

2026

RESOURCE ISSUE

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About Us

East Foundation promotes the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education.

We manage more than 217,000 acres of native South Texas rangeland, operated as six separate ranches in Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, and Willacy counties. Our land is a working laboratory where scientists and managers work together to address issues important to wildlife management, rangeland health, and ranch productivity. We ensure that ranching and wildlife management work together to conserve healthy rangelands.

East Foundation was established with a bequest from the estate of Robert East in 2007. In pursuit of our mission, we use our resources to build future leaders through programs that introduce students to private land stewardship. We invest in future professionals through internships, graduate fellowships, and close engagements with university programs.

We care for our land and are always exploring more efficient ways to get things done and are continuously guided by our values to conserve the land and resources.

We do what's right for the land and the life that depends on it.

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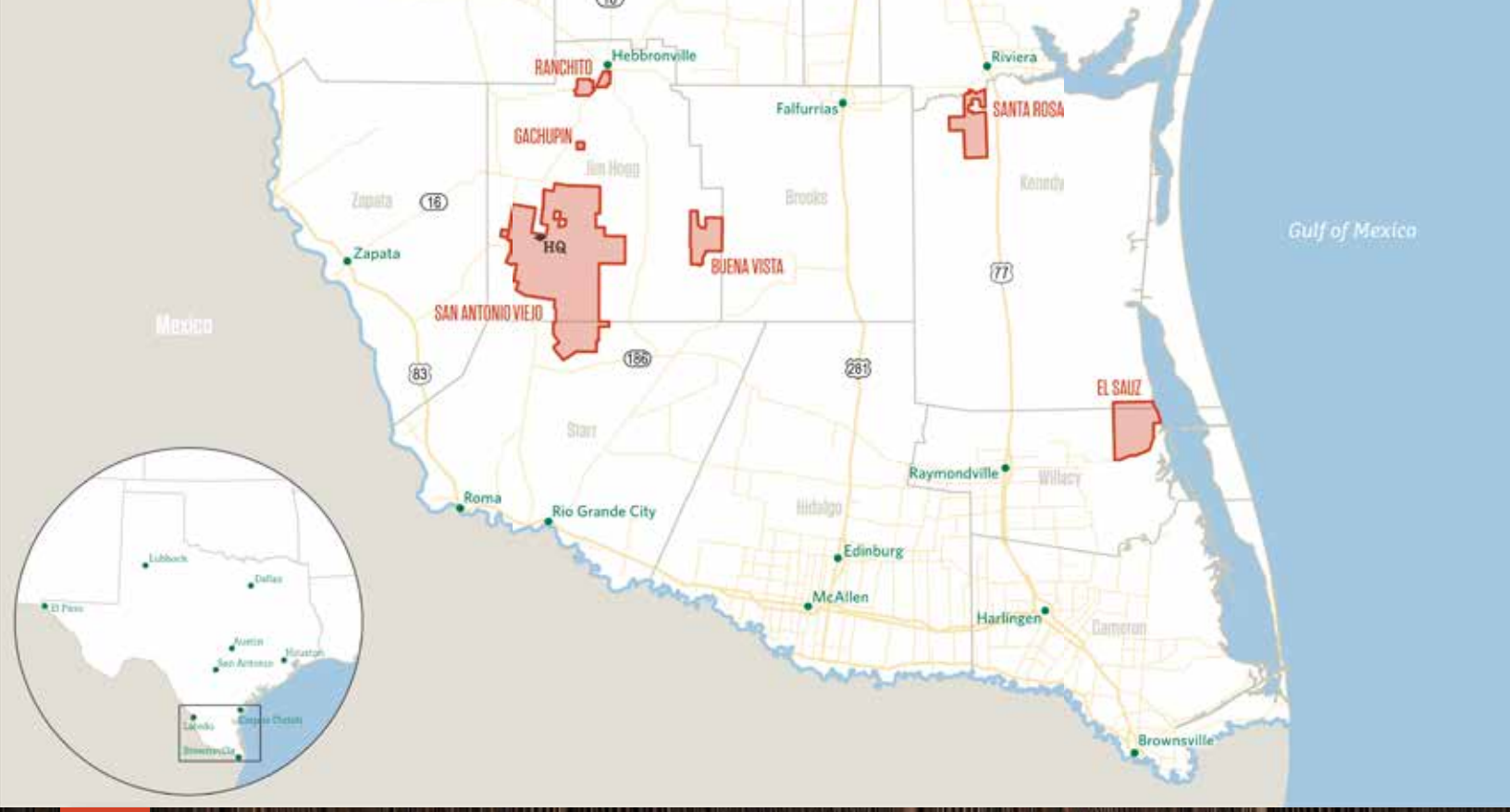
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About East Foundation







Knox Kronenberg, Emily Stribliing, Jonathan Vail

Our Mission

East Foundation promotes the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education. In pursuit of our mission, we use our working ranchlands and abundant natural resources to build future leaders through programs that introduce students to private land stewardship. We invest in future professionals through internships, graduate fellowships, and close engagements with university programs.



Emily Stribling

We promote the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education.

