

# High Valley Ranch

*Dave Duncan's innovative forage and production practices put this Washington Angus operation on the map.*

*Story & photos by Jerilyn Johnson*



What do an Alaskan fishing expedition business and a beef cattle operation have in common?

For Dave Duncan, quite a lot.

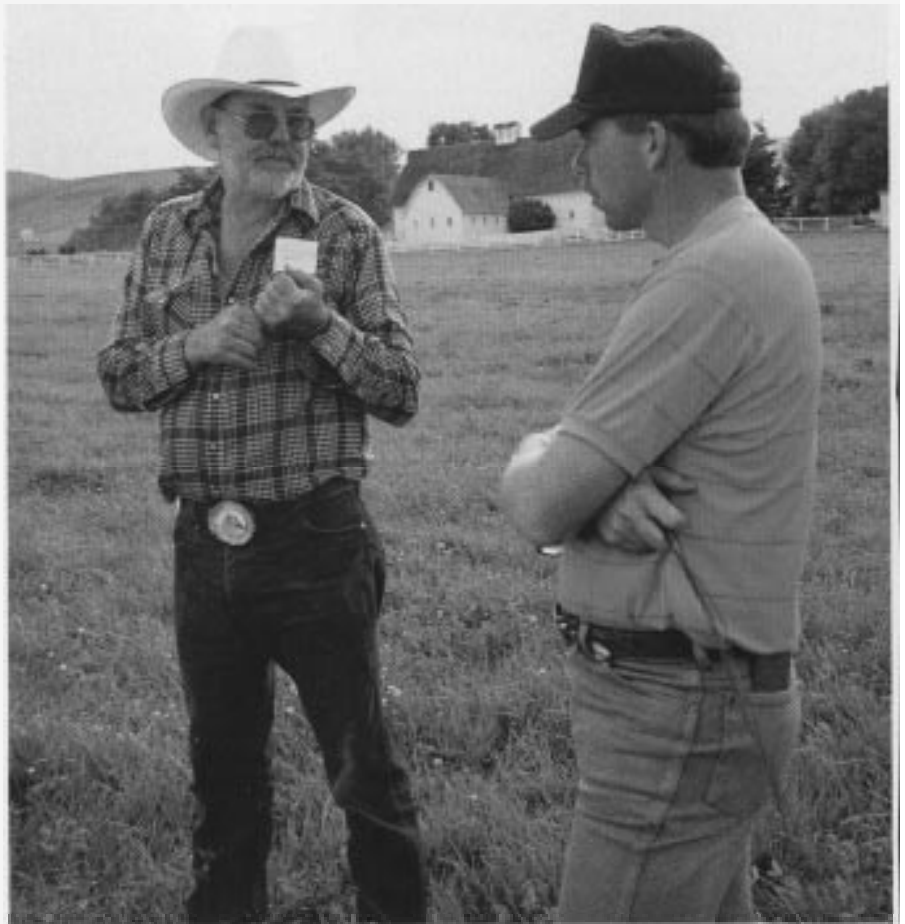
His Duncan & Sons Alaskan Outfitter business stands behind its guarantee of quality fishing, personal service, maintenance of natural resources, outstanding scenery and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.

His High Valley Ranch stands behind those very same qualities, with Angus cattle and beef as the featured products.

"I believe extra effort really pays off in a business — whether it's fishing or ranching," Duncan says. "It also helps when you have a genuine interest in what you're doing."

Ranching was Duncan's first goal in life. After growing up in northern California, he attended college at California State University, Chico. He earned a degree in animal husbandry there with every intention of one day owning a beef cattle operation. After graduation, however, the reality of starting out on his own hit. It wasn't feasible at the time.

Instead, Duncan chose his second love — fishing and hunting — and took a job as a guide in Alaska. That job eventually turned into a successful family business with all five of his sons — John, Clint, Todd, Brad, and Craig and daughter, Roxanne — becoming involved. Today it's known as Dave Duncan & Sons, Ltd. They offer fishing expeditions in four remote wilderness areas of Alaska from



*Dave Duncan explains the mechanics of his controlled grazing system to Jeff Windett, former Angus Association regional manager. Duncan inspects his grass and legume growth each day.*



*Irrigated pastures provide good summer pasture for High Valley's Angus cow herd.*

June through October. These expeditions attract adventure-seeking sportsmen from all over the United States and Canada.

In 1985, Duncan finally had the opportunity to fulfill his first dream. He purchased a cattle ranch near Ellensburg, Wash.

This working ranch was established in 1865. Beef and dairy cattle, horses, and forages had been raised there over the years. During the 1960s, under the ownership of cattleman L.T. Murray, the historic ranch included more than 130,000 deeded acres. Then in 1969, the Washington Game Department purchased 120,000 acres for Elk and other wildlife habitat development.

The Duncans purchased the ranch headquarters and remaining acreage in Murray's estate sale in 1985. They soon began investing in additional pastureland and began improving it for cattle and sheep grazing. Today the ranch includes 1,000 acres of improved range and 800 acres of irrigated pastureland.

