

Spring Cattle Drive in Idaho

From the desert to the forest, family and friends trail cattle the whole way.

Commentary & photos by Paige Nelson, field editor

It was cold enough to want a coat that morning when we saddled our horses in the dim light of the barn. For the next two days, we would trail about 430 pairs of commercial Angus cattle 11 miles, taking them from our eastern Idaho Bureau of Land Management (BLM) desert allotment just north of Saint Anthony, Idaho, to our U.S. Forest Service (USFS) allotment near Island Park, Idaho, for the summer grazing season.

We loaded the horses in trailers in the morning darkness and pulled out of White Sands Co. headquarters. The green digits on the dashboard clock read 5:30 a.m. It was June 19, 2014.

The pickups rolled into the Old Well, our starting point, about 45 minutes later, just as the sun rose over the Tetons. Most of us tied our raincoats onto our saddles before riding off for the day. Idaho rains don't usually last long, but they can be unpredictable and cold.

Clayton Eliason passed out snack bags saying, "You guys all better take one of these, or Cindy will kick my butt."

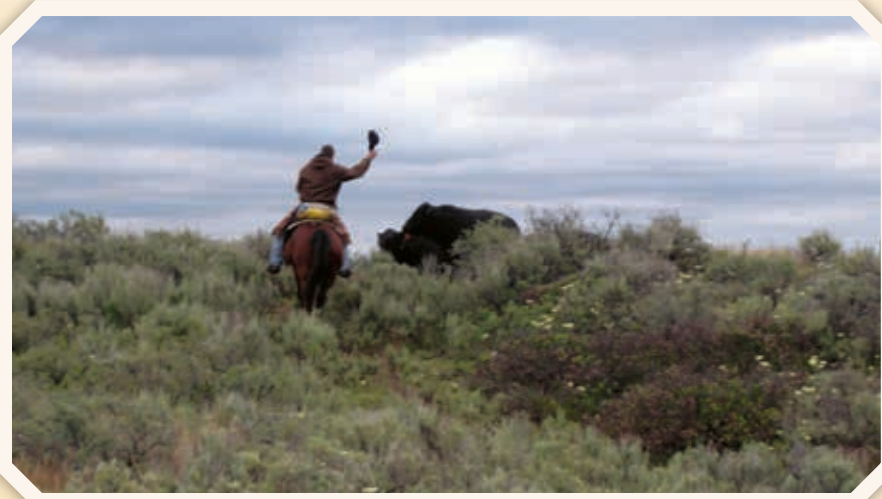
Mom diligently puts together a Ziplock® bag full of snacks for every cattle drive. This time we got jerky, string cheese, a granola bar, a sucker and candy. Wade Mackert passed out the two-way radios and water. We wouldn't see the pickups again till late afternoon. ☺



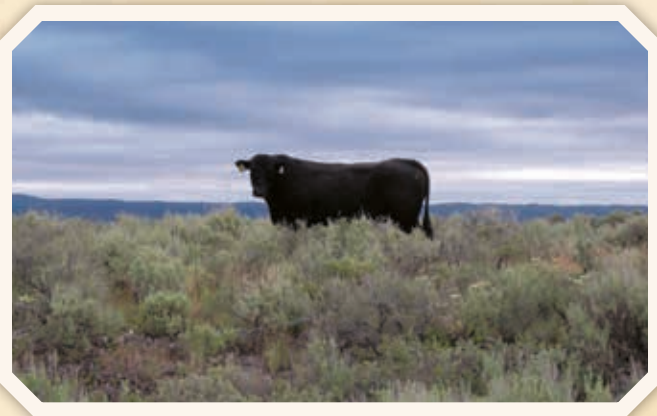
► Trailhands leave the horse trailer and start the roundup around daybreak. Pictured are (from left) J.C. Stimpson, Zak Miller, Clayton Eliason, Rylan Miller, Wade Mackert, Tyler Nelson and Rick Miller.



►“If you guys want to head up to the north corner and check that out, we’ll kinda cover this south side and meet you at the well,” directs Wade Mackert.
“We’ll cover the east side and push everything we find north,” I reply.