Our Land & Operations

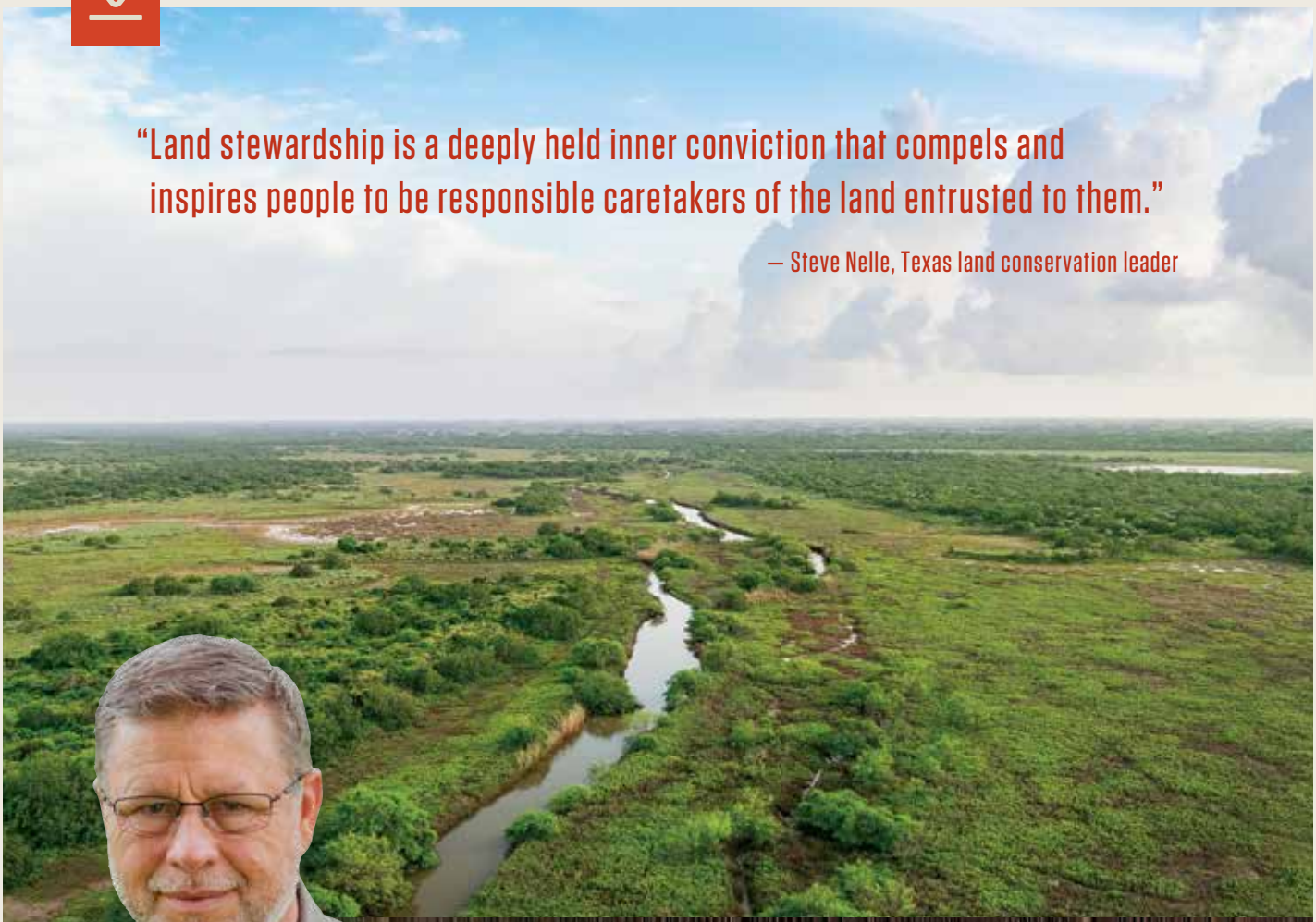
We ranch in the Wild Horse Desert, a region also known as the South Texas Sand Sheet and the Coastal Sand Plains, an area prone to both drought and extreme heat. We manage over 217,000 acres of native South Texas rangeland, operated across six ranches in Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, and Willacy counties.



Our History

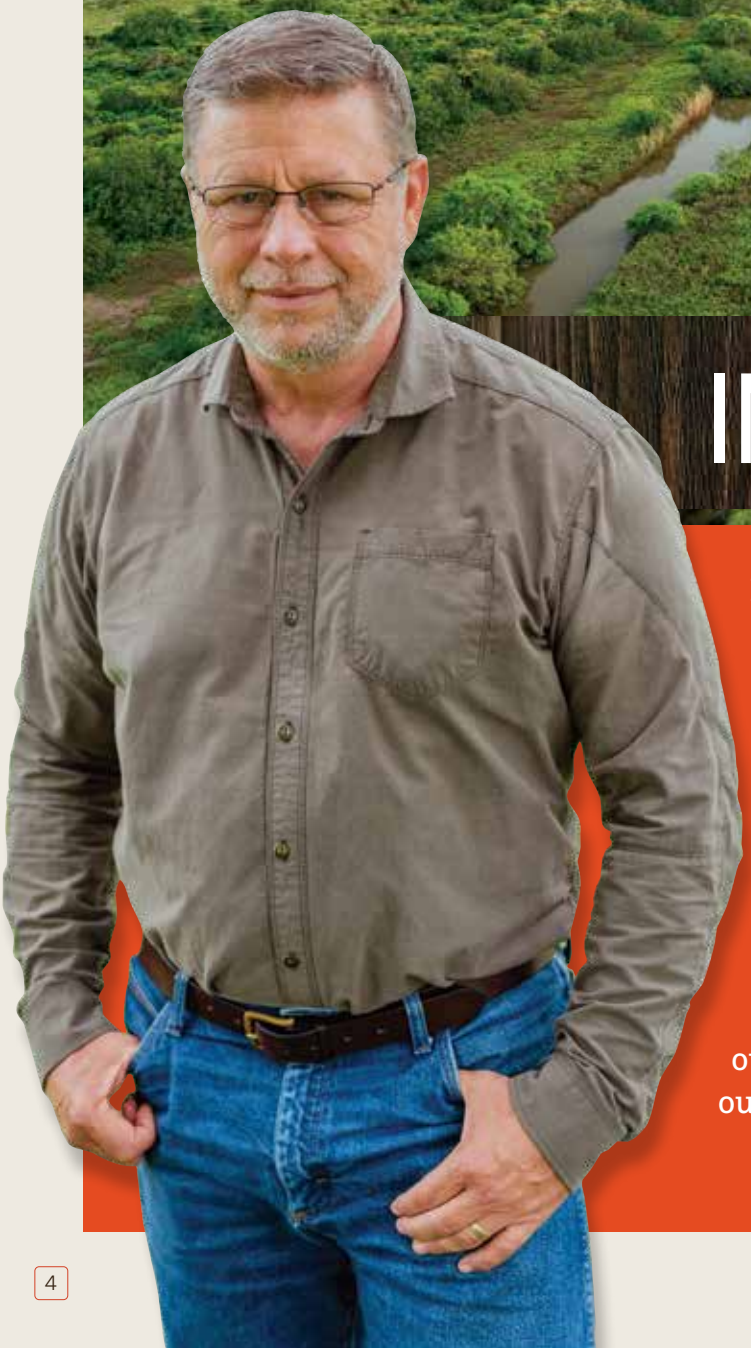
East Foundation's ranchlands were acquired over a period of about one hundred years. This land was utilized as a family owned and managed ranching operation. East Foundation was established with a bequest from the estate of Robert East in 2007.

