

# Call of the Wild

The newest tourism trend takes visitors back to nature, giving some ranches and rural communities an economic boost.

by Kindra Gordon

Five years ago, Canadian, Texas, resembled many small towns across America. With a population of just 2,400 people, this county seat located northeast of Amarillo offered its ranching community mostly empty Main Street buildings.

Today, the town is home to 14 newly renovated buildings with businesses in each, 11 bed-and-breakfast retreats, eight restaurants and three motels — one even includes a conference center. In all, 160 new jobs have been created in the revived community.

What turned this town around? Tourism — but not the kind of tourism that boasts of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Statue of Liberty or Disney World. Instead, Canadian offers tourists a chance to experience nature, wildlife and even working cattle ranches.

“People want out of the urban jungle. They want to see the country,” says Dale Rollins, a professor and Extension wildlife specialist with Texas A&M University.

This new sightseeing trend, often termed

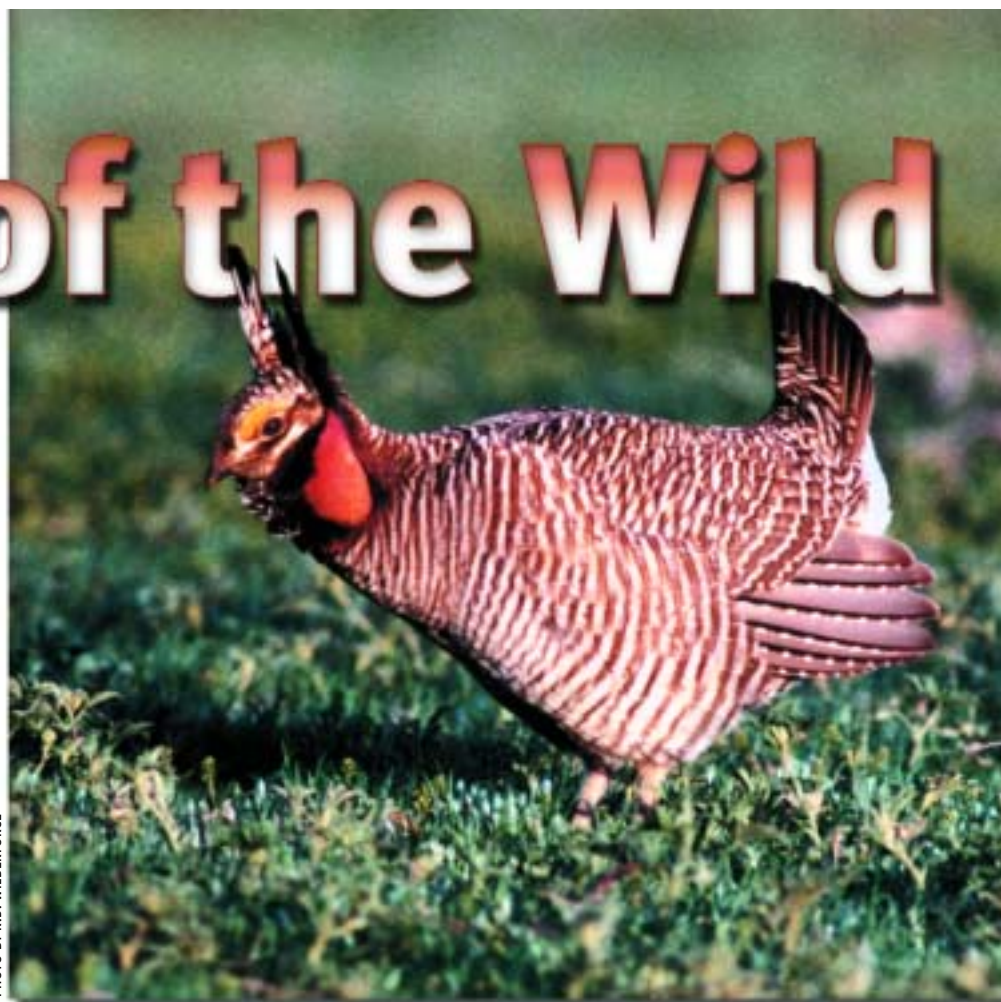


PHOTO BY R.D. WILBERFORCE

► The Lesser Prairie-Chicken, which is native to the Texas Panhandle region, is a featured attraction of the tourism enterprise of the Canadian, Texas, community. “We realized what we had that was unique were land tracts of 10,000 acres of wildlife habitat, particularly Lesser Prairie-Chicken habitat,” explains Remelle Farrar, Community Development director for the town.

