system to produce “Wyoming Tested Tough” cattle.

“We try to raise cattle that customers can take home and they will be profitable for them,” Boner says. “That is a balance of traits unique to Wyoming: we need cattle that are easy-fleshing, moderately framed and structurally sound.”

Though not a marketable philosophy according to Boner, his commercial producers want balanced animals that make incremental improvements. This is what makes them money.

“Balance is the key to long-term sustainability, it is a balance of everything,” he says. “We have

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seen incremental improvements in our birth and weaning weights over time. And our cows are showing good pregnancy rates as well.”

The biggest challenge is finding the genetics producing high-performing cattle on the rail. The Wyoming landscape makes this hard-fought trait-selection battle more of a guessing game than an actual selection process.

“Most of the higher marbling cattle we have used here just fall to pieces,” Boner says. “We want to have our cake and eat it too.”

Despite this, his cattle are efficient in the feedlot and boast a great cost-to-gain ratio. Qualifying 45% of the time for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)

brand, 95% of his cattle also grade Choice or better.

“Our goal is to get even more cattle that qualify for CAB and Choice or better, but only if we can find the genetic combination that works in our environment,” Boner says.

With each new calf crop hitting the ground, Boner gets insight into what works and what doesn’t to achieve his goals on the rail.

“When Angus cattle improved in the 1970s, it was because of the functionality of the female,” Boner explains. “If we lose sight of that we will lose our commercial cattlemen. If we can’t give them a good cow they will find one somewhere else. It is a delicate balancing act that is a marathon, not a sprint.” **AJ**