Today, we operate as an **Agricultural Research Organization**, the first of its kind in the United States. Working in concert with land-grant university, agency, and other partners, the Foundation's ranches are a working laboratory where scientists and managers together address issues important to wildlife management, rangeland health, and ranch productivity. We ensure that ranching and wildlife management work together to conserve healthy and productive rangelands.



"Land stewardship is a deeply held inner conviction that compels and inspires people to be responsible caretakers of the land entrusted to them."

— Steve Nelle, Texas land conservation leader



INTRODUCTION

Land stewardship is often described through practices, policies, or management decisions. We talk about grazing systems, groundwater conservation, wildlife populations, infrastructure, economics, and research. All those things matter. But stewardship begins somewhere deeper. It begins with a mindset—an understanding that land is not simply something we own or use, but something entrusted to us for a period. Stewardship is the recognition that our responsibility extends beyond immediate outcomes and beyond ourselves.

This concept, plainly expressed by my friend Steve Nelle, sits at the center of what we do at East Foundation. Across more than 217,000 acres of South Texas rangeland, we operate working ranches that support livestock production, wildlife conservation, scientific research, and educational programming. These ranches span multiple ecological regions, from the deep sands of the Sand Sheet to the thornscrub and coastal marshes that define the Wild Horse Desert. Together, they represent one of the largest remaining connected landscapes in Texas—a landscape shaped by drought, wind, fire, wildlife, groundwater, and generations of ranching.

The writings throughout this 2026 issue of our Annual Report all reflect upon a simple but important truth: stewardship requires us to think in systems rather than silos. Land, water, wildlife, livestock, and people are not independent pieces. They are interconnected parts of the same working landscape. Decisions affecting one inevitably influence the others. The obligation of stewardship is to learn how to manage those relationships in ways that sustain the long-term value and resilience of the land.

- Henry Chappell's opening essay provides a landscape-scale history and ecological overview of East Foundation's ranches, illustrating how diverse South Texas ecosystems, ranching heritage, wildlife conservation, and modern management practices intersect across the Foundation's lands.

- Todd Snelgrove explains how groundwater is the lifeblood of South Texas ranching, sustaining livestock, wildlife, and rural communities in a region defined by drought and limited surface water. The article highlights the need for science-based management, resilient infrastructure, conservation practices, and policy engagement to protect the long-term future of working lands and rural economies.

- Jason Sawyer explains how we manage wildlife as part of a broader ranch resource portfolio, where long-term monitoring and science-based decision-making help us sustain wildlife populations while maintaining productive ranching operations.

- Garrett Stribling describes how East Foundation Ranches transformed its cattle operations through data-driven management, genetic improvement, and grazing practices. As a result, East Foundation Ranches received the 2026 National Beef Quality Assurance award for Cow-calf operations.

- Tina Buford explains how developing the next generation of ranchers, scientists, and land managers is essential to the future of Texas working lands. The article highlights how hands-on education, leadership development, and partnerships help prepare young people to address complex natural resource challenges while sustaining rural communities and conservation efforts.

For generations, ranchers across South Texas learned to adapt to environmental variability while maintaining productive landscapes capable of supporting both people and wildlife. Today, that responsibility remains just as important, but the complexity of the challenge has grown. Stewardship now requires integrating science, economics, technology, and policy into daily management decisions while remaining grounded in the realities of working lands.

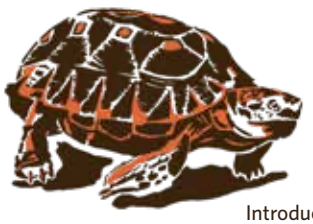
As you read these pages, I hope you recognize that the work described here is not about preserving the past for nostalgia's sake. It is about preparing working lands to remain productive, resilient, and relevant far into the future. The challenges facing Texas rangelands are real—the reemergence of New World screwworms, prolonged drought, increasing pressure on groundwater resources, changing wildlife dynamics, economic volatility, urban expansion, and the growing complexity of natural resource policy. Yet these challenges also create opportunities to think differently, innovate responsibly, and strengthen the connection between science and practical land management.

At East Foundation, we often describe our approach as "management by experiment." That phrase reflects a willingness to ask hard questions, test assumptions, measure outcomes, and continuously improve. It recognizes that stewardship is not static. It requires adaptation, humility, and a commitment to learning. Whether we are evaluating grazing systems, monitoring wildlife populations, improving cattle genetics, conserving groundwater, or developing educational programs, the objective remains the same: to leave the land more resilient and more valuable for those who follow us.

Importantly, this work does not happen in isolation. It depends upon dedicated employees, partners, educators, students, policymakers, neighboring landowners, and rural communities who share a belief in the importance of working lands. Together, these partnerships allow us to bridge the gap between research and application, ensuring that what we learn on our ranches contributes to broader conversations about conservation, ranching, and natural resource management across Texas and beyond.