“ecotourism,” serves up the natural elements these visitors seek.

“Ecotourism has evolved from the more traditional hunting leases. Hunting is still a big part of nature-based tourism, but now we are seeing interest in bird-watching, nature walks, and rural bed-and-breakfasts,” Rollins says.

Mountain biking, canoeing, trail rides,

even stargazing are other rural activities that fit the nature tourism niche. And, Rollins points out that these can be year-round income generators for landowners, whereas the hunting industry only offers a seasonal window of opportunity.

## Canadian’s story

Five years ago, the thought of selling bird-watching or nature walks was pretty foreign to people living in the community of Canadian. But the town’s economic development council was trying to develop viable business opportunities.

“The whole community was up in arms and looking for a new plan to revive Canadian,” says Remelle Farrar, who went from being a concerned citizen to Community Development director for the town.

At about the same time, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, which is native to the Texas Panhandle region, was being considered for listing as a threatened species.

“Canadian is primarily surrounded by native grass and ranching. We realized what we had that was unique were land tracts of

## Could your ranch be an ecotourism destination?

Before you jump into the ecotourism business, there are some considerations. Most importantly, you must like people, says Dale Rollins, a professor and Extension wildlife specialist with Texas A&M University.

Next, determine what you have to offer. What does your ranch have that is different or unique? Are there special plants or wildlife, historical points, or special scenic views?

To answer this question, you might enlist the help of local wildlife experts or bird-watchers to help take inventory. They can identify species that may be unique to your area and that can be a major attraction for some groups — especially for birders.

Third, identify your tourist clientele, and keep them informed of what your ranch and community offer.

Lastly, develop a business plan that addresses the recreational opportunities you have and want to provide, a fee schedule, a marketing plan and liability issues. (Each state has different rules regarding liability issues, so it may be best to consult a lawyer familiar with these issues.)

Rollins gives this advice, “Before you jump in, test the water first. Ask yourself if you are into the tourist business and if you are a people person.”

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10,000 acres of wildlife habitat, particularly Lesser Prairie-Chicken habitat,” explains Farrar, who has a ranch background. Therefore, a partnership was formed to work with private landowners to preserve this habitat.

Farrar says that at one of the initial meetings, one gentleman’s comment became a light-bulb moment. “This man said, ‘The Lesser Prairie-Chicken is just like raising a crop; landowners need an economic incentive to make it work. I realized tourism could do that,’” she says.

Farrar had read articles about ecotourism, and she soon contacted a nature tourism consultant who agreed to come to Canadian to host a workshop, but he had one stipulation. He required that neighboring counties be invited as well.

Farrar reports that approximately 50 civic leaders and ranchers turned out for that first meeting in 1998 and, as a result, formed Texas Prairie Rivers to develop ecotourism businesses within the 11-county area in the northeast Texas Panhandle. Ranchers, government agency representatives and community leaders were all a part of the new association.

“To start, we identified that we had a money bird — the Lesser Prairie-Chicken — so bird-watchers were a natural visitor to attract to our region. We also recognized that urban people seeking a taste of the ranching lifestyle they may have grown up with would be interested in our communities,” Farrar says.

But, she adds, “We knew that to bring people to communities we needed places to eat, things to do, places to stay.” So the newly formed Texas Prairie Rivers group shared their plan with businesses and landowners who could sign up to provide services to guests. (For landowners it might be nature walks, access to land to see the Lesser Prairie-Chicken and other wildlife, or access to the river to go

canoeing.) Within the first year, more than 300 partners and 300,000 acres were made available to prospective tourists.

Next, Texas Prairie Rivers shared their plan with people at the Texas Department of

Agriculture, the state’s parks and recreation program, birding groups, and the media. “We didn’t have money for marketing or advertising. So by developing relationships with people at those agencies and making them aware of Texas Prairie Rivers, they could refer people looking for nature-based tourism opportunities to us,” Farrar says.

The strategy worked and tourists, especially birders, began to seek out Canadian and its neighboring communities. Today, tourists coming to the area can sign up for various weekend activity packages — all orchestrated by Texas Prairie Rivers. For example, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken weekend is one of the packages offered.