►Tyler and I had volunteered to cover the east side. Not too long into our search we found two bulls and two pairs. Tyler went to get the bulls started. Oftentimes the cattle stay in small social groups and spread out to find the best feed. This early in the morning they are still enjoying their early morning grazing bout. It is always a relief to find a matching number of calves and cows.



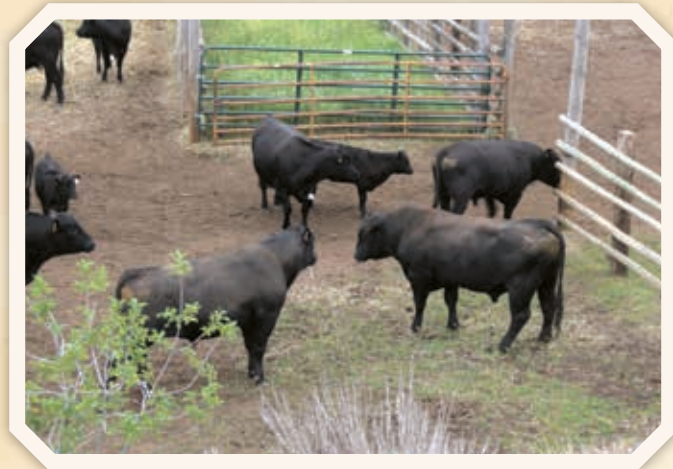
►The clouds were heavy all morning, and it looked like rain would fall. The conditions kept the temperature down and made traveling easier on the cattle.

The cattle were spread throughout the 4,000-acre pasture. Their only source of water was a well with a water trough located close to the north gate — our exit point. The plan was to spread out and cover some ground, eventually heading for the well, picking up pockets of cattle as we found them. Angus cattle can be easy to miss out here; they blend in with the black lava rock. ☞

►**Right, next page:** When Tyler and I reached the North Well with our herd, about 100 head were already there. Most of them were pretty content, but a few of the younger, less-experienced cattle were anxious to get going and were starting to spread out again.



►“Hang on. I need to tighten my cinch. Cody (horse) has lost some weight since this morning,” says Tyler Nelson.



►Once out on the range, the bulls usually establish dominance patterns and spread out amongst the cattle. When they are brought together again, the process can start anew. This time, the loser is taking off in the opposite direction of his foes.



With the majority of the herd gathered at the well, and just a few stragglers being trailed in from the far reaches of the pasture, it was time to start them on their way. After some whoops and hollers, the cattle trailed out on the North Well Road, headed for the mountains. 🐾



►The tail end requires plenty of good riders to keep cows and calves moving and to turn back any runaways. Pictured are (from left) Lyndsey Kunz; Wade Kunz; and Rylan, Zak, Clayton and Lee Miller.



►The cattle will string out along the trail for miles if they are allowed to travel at a nice, even pace. This makes trailing easier on the cows and the cowboys.



►Left: Lava rock monuments can be spotted throughout the Saint Anthony desert. Before many roads were built, the sheepherders would build them for use as location markers.

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The end point for the day was a wire corral situated along a fenceline where the cows would water and mother up. Around dusk the north gate was opened, allowing the cattle to drift toward their destination, but the fenceline kept them from returning to the desert allotment. It was 7 miles from the North Well to the wire corral. ☞

►The tail end arrives at the corral around 11 a.m. Lyndsey's horse, Hank, watches as the lead cattle file into the corral. Rhett Kunz has waited all day to ride and finally gets to with his dad walking alongside.

"Yeah, and I have Luke Skywalker from Lego® Starwars. He's a good guy," Rhett Kunz explains to his grandpa (Lee).

Pictured are (from left) Lyndsey Kunz, Cole Kunz (walking), Rhett Kunz, Lee Miller and Clayton Eliason.



►We left the North Well before Wade Mackert and his group of cows had arrived. He has barely caught up to the rest of the herd at the end of the day.

"Hi Wade, nice of you to show up today! Thanks for all your help," Lyndsey jokes.

"Well, if you guys wouldn't have been going so fast, I would have showed up a lot earlier," he retorts.