The future of South Texas will ultimately depend on people willing to take the long view—people who understand that healthy landscapes, productive ranches, abundant wildlife, and strong rural communities are inseparable from one another. That enduring responsibility and opportunity continues to guide our work every day at East Foundation.

– Neal Wilkins



THE LAND

By Henry Chappell





AS THE CARACARA FLIES: AN ECO-REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The six East Foundation ranches include four of the nine recognized ecological zones in South Texas, surely one of the most diverse holdings in the state. This habitat, spread across vast acreages—some 217,000 acres in Jim Hogg, Starr, Kenedy, and Willacy counties—provides a rare living laboratory where scientists and land managers address issues critical to wildlife management and ranching.

Ranchito, the northernmost East Foundation property, sits just south of Hebbronville, where the western reaches of the Coastal Sand Plains give way to the vast Texas-Tamaulipan Thornscrub region, also known as the South Texas Brush Country. About 10 miles southward, Gachupin's square mile sits well within the Thornscrub region. Another 10 miles southward, sprawling San Antonio Viejo roughly straddles the two eco-regions, its grassy dunes and mesquite plains in the north and east transitioning to tighter soils and thornscrub in the south and west. Directly eastward 15 miles, Buena Vista, on the eastern boundary of Jim Hogg County, sits entirely within the Coastal Sand Plain, as does Santa Rosa 60 miles northeast. Finally, some 120 miles southeast of San Antonio Viejo, Laguna Madre Coastal Marshes form the eastern edge of El Sauz, while oak thornscrub and living dunes characteristic of the Coastal Sand Plains dominate the western two-thirds of the ranch. Its southeastern corner transitions into the scrubland of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The climate across the regions is subtropical, typified by hot summers and mild winters. Freezing temperatures are rare. Yet each ranch is shaped by local variation in rainfall, groundwater depth, and wind effects.

SAN ANTONIO VIEJO



150,108 acres

San Antonio Viejo covers 150,108 contiguous acres in southwestern Jim Hogg County and northwestern Starr County. From the windmill at Zorillo, on the northern boundary, San Antonio Viejo extends about 28 miles to its southern tip just south of the well at Tigre.



The ranch averages about 23 inches of rainfall per year. Severe drought is common. During unusually wet periods, small lagunas may hold water. Otherwise, surface water is scarce or absent. Water for livestock comes from 144 ranch wells that tap the Chicot and Evangeline aquifers—parts of the broader Gulf Coast Aquifer that underlies the region.

In the Coloraditas country to the north, mixed mesquite prairie and mottes of blackbrush and granjeno dominate. Eastward, coastal sand plain held in place by grass and mesquite provides some of the most productive grazing on the ranch. Southward, in the mesquite and woodland prairie, the grassy dunes reach the highest elevations on the ranch—from about 680 feet to 748 feet. In late spring and early summer, Inca doves flush two and three at a time before vehicles. Crested caracaras, totem birds of the Wild Horse Desert, perch in the treetops, on fence posts, or cruise for prey and carrion. During years of timely rain, bobwhite quail densities may exceed a bird per acre. From April through July, from sunup until dark, there's no place on the ranch out of earshot of the cock's mating call.

South of Tequileros, just across the county line from Jim Hogg County to Starr County, terrain drops as the sand sheet gives way to tight soils and thornscrub. Javelinas disappear into spiny, head-high scrub.

Scores of nongame bird species thrive in the varied habitat. Green jays, pyrrhuloxias, and grosbeaks flit about in heavy brush. Altamira orioles and scarlet tanagers nest in the trees and scrub around dwellings, providing fine, uplifting company during nesting season.

At San Antonio Viejo, genetics and superb habitat combine to produce deer of exceptional quality. The annual whitetail deer captures allow researchers to gather tissue samples and monitor health. Aerial surveys and data from radio-collared deer further refine population estimates. Yet, for all its wildness and deep history, San Antonio Viejo, like all the East properties, continues as a working ranch, and, fittingly, serves as headquarters for East Foundation Ranches, LLC. "We keep working lands working," said Garrett Stribling, East Foundation's ranch business manager. "We can't just think about cows; we have to think about total mouths to feed: more deer, more turkeys, more quail, and on certain ranches, nilgai."