“Meals, lodging, ranch visits and other activities are entirely organized. The visitor pays one fee to Texas Prairie Rivers, and we pay out to all the parties involved in providing services. For instance the access fee for landowners is \$25 per person each time the guest goes on the ranch,” Farrar explains.

With five years behind them, the now bustling community of Canadian is proof that ecotourism has brought revenue back to the ranches and rural communities involved.

Rancher Jim Bill Anderson has been involved with Canadian’s nature-based tourism from the start and today offers visitors access to his ranch for Lesser Prairie-Chicken viewing, wildlife-watching and canoeing. He says the business fits well with his commercial cow-calf operation and is just another way to make a dollar.

“There’s no infrastructure,” Anderson says. “You are just capitalizing on what you already have.

“I think it’s got a lot of potential and will grow exponentially,” he says. But he recognizes that having the entire community involved has been key to the area’s success. “A lot of ranchers have tried to



PHOTOS BY JESSICA RUSSELL



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offer some nature-based tourism activities, but didn't have a lot of success because the community wasn't involved. You need the economic development council and chamber of commerce involved to help promote what you have to offer."

Farrar agrees, saying, "Texas Prairie Rivers provides the service of a marketing middleman. Many landowners like to share their land, but don't know how to find guests or market it. We can put an entire weekend package together to make it a large enough attraction to draw large numbers of tourists."

### Future of ecotourism

Both Rollins and Farrar are optimistic that ecotourism offers opportunities for other ranches and rural communities.

"I think every rural area has the possibility of developing nature-based tourism," Farrar says.

"Everybody's looking to get away from urban settings and most ranches have scenic settings, wildlife or history to share."

Rollins agrees, saying, "People want private settings. It's often surprising what people will pay for a rural experience." He adds that ecotourism is especially well-suited to states with large tracts of private land, since tourists don't have nearby public lands that offer similar recreational opportunities.

For ranchers thinking about branching into ecotourism, this duo offers a few guidelines. Farrar emphasizes that it should be a community-wide effort.

"It's important for landowners developing ecotourism activities to work with other businesses in the community," she says. "Most ranches won't hold enough attraction for a full weekend of activities or be able to offer full-service tourist amenities." She also points out that for the community to benefit economically, it's important to keep tourists for a two- or three-day stay.

While determining if your ranch would be suited for ecotourism, Rollins says first decide if you like people.



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"That will be the nuisance factor," he says. Next look at what you have to offer vs. what's available. "You need to find a niche, maybe it's recreational opportunities or a private lodging experience that isn't already available," Rollins says.

He adds that there may be some management trade-offs as well. "If you're managing rangelands for maximum livestock production, you can't maximize wildlife production. So, depending on what you are trying to offer, you will need to find a compromise for balance," he says.

In and around Canadian, Farrar says landowners implemented several conservation projects to preserve the Lesser Prairie-Chicken and its habitat, establishing a solid foundation for their ecotourism businesses built around this special bird. Due to landowners' efforts, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken was never listed as a threatened species.

"That's the great thing about this whole story," Farrar adds. "And, what we see now is that the government agencies involved now have a preference for working with private landowners to allow ranching and wildlife habitat to co-exist."

Farrar says a final benefit is that nature tourism also offers public relations opportunity for the ranching industry. "This is another opportunity to spotlight private landowners as the best stewards of the land. By bringing guests onto ranches we are educating urban people about landowner's conservation efforts. Ultimately, that is most important because the population centers often carry the vote in deciding what happens to us in rural areas."

For more about Texas Prairie Rivers, visit [www.texasprairierivers.com](http://www.texasprairierivers.com). Farrar is also director of a new effort called the Prairie States Coalition, which is working to develop a wildlife trail and other nature tourism opportunities through Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico.

### Ecotourism activities

- Guided bird or wildflower walks
- Photography
- Wildlife watching from blinds
- Owl prowls at night
- Stargazing in dark, rural settings
- Special hikes to unique scenic areas
- Bird-watching or wildlife viewing by canoe or kayak
- Fossil walks along creek beds
- Interpretive walks featuring geology, historic sites or ranching heritage
- Mountain biking or horseback riding trails
- Camping or backpacking
- Chuckwagon meals with music or storytelling
- Observing or assisting cattlemen as they work livestock
- Relaxing and experiencing a rural setting

Source: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

