



RESEARCH ON THE RANCH

Career training on private working cattle ranches in South Texas

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▲ **Ranch management interns at the East Foundation gain stockmanship skills by participating in cattle workings. During the internship, they also get exposure to various range and wildlife research projects occurring on East Foundation ranches.**

Emily Stribling

In the United States, private lands are critical for wildlife conservation. Endangered ocelots (*Leopardus pardalis*) roam dense thorny brushlands on private ranches in South Texas, searching for small mammals and birds to hunt. Imperiled lesser prairie-chickens (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) lek on privately owned rangelands across the Great Plains. Migrating monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*) flutter among private farms, ranches and forests en route to their seasonal destinations.

Because private lands provide wildlife habitat, they can also serve as training grounds for future wildlife professionals and

resource stewards. East Foundation's science program offers such career training opportunities on its properties in South Texas. We mentor young people on our private working cattle ranches, allowing trainees to develop professional skills, support private land stewardship and learn how wildlife conservation and livestock production can coexist.

East Foundation is just one example of private land in the U.S. We want to inspire other landowners and partners to create similar opportunities for new wildlifers, as well as inspire students and young professionals to seek out private land experience.

WORKING ON WORKING LANDS

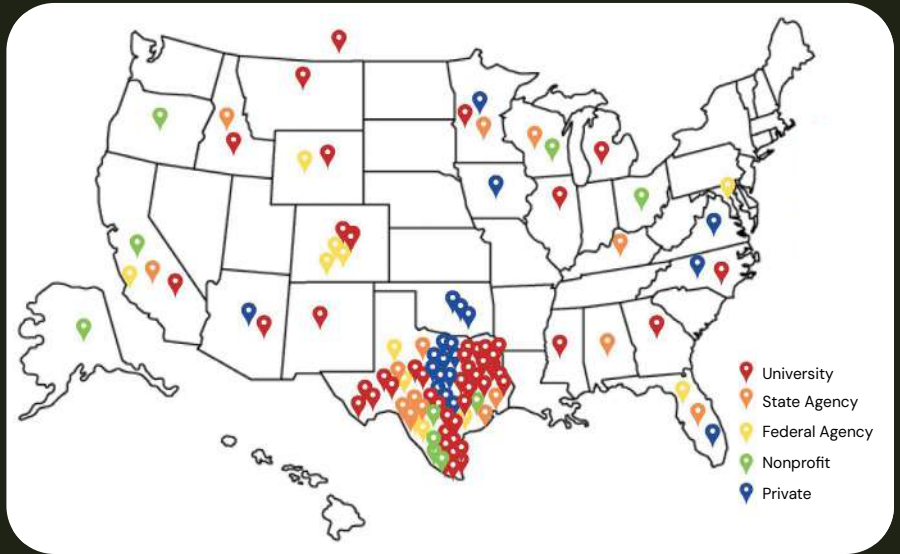
[East Foundation](#) privately owns and operates 217,000 acres of working rangeland across six properties in South Texas.

Those acres are made up of various ecosystem types, including coastal marshes, sand plain grasslands and savannas, live oak woodlands and Tamaulipan thornscrub brushlands. East Foundation lands support an active livestock production operation and diverse wildlife populations—ranging from endangered species like the ocelot to abundant species like white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

Our mission is to promote the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science and education. We operate as an IRS-designated Agricultural Research Organization, a unique type of 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, which requires us to continuously work with land grant universities and colleges of agriculture to use our ranches as living

IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

As of the end of 2025, East Foundation's career training alumni include over 3,000 deer capture participants, 45 university researchers and 100 total interns and technicians. Trainees go on to work for state and federal agencies, universities, private companies and nonprofit organizations around the country, often in leadership positions. (Read a few profiles [on our alumni showcase website](#).) No matter the locations or roles where our alumni land, East Foundation hopes that their experiences with us enable them to be capable professionals, leaders and advocates for private land stewardship.



laboratories for agricultural research ([Campbell et al. 2025](#)). Our research provides information to support conservation and enhance decision-making by stewards of working lands, with [scientific studies](#) on our lands spanning livestock production and ranch management, land stewardship and management, and wildlife management and conservation.

East Foundation's research designation, project portfolio, mission and organizational assets (including land, cattle, natural resources, resource allocation, expertise and flexibility) distinguish us amongst private operators and allow us to offer formal career training opportunities on our lands. We choose to make this an organizational priority because we understand firsthand that successful entry into the natural

▲ Current known positions and locations of East Foundation's intern, technician, graduate student and postdoctoral alumni.

resource profession is experience-driven, with new professionals needing access to meaningful field experiences. Training experiences with organizations like East Foundation are unique in the natural resource world because they expose trainees to management practices on private working lands.

CAREER TRAINING OFFERINGS

East Foundation, on its own and through partnerships, offers several career training opportunities. No matter which experience a trainee engages in or how long they

work with East Foundation, each trainee gets the unique opportunity to experience private lands where diverse stewardship activities occur, including cattle production, conservation of threatened and endangered species, [education of local schoolchildren](#), science projects and sustainable harvest research. Our hope is that exposure to diverse activities on our land will help our trainees develop into future leaders who appreciate the value of private land stewardship.