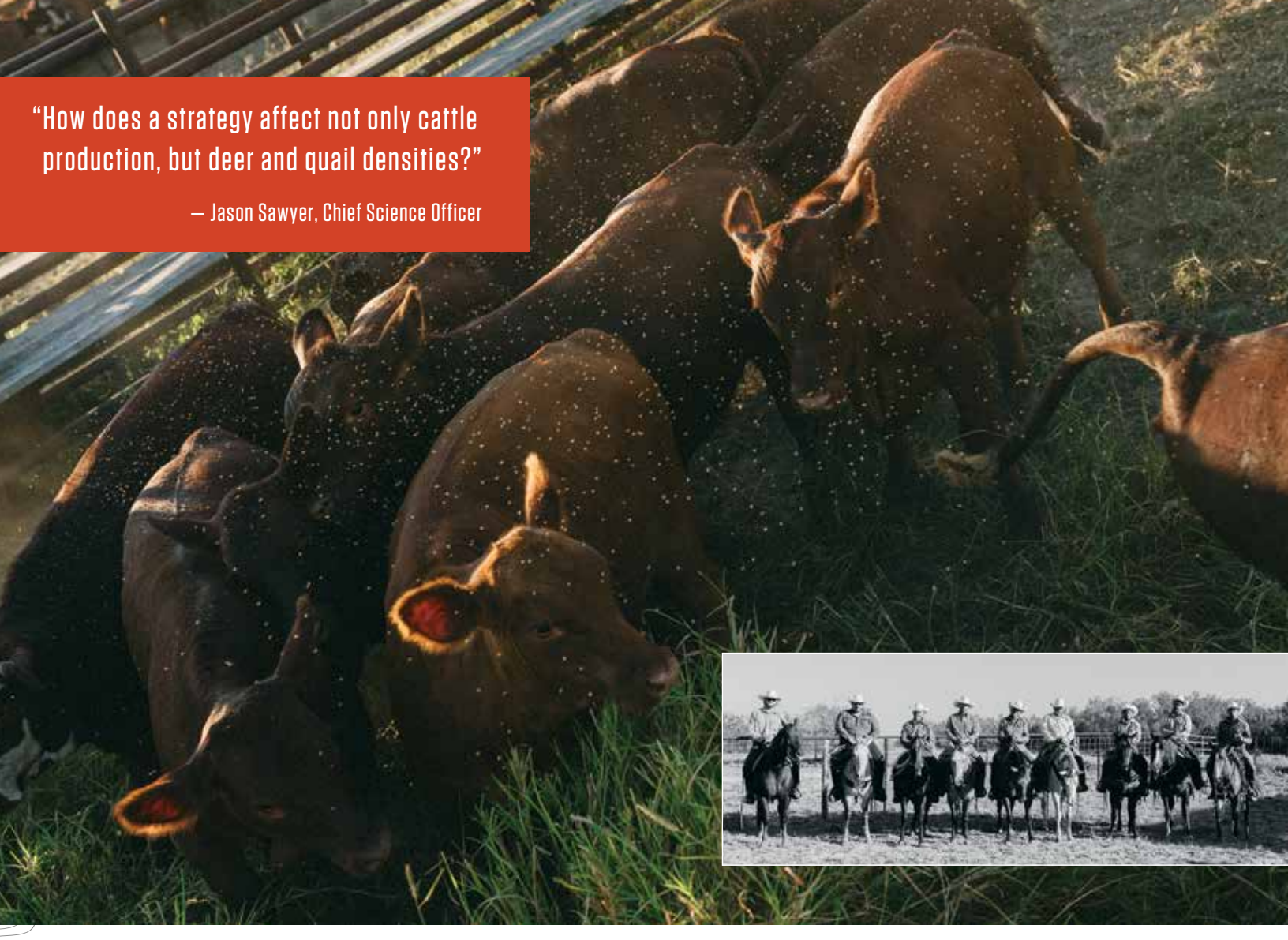
Toward that end, the Foundation focuses on carrying capacity of the land and improving the quality of the cattle herd to most efficiently use available forage while maintaining or enhancing rangeland health. "The original East composite herd we started with had a little bit of everything," Stribling said. "A lot of *Bos indicus* and every



"We can't just think about cows; we have to think about total mouths to feed: more deer, more turkeys, more quail, and on certain ranches, nilgai."

— Garrett Stribling, Ranch Business Manager





> "How does a strategy affect not only cattle production, but deer and quail densities?"
>
> — Jason Sawyer, Chief Science Officer

color under the sun." In 2020, cattle managers cut the herd down from several thousand to a few hundred cows and began rebuilding, turning Red Angus bulls out on the original cows to produce more uniform color and increase maternal qualities, then following with Santa Gertrudis and a Red Angus-Santa Gertrudis composite called American Red. "We've been very strict in terms of color, reproduction, and temperament," adds Stribling.

The herd has increased to about 5,000, including about 3,200 brood cows, which managers consider ideal given average rainfall, and may temporarily increase to 7,000 total under optimal conditions. Helicopter gathering, long a standard practice on big South Texas spreads, ceased on East ranches three years ago. Gather rates using horseback and truck and siren average 99 percent. "It has dramatically reduced cost and stress on the animals and has improved the temperament and handling of the cattle," Stribling said. "We have a very active feeding program adjusted to conditions. And with rotational grazing, we're spending a lot of time with the cows. They're used to being worked and touched."

Over the past few years, pregnancy rates have increased 20 percent. Weaning weights and feedyard metrics have been far more consistent. "We're genotyping the animals to their exact breed types," Stribling said. "We want to identify which types are most productive down here. You can't manage what you can't measure."

The same applies to rangeland. In 2015, in cooperation with Texas A&M University-Kingsville, the Foundation established the 18,538-acre Coloraditas Grazing Research and Demonstration Area in the northern reaches of the San Antonio Viejo to determine how different grazing strategies affect wildlife populations, range condition, and cattle production.



"We're developing a quantitative stocking method based on the best measurements of resource availability," said Chief Science Officer Jason Sawyer. "We're continually asking how we can increase resilience—how fast can the range recover after drought or grazing. How does a strategy affect not only cattle production, but deer and quail densities?"





Researchers measure fluctuations in forage, species composition, and vegetation structure and wildlife densities in and around the study area. “We’re learning to iterate, and that there will be tradeoffs,” Sawyer said. “Right now, we’re at the end of Phase 2, but the study will continue in new phases.”

In February 2026, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association honored East Foundation’s cow-calf program with the Beef Quality Assurance Award.

RANCHITO AND GACHUPIN **5,866 acres**

Located just south and east of Hebbronville, the Jim Hogg County seat, 5,218-acre Ranchito originally served as a resting and holding area for East cattle awaiting rail shipment. The Easts purchased Gachupin, their smallest ranch in 1956. At only 648 acres and located roughly halfway between San Antonio Viejo and Ranchito, Gachupin probably served as a resting station for cattle being driven from headquarters to Hebbronville.

Similar to San Antonio Viejo, both ranches are a mix of Texas-Tamaulipan thornscrub and coastal sand plain. Ranchito boasts the most stable bobwhite quail population of the six East ranches. Currently, East Foundation manages these two small ranches as remote divisions of San Antonio Viejo.



BUENA VISTA

15,106 acres

Buena Vista lies directly east of San Antonio Viejo on the South Texas sand sheet, comprising 15,106 acres of grassland—predominantly seacoast bluestem—and mesquite savannah. In the far southern reaches, a few small active dunes advance northwestward. The mosaic provides ideal habitat for whitetail deer, bobwhite quail, and countless nongame species. Some two dozen windmills tapping the Gulf Coast Aquifer provide water for livestock and wildlife. Surface water is scarce. Buena Vista's cow herd calves in the fall.