►Below: J.C. Stimpson says, "C'mon Paige, get a picture of the workin' men around here." He and Wade Mackert drove the water truck to the cow camp so the horses and dogs could get a drink.





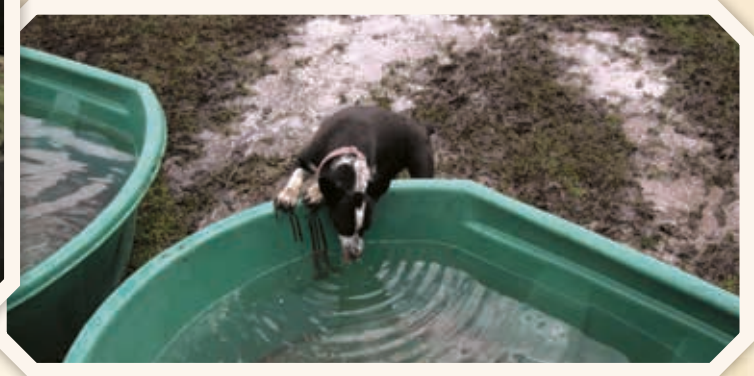
►It's the final push through the corral gate. Go slow and everything will be fine. A few calves are starting to turn around and look at us, so it's time to back off a little and let them figure it out.

"Hup cows, hey cows, hey cows," Rylan calls.

Pictured are (from left) Lyndsey Kunz, Wade Mackert, Saylor Kunz, Tyler Nelson and Rylan Miller.



►J.C. Stimpson rode ahead of the herd and made sure the troughs were full for our thirsty cattle and dogs.



►**Left:** Cindy Miller, wife, mother, grandma and cook, packed the camper full of food the day before. She filled the refrigerator and six coolers, plus a water jug. There is no electricity out here, so all cooking is done with fire and propane. Barbecued brisket, baked beans, salad, chips, grapes and homemade bread are served for lunch. The kids cannot stay away from all the pop in the blue cooler to the left. Sylvia Miller, Kristal Miller and Marcy Miller have all helped to prepare food for the cattle drive.

"Cindy, this is really good," says Wade Mackert.

"Ah, anything's good when you're hungry," she replies.



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After a few painkillers and lunch, some cowpokes settle down for a nap and others entertain the kids. There is plenty to do at the cow camp and always someone with which to swap stories. ☞

►“Ok, now, I think this pole goes there,” says Lee Miller. Pictured are (from left) Cole Miller, Lee, Sicaly Miller and Zak Miller.



►A game of “Monkey in the Middle” breaks out in camp. “Over here, Crew. Come get it, Crew,” Wade Kunz taunts his younger cousin. Pictured are (from left) Wade Kunz, Rhett Kunz, Crew Miller and Rylan Miller.



►We let a few horses at a time graze. The four mares like to stick together. Pictured are (from left) Tess, Roxie, Pepper and Lucy.



►As Tyler Nelson brushes off from the previous dog pile, he goes back down.



►Nine-year-old Belle is tired after a long day on the trail.



► Around dusk, revived with new energy after a lazy afternoon, a fierce game of Chinese Checkers, a family favorite, breaks out.



PHOTOS BY LYNDSEY KUNZ



► After a good, long roll, Lucy relaxes in the grass.



► Time to eat. This time we get roasted hot dogs and lunch leftovers. Tired and sore, we all decide to go to bed early tonight.
“Hey, Dad, where is the ibuprofen?” asks Rick.

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► We were up with the sun and saddling in the morning chill. Tess munches on compressed hay cubes. She has another big day ahead.

Almost as soon as we went to bed, it was clear we were too close to the sheep flock camped just over the hill. We didn't hear much bawling from our cows, but the sheep went on all night.

As the moon rose, we listened to the coyote choir. It was a welcome sound compared to the wolves that howled two years ago.

The second day began with another roundup and then a ride of 4 miles to our destination. The cows had grazed all night and were spread out but willing to travel. 🐾



► Before hitting the trail for another roundup and drive, cowboys (from left) Cole, Craig and Lee eat Cindy's homemade banana bread and sip hot chocolate and orange juice. Belle (dog) hopes to sneak a piece, too.