Ranch management interns

Ranch management interns live on East Foundation ranches for up to six months and primarily shadow and assist ranching

staff with cattle operations and general ranch management. Interns develop stockmanship and livestock handling skills, and learn rangeland management principles like how to consider available forage and pasture conditions when making stocking decisions. Along the way, interns experience many different elements of our land stewardship mission, with opportunities to assist staff and partners with education programs and range and wildlife research projects. These internships are geared toward future ranch managers who are recent graduates or current undergraduates. We also work with interns and their universities to provide course credit.

Research technicians

Seasonal technician positions with East Foundation also go for up to six months, but they are project-specific and designed for early-career professionals seeking research experience to build on a range or wildlife background. East Foundation scientists and our partners train technicians to collect data for one of our research projects and to operate independently in the field on our ranches. For example, rangeland ecology technicians learn to identify plants and estimate biomass. This provides our ranch management team with stocking rates for our long-term, large-scale grazing study where we experiment with different cattle grazing



◀ **High school Land Stewardship Ambassadors hear from East Foundation staff and other professionals during their program, allowing them to learn about career paths in natural resources.**

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◀ **East Foundation invites about 200 undergraduate students each year to participate in our annual deer captures. Participating students spend a weekend handling deer and collecting samples and data for East Foundation's long-term research on deer populations.**

Jonathan Vail

systems and monitor impacts on range vegetation, wildlife populations and live-stock productivity ([Montalvo et al. 2020](#)). Other technician groups monitor northern bobwhite quail (*Colinus virginianus*) populations through trapping and other survey efforts and collect data for our sustainable bobwhite harvest study ([Woodard et al. 2022](#)). Beyond their specific project work, technicians can also observe or assist with other East Foundation activities, including cattle working events like sorting and branding, different research projects and field lessons for local schools.

Graduate students and postdoctoral researchers

East Foundation collaborates with universities to conduct diverse scientific studies. University graduate students (both master's and doctoral) and postdoctoral researchers work on these studies alongside their faculty advisors, with East Foundation providing researchers access to study sites on our ranches. East Foundation scientists serve on graduate committees and help graduate students and postdocs go through a cycle of project development, data collection and analysis. As we help university researchers develop into scientists, we also encourage

them to think about how to communicate with landowners and managers; every year, we challenge graduate students to translate their research into land stewardship implications via a presentation to a nonscientific lay audience during our [Three Minute Thesis competition](#). This is a valuable experience. "Communicating science in a way that speaks to landowners and non-scientist-minded individuals is just one of the many skills I have better developed through my work with East Foundation," said graduate program alum Silverio Avila, who currently works in extension with Texas A&M AgriLife.

Undergraduate research volunteers

We provide short-term opportunities for undergraduate students to assist with research projects and land management (e.g., prescribed burning) on our ranches. Most notably, we invite about 200 undergraduates to our ranches each year to participate in [white-tailed deer captures](#)—one of our longest and largest research efforts. Various universities engage and we usually connect with participants via TWS student chapters. Student volunteers receive training from East Foundation and university researchers before spending a weekend handling

large mammals, collecting and organizing samples and measurements from live individuals, and safely releasing animals. For some undergraduates, East Foundation deer captures may be their first exposure to field research, working lands or handling wildlife. "Opportunities to get such unique hands-on experiences are rare," said Bryan Spencer, who helped train deer capture volunteers as part of his master's degree work at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. "While we may learn about wildlife handling techniques and biology in the classroom, field experiences leave an everlasting impression." Experiences in the field with East Foundation helped Spencer land a Ph.D. position at the University of Idaho.

High school Land Stewardship Ambassadors

[Land Stewardship Ambassadors](#), managed jointly with [The Witte Museum](#) in San Antonio, is one offering in our [Behind the GatesSM](#) education program. The goal of this offering, available to high school students in South Texas, is to increase awareness of land stewardship principles, promote civic engagement and inspire entry into careers that support land stewardship. Throughout the semester-long program, ambassadors meet locally to



◀ **Bobwhite quail technicians collect data from a quail trapped for research on sustainable harvest. East Foundation's research technicians are trained to work independently in the field collecting data for one of our ongoing projects.**

Jonathan Vail

hear from East Foundation staff and other guest speakers representing agency, university, private and nongovernment backgrounds. Speakers exemplify different career paths in natural resources. The program culminates with a weekend in the field at East Foundation's headquarters ranch in the South Texas brush country. Some of the over 260 ambassador alumni have gone on to become East Foundation interns or technicians, and most plan to pursue a career in natural resources or agriculture. Even for those who don't, the program allows them to experience working lands, enhance their agriculture and science literacy and learn how to be an advocate for resource stewardship.