"For us, fall calving herds serve as a terminal," Garrett Stribling said. "As we rebuilt this herd with an emphasis on reproduction, we wanted to put pressure on these cows. If they come up dry or open in the spring herd, that's one strike, and they go to the fall herd. If they come up dry in the fall, they're gone." Buena Vista Unit Manager Damian Martinez implements a conservative grazing program, rotating the herd through the ranch's four pastures as dictated by season, rainfall, and range condition.

For the past decade, Buena Vista has been the site of the most comprehensive bobwhite quail harvest and sustainability study to date. The study has since carried over to Santa Rosa and other Foundation ranches.

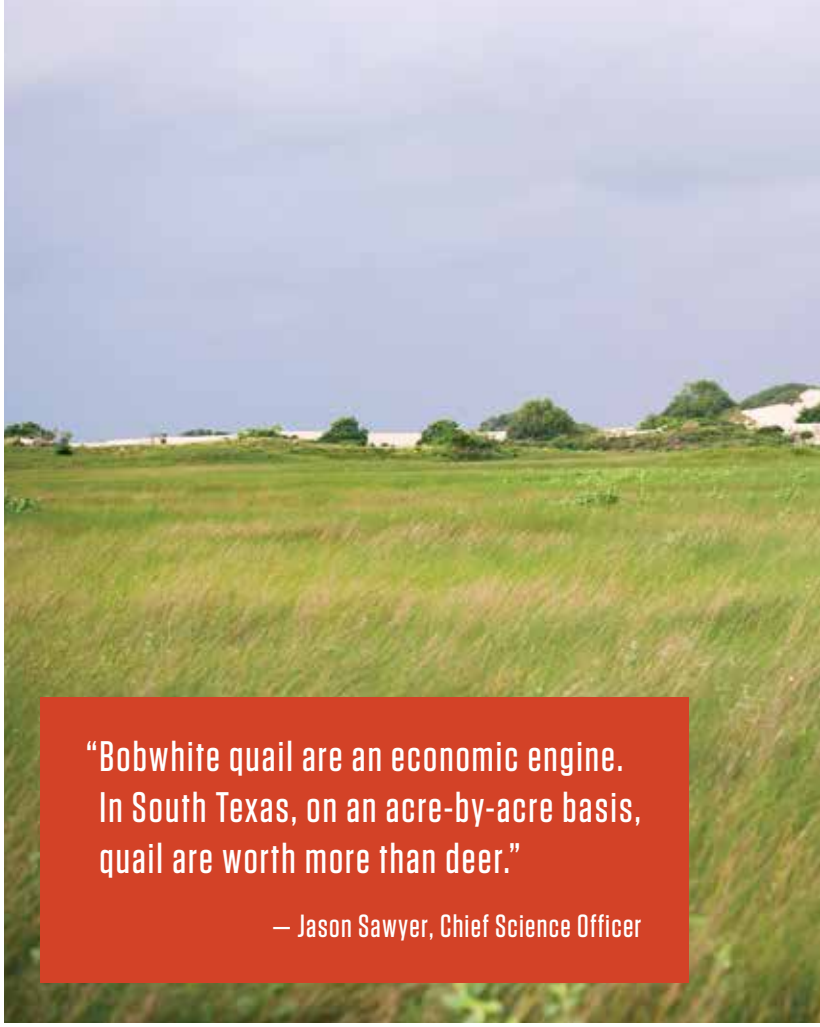
"Bobwhite quail are an economic engine," Jason Sawyer explained. "In South Texas, on an acre-by-acre basis, quail are worth more than deer."

By applying strict harvest limits to certain areas and comparing them to nearby sites with no harvest, and controlling for rainfall variation and other factors, researchers can quantify the effects of hunter harvest on long-term sustainability. "In ways, our quail study is like our cattle forage study," adds Sawyer. "It's about resilience, and about how much can be harvested without long term damage."

SANTA ROSA

18,643 acres

Bounded to the north by Los Olmos Creek, Santa Rosa lies in far northern Kenedy County where the Coastal Sand Plain plays out into the rich Gulf Coastal Prairies. An 18,643-acre patchwork of mesquite savannah, sandy grassland, and oak mottes, Santa Rosa is the most productive of the East ranches. Though drought-prone, the ranch bounces back very quickly with rainfall. Permanent and seasonal lagunas provide surface water for wildlife and livestock, as well as resting and feeding areas for waterfowl.



> "Bobwhite quail are an economic engine. In South Texas, on an acre-by-acre basis, quail are worth more than deer."
>
> — Jason Sawyer, Chief Science Officer















With its abundant water and forage, and rich soils, Santa Rosa serves as the Foundation's heifer development division. Second-calf cows on Santa Rosa are used to replace losses in mature herds at San Antonio Viejo and elsewhere.

EL SAUZ  27,000 acres

Lying along the coast of Laguna Madre, just north and west of Port Mansfield, El Sauz encompasses parts of three distinct eco-regions: along its eastern edge, some 6,000 acres of Laguna Madre Barrier Islands and Coastal Marshes; 5,000 acres of Lower Rio Grande Valley in the southwest corner; and 16,000 acres of Coastal Sand Plain. Elevation ranges from sea level at the coast to about 59 feet atop dunes in the northcentral and northwestern parts of the ranch.

The plains of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in the southwest hold numerous resacas, and small lakes and ponds charged by groundwater and augmented by relatively frequent showers. To the northwest, transitioning into the Coastal Sand Plain and slightly higher elevations, dense associations of live oak, mesquite, and granjeno, dominate. Wetlands, characterized by mesquite, cordgrass, and marsh grass, dominate the central and far southeastern portion of the ranch. A mix of wetland and shrubland characterizes the coastal region.