"Well, how did you guys sleep last night?" asks Lee. "I slept like a rock until Gus woke us up last night. He needed a drink at 2 a.m.," replies Cole.



► As we climb in elevation, the landscape begins to change from the high-desert sage to mountain shrub land. Eventually, we will end in the conifer forest up ahead.



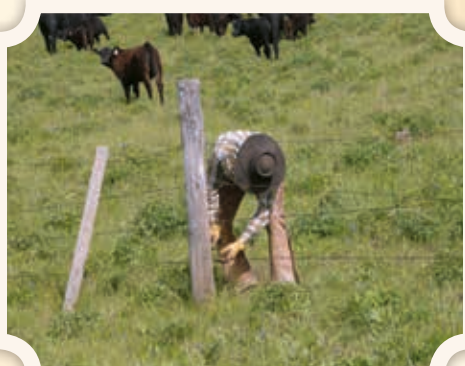


►By now the calves know how to trail, and the cows are anxious to get to the forest.

We drive on past the forest fenceline and into another wire corral where the strays will be sorted out and pairs will be allowed to mother again. The lush forest grass is hard to resist. 🐾



►The calves watch as the corral is built.



►Rick puts up the corral fence. It will be let down a few hours from now.

PHOTO BY LYN DSEY KUNZ

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►Keeping their eyes on the prize — a stray calf — (from left) Rick, Zak, Lee and Clayton form a moving fence toward the gate. “Easy now, boys. Easy,” Lee says quietly to the calves.

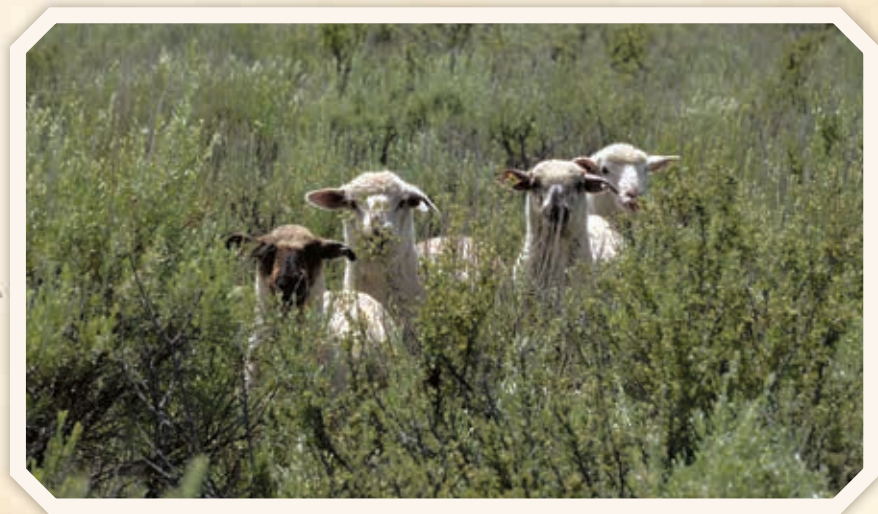
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► Sylvia Miller enjoys a hamburger and a Coke. She has helped on almost every spring cattle drive for 51 years. At 90 she still drives a pickup and horse trailer up the trail.

When the strays are sorted off and trailed home, about 2 miles away, we head back to the cow camp for lunch. The cattle work is done. It's been a successful and, more importantly, a safe cattle drive for the White Sands Co. and the Miller family. 🍴



► The sheep pay a visit before we pull out of cow camp.

PHOTOS BY LYNDSEY KUNZ



► The Miller Family. Pictured are (back row, from left) Marcy Miller, Zak Miller, Augustus (Gus) Kunz, Cole Kunz, Rhett Kunz, Wade Kunz, Sylvia Miller, Crew Miller, Rylan Miller, Case Miller, Rick Miller, Lee Miller, (front row from left) Sicaly Miller, Blyss Miller, Lyndsey Kunz, Sayler Kunz, Kristal Miller, Tyler Nelson, Paige Nelson. Horse riders are: (from left) Hallee Miller, Cindy Miller.