**High Valley Ranch** is located east of the Cascade Mountain range in a scenic, rolling, high desert region of central Washington. It is dry, with less than 16 inches of rainfall recorded in an average year. The soil is good but very fragile. Overgrazing and drought can turn it into desert in no time. Irrigation was started on the ranch back in 1875 and has always been important for adequate forage growth and livestock watering.

Natural fertilization practices are followed here through livestock waste and nitrogen-fixing legumes. The ranch hasn't had a chemical fertilizer application in 50 years.

"Our pastures are as green as our neighbor's fertilized hay field," Duncan says with pride.

A strong believer in protecting natural resources as well as least-cost production, Duncan chose to follow a practice that would incorporate both these beliefs. In 1988 he enrolled in Alan Savory's Holistic Resource Management (HRM) course at Bozeman, Mont. This course taught him how controlled grazing, biological

planning, time management, and recordkeeping could make his ranch economically as well as environmentally sound.

"The HRM course taught me that you have to be out there observing your pasture's forage growth and your cattle every day," Duncan says.

Controlled grazing has many benefits for producers like Duncan. It allows increased stocking rates—Duncan's goal is to improve his animal units per acre from two to 3.5 head. Best of all, it extended their grazing season. Last year they grazed cattle all the way up to January 10.

A total of 11 paddocks per herd have been set up on the irrigated pastures with more than eighteen miles of electric fence built. Irrigation ditches and streams provide a central water supply. Their forage base is a 50:50 ratio of orchardgrass/tall fescue and white Dutch clover. The cattle are rotated into a new paddock every 1 1/2 to three days, depending on the season and forage growth. Cows and replacement heifers

from both the purebred and commercial herds graze together. Duncan is looking into creep-grazing the younger, growing calves.

**Don Mays**, a neighboring rancher and friend, also took Savory's HRM course with Duncan. Now the two cattlemen like to share ideas and compare results. "It helps us keep on track," he says.

Duncan first established a commercial beef herd on his ranch, utilizing Angus, Herefords and black baldy crossbreds and selling feeder calves. He also custom grazes pastures to neighboring ranchers for their commercial cows. This past year he had enough grass to run an extra 500 head.

Duncan recently added a stocker program which allows him to graze up to 800 head of cattle in his paddocks during the peak forage growth months of April through mid-July. The stockers gain approximately 225 to 250 pounds per head before marketing. The extra profit from these stockers goes into the purchase of winter hay supply for the cow herd.

"We don't have heavy-iron syndrome at our ranch," Duncan says. "We use very little machinery — I'm the owner of one tractor and some irrigation equipment. We don't raise our own hay. Our area has plenty of growers and a large hay supply so it's more economical for us to just buy it."

Area hay growers export a lot of hay to the Japanese market. Recently, Japanese buyers have become interested in Washington grown beef cattle. This option appeals to Duncan, who hopes to expand his beef marketing in the future.

Before export marketing takes off, however, Northwest States will need more feedlots and packers. Although Washington has good feedlots now, area feeder cattle are still sent to Idaho and the Central Plains. The high cost of transportation is often balanced out by better cattle prices.

In addition to cattle, the Duncans also have a flock of 100 Suffolk ewes. Sharon Duncan is in charge of this operation. The sheep are another important part of the controlled grazing program at High Valley Ranch. They graze 10 one-acre paddocks.



#### Angus are the Answer

Earlier this year, Duncan met yet another goal: He established a purebred Angus herd. After months of looking at breeding stock and sorting through records — traveling to Montana, Kansas and even to Virginia — he was able to put

*"We don't have heavy-iron syndrome at our ranch. I'm the owner of one tractor and some irrigation equipment."*

together a young cow herd of 40 animals and several quality herd bulls. He plans to add another 60 head of cows by the end of the year.

"I want to build a cow herd that will perform well," Duncan says. "We identified the better breeders, those who shared our same goals, then we started

buying behind their first cull cuts."

Duncan is using Angus bull semen from Traveler, Bando and Rim 88, for his first-calf heifers. The cows are being A.I. bred to Scotchcap, Rito 2100 and Leachman Tonto. He also has a growing battery of Angus bulls used for cleanup breeding and for the commercial cow herd.

Down the road, Duncan hopes to build a purebred herd of 250 to 300 cows and to be able to market 75 to 100 good bulls a year. He will target commercial cattlemen for his bull market.

Duncan has created a list of 10 production goals. He hopes to accomplish these through genetic improvement, balanced EPDs, strict culling and good forage nutrition. They are:

1. Reproductive efficiency
2. Fleshing ability and condition
3. Growth
4. Milking ability, sound udders
5. Moderate frame (5 to 6) and weight (1,150- to 1,300-pounds) cows
6. Soundness, good structure
7. Volume, thickness
8. Good feed conversion
9. Retail cutability
10. Choice; yield grade 2 or 3.

"These are tough goals," Duncan says, "but I want my cattle to fit the box and be marketable to the consumer."

**Future goals for** High Valley Ranch include adding a new computer software program. They recently looked into a successful herd management program created by Angus breeder Dave Nichols of Bridgewater, Iowa.

Duncan is also looking into a retained ownership program where progeny of all their Angus bulls can be identified and evaluated all the way to the packing plant.

"We feel that retained ownership will get us closer to the ultimate goal of value-based marketing," Duncan says. "It's where we need to be in the future."