Through the central portion of the ranch, ranging northwest, several active dunes, about a thousand acres total, migrate from southeast to northwest as coastal wind pushes and gathers sand. At maximum height, the peaks crumble and descend the lee sides of the dunes. Thus, over the decades, the dunes crawl northwestward, covering windmills, outbuildings, motts, and grassland, leaving behind "scars" that will in time heal and regenerate.

El Sauz is home to one of two East Foundation fall calving herds. Unit manager Dylan Durbin typically grazes about 600 cows at the ranch. Bulls from Hebbronville are brought in annually. Like Buena Vista, El Sauz serves as a terminal ranch. Cows that fail to reproduce on the spring herd ranches are given a final chance at El Sauz. If they produce a fall calf, they stay. If not, they go directly to the packer. "Being adjacent to areas with high fever tick risk, we want to minimize movement of cattle to other ranches," Garrett Stribling said.

Although most of the ranch outside the narrow strip of coastal shrubland is highly productive rangeland, the central 18,000 acres are the most utilized. The 5,000 acres in the southwestern corner can be extremely productive, and is grazed at times, but is prone to flooding. Historically, cattle gathering and effective rotation proved difficult due to brush and pastures comprised of patchworks of high-quality forage and unproductive salt flats.





"The cattle tended to be very territorial," Durbin said. "Some liked to hang out up in the thick oak country; others wanted to be elsewhere." Worse yet, the salty air off the Laguna tended to rust out fences in just a few years, and abundant nilgai destroy fencing by stooping under the bottom strand then standing to full height.

In December 2025, the Foundation implemented a "virtual fencing" system at El Sauz. Every cow is fitted with a GPS collar. Using an app on his phone, Durbin can instantly place and move virtual fencing to reconfigure pastures, allowing him to quickly concentrate cattle where forage is most abundant and move cattle off areas that need rest. As a cow approaches a virtual boundary, the collar emits a warning beep. If she continues, the collar delivers a mild shock.

The uninitiated will be startled by the sight of large, long-necked, slate-colored animals with goat-like horns and a distinctive gait, propelled by hind legs shorter than front legs. The nilgai, a species of large antelope, was imported from India to Texas and released on the King Ranch in the 1920s. Nilgai have thrived in parts of South Texas, including El Sauz and other East ranches.

Nilgai are flexible feeders, browsing and grazing as conditions require. Bulls may reach 650 pounds. Nilgai provide sporting opportunities on some ranches but also compete for forage with wildlife and livestock. And they are prolific. Females may reproduce at one year of age and half give birth to twins.

"Nilgai have been a part of this rangeland ecosystem for over 100 years," said East Foundation President and CEO Neal Wilkins. "They are likely here to stay. So, the most reasonable approach is to learn to treat them as part of the natural system. This is really only the case for ranches like El Sauz and Santa Rosa—the eastern part of the sand sheet—where rainfall and other conditions are most favorable for them. For San Antonio Viejo and our other holdings, the approach is to limit Nilgai spread as much as possible."

Whitetail deer, javelinas, bobwhite quail, and turkeys abound, as do dozens of nongame bird species. Abundant wetlands host a variety of shorebirds, and both dabbling and diving ducks such as bluewing teal and redheads.

Prescribed fire plays an important ecological role at El Sauz. East Foundation partners with Texas A&M University and Texas A&M-Kingsville to determine the best prescribed burning methods for wildlife management and grazing optimization.

From the height of a large, active dune in the northwestern corner of El Sauz, you can look out over a few thousand acres of oak and thornscrub that hold about half of the federally endangered ocelots in the United States. Once extant throughout much of Texas, Louisiana, and as far north as Arkansas, 80 to 100 of the little cats now hang on within a few islands of coastal South Texas thornscrub. South of the border, ocelots range from Northern Mexico to the Amazon rainforest. Texas's ocelots are hemmed in on all sides,







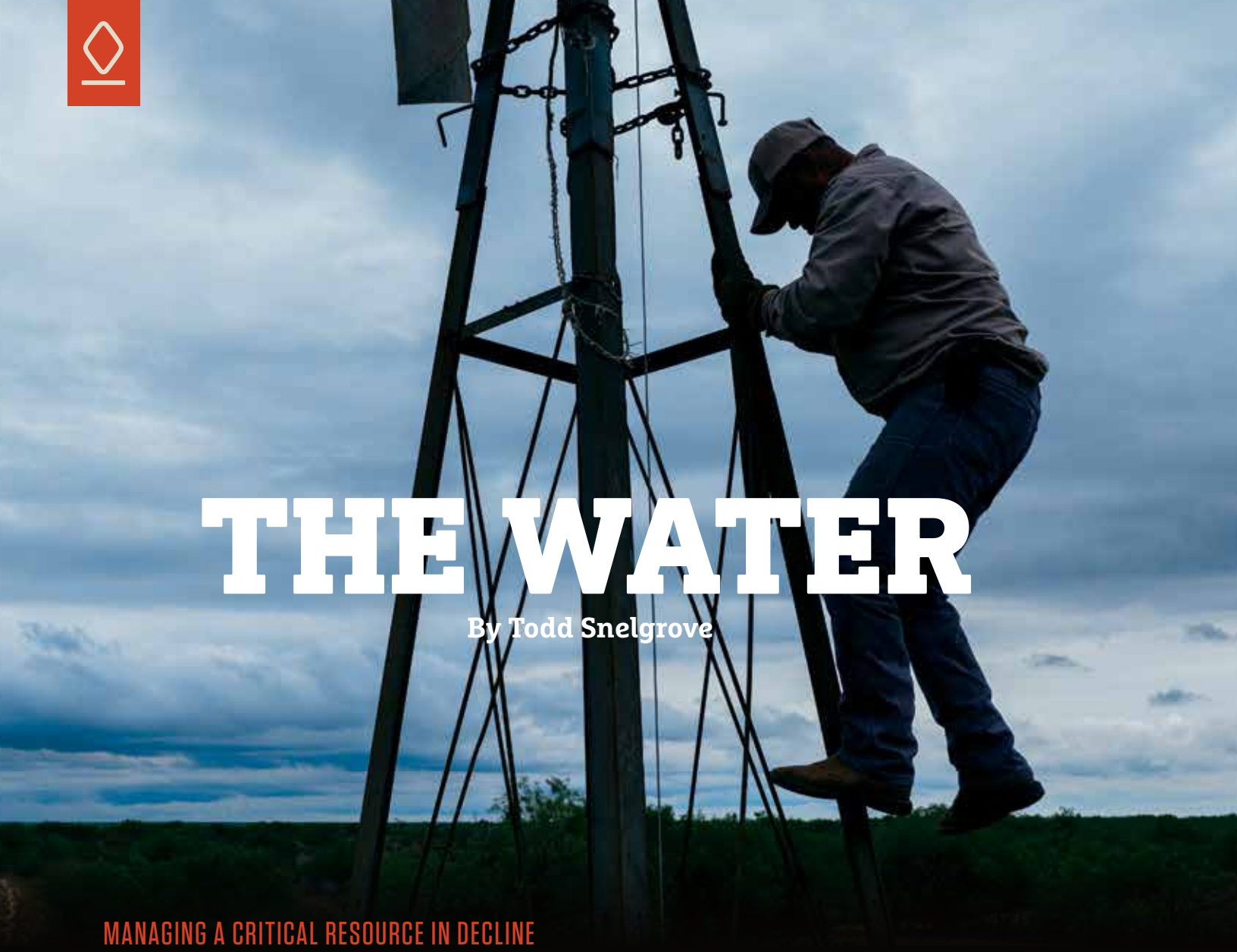
threatened by development, disease, hurricanes, highways, and genetic exhaustion due to inbreeding. More than 95 percent of their habitat has been cleared for agriculture and human development. Although a few ocelots live within the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, the majority live on private land—working cattle ranches—and most of those, perhaps 40, live at El Sauz.