VALUE OF EAST FOUNDATION TRAINING EXPERIENCES

Throughout their time with us—whether one weekend as an undergraduate volunteer or five years as a doctoral student—East Foundation trainees get to see for themselves how cattle production, scientific research and range and wildlife management coexist as elements of private land stewardship. "I appreciated being able to work with East Foundation, where the mindset is to find solutions

to make ranching and wildlife managers allies," said Seth Rankins, a wildlife researcher who studied white-tailed deer during his master's degree with East Foundation. For trainees like Rankins pursuing a wildlife career, experiences with East Foundation expose them to the realities of wildlife management on a large-scale private agribusiness, where trainees routinely interface with cattle herds, the ranch management team and ranch infrastructure. Meanwhile, ranch management trainees get opportunities to explore research and management focused on the wildlife populations living on the lands they are being trained to steward.

As they complete work that supports East Foundation mission, trainees' understanding of private land stewardship grows and they develop diverse technical and practical skills that aid their professional development. Technical skills acquired can include animal handling, species identification, radio telemetry, camera trapping, data organization and analysis and more. Trainees also learn practical skills like ranch etiquette, equipment maintenance and operation, field navigation and independent problem-solving in remote

environments. Developing these skills helps trainees become confident professionals who can operate independently in any outdoor setting, whether on private or public lands. Faith Hardin, who obtained a master's degree monitoring birds on East Foundation ranches and is now a project manager at the University of Montana, said that "working solo on the expansive San Antonio Viejo Ranch, running into rattlesnakes, angry bulls and angrier cacti gave me a confidence in backcountry work I didn't have before."

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Informal training and mentorship of the next generation's private land operators and stewards via family, neighbor or community connections have long been cornerstones of agriculture. For young people who don't have those personal connections to private landowners, expanding available opportunities to gain meaningful experiences on private working lands can benefit the wildlife profession and resource stewardship by private land managers. At East Foundation, we have found that career training on our lands is mutually beneficial; trainees develop

knowledge and skills and we receive support for our stewardship goals.

We also recognize that our situation is uncommon. Only a handful of private landowners may operate at East Foundation's geographic scale and be able to offer structured career training programs on their own. However, partnerships between landowners and universities or other organizations can help bridge private land access gaps. For East Foundation, our relationships with universities are key to career training, as faculty help us connect with trainees, develop experiences and provide mentorship. This is not unique; across Texas, many landowners provide land access to university wildlife researchers, giving students a site to explore their research questions while observing diverse land management practices firsthand. We offer below a few recommendations for landowners and partners who seek to provide career training.

First, we recommend creating specific and focused positions to attract applicants whose interests, skills and career goals are relevant to the position. In addition to being helpful for recruiting, keeping positions focused helps staff know what experiences to provide the trainees. Next, we can accommodate novice trainees but also recruit more experienced individuals, making sure to provide them with greater responsibility and leadership opportunities. Remembering that all trainees' roles are still developmental, we always provide appropriate tasks for an individual along with clear rationale and context for why those tasks matter for

larger management goals important to the landowner. We recommend regular check-ins with trainees to evaluate their performance and to ensure that their expectations and ours are met.

East Foundation encourages trainees to synthesize their experiences into a product. Graduate students write a thesis or dissertation, and even interns and technicians can conduct their own project, join a publication they collected data for or present at a conference or event about their work with East Foundation. These experiences require engagement in the scientific process, critical thinking and independent work. A product can also be a helpful addition to a developing professional's resume. For example, East Foundation technicians have presented at the Texas Chapter of the Wildlife Society annual meetings and published a unique finding from an East Foundation ranch ([Rice et al. 2022](#)).

Finally, we recognize that newcomers to the wildlife profession may be unfamiliar with the importance of private lands. Some may see private lands as "unprotected" and thus not contributing to conservation. East Foundation and many other landowners certainly exemplify that private working ranchlands producing beef can also support ecosystem services, game populations and endangered species. We encourage students and early-career professionals in natural resources to remain open-minded; consider gaining experience on private lands to learn how they benefit public trust wildlife even when not owned or managed by a public agency. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION about East Foundation and our career training opportunities, please visit EastFoundation.net. You can also find us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



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Andrea Montalvo, Ph.D., is the research scientist for East Foundation. She obtained her Ph.D. working on East Foundation land, leads the Foundation's current range monitoring program, mentors interns and technicians and conducts wildlife population monitoring in partnership with universities.



Landon Schofield, CWB, is the range and wildlife biologist at East Foundation. He works with university graduate students to implement their research projects in the field and leads East Foundations' annual deer capture efforts. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. focused on exotic game species.



Ashley Reeves, D.V.M., Ph.D., is the research veterinarian at East Foundation. She participated in the graduate school program as a Ph.D. student and currently advises graduate students and ocelot research technicians. Her research focuses on reproductive advances in endangered species, health investigation and management in wildlife and domestic species, and wildlife capture and anesthetic protocols.



Abe Woodard, Ph.D., CWB, is the range and wildlife scientist at East Foundation. He leads East Foundation's sustainable bobwhite quail harvest study—a project he began working on as a Ph.D. student in East Foundation's graduate school program—and trains quail research technicians and graduate students.