In the most ambitious effort to date, East Foundation, in cooperation with Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M-Kingsville, Natural Resources Institute at Texas A&M, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife service, hopes to increase ocelot numbers, expand the population into suitable habitat further from the coast, and increase genetic diversity through captive breeding. Veterinarian Ashley Reeves heads the ocelot breeding effort. “We hope to release the first ocelots in two to three years,” she said. “This will be dependent on genetic composition, time to reach sexual maturity, and the successful production of offspring.”

Some of the offspring from the second generation would then be released into suitable habitat, beyond the threat of hurricane inundation, in the southern reaches of San Antonio Viejo, where thornscrub predominates. Current plans call for the release of four to six cats annually over the next ten to fifteen years. Biologists estimate San Antonio Viejo’s carrying capacity at about 63 ocelots. Construction of a $20 million ocelot breeding facility on the campus of Texas A&M-Kingsville is scheduled for completion in early 2027 and should be ready for its first ocelots in early 2027. In late March, standing with Reeves and me at the base of a dune in late March, amid El Sauz’s ocelot habitat, Neal Wilkins summed up East Foundation’s land management philosophy:

> “We ranch all of this land. Every square foot of this ranch has a job—but the job varies depending on location. Some areas grow grass for cattle and cover for quail. Right now, this area works to grow ocelots and cattle on the same ground. That’s the whole idea behind working lands.”
>
> — Neal Wilkins, President and CEO





THE WATER

By Todd Snelgrove

MANAGING A CRITICAL RESOURCE IN DECLINE

It's a sweltering South Texas summer afternoon—temperatures pushing 105 degrees for what seems like the hundredth day in a row, the wind whipping red dust across the ranch, and every drop of surface water is long gone. Yet across thousands of acres, cattle and wildlife have ready access to water from a network of troughs supplied by wells tapping into groundwater. This scene has played out every day for nearly 150 years across the South Texas Sand Sheet—historically known as the Wild Horse Desert—a vast area of deep sands and brush mottes where groundwater is the only reliable source of life for people, livestock, and wildlife alike.

The groundwater we manage and depend upon is drawn from the expansive Gulf Coast Aquifer system. This major aquifer stretches nearly 42,000 square miles along the Texas coast from the Louisiana border to the Rio Grande, consisting of several water-producing sand layers—including the Jasper, Evangeline, and Chicot aquifers—that become narrower and shallower as they extend inland. The South Texas portion underlies the Sand Sheet, where the Evangeline and Chicot layers dominate and water quality transitions from fresh to brackish and saline as one moves south and toward the coast. Where we operate, in Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, and Willacy counties, the combination of deep sands and 20 to 24 inches of average annual rainfall creates conditions most Texans never experience. Aquifer recharge is measured in tenths of inches annually, and with wild extremes in rainfall, there is little or no surface water. No lakes. No rivers, creeks, or bayous. The occasional laguna or presa may fill after heavy rains only to dry up quickly when hot and dry weather returns. This reality has shaped settlement, ranching, and life in the region for centuries. When we look back, groundwater has been central from the earliest days of settlement through today.

Ranchers across South Texas depend on groundwater to sustain their herds, rangelands, and wildlife resources. Nearby rural communities and surrounding counties also

depend on groundwater for their water supply and to remain economically viable. Why does this matter? Where surface water is unavailable, as in much of South Texas, groundwater is the irreplaceable foundation of life, livestock production, wildlife habitat, and the rural economy.

When the Spanish land grants were first settled in the mid-1700s, early settlers quickly learned the hard truth: surface water is scarce, and groundwater is life itself. Settlement patterns were driven entirely by access to freshwater. Shallow hand-dug wells, often just 30 to 40 feet deep, became the anchors for roads, homesteads, and early ranches. Remnants of those wells are still visible today on San Antonio Viejo along the old army road to Fort Ringgold near Rio Grande City. Those wells have long since gone dry, but their locations tell the story of how groundwater shaped the very geography of human endeavor in the Sand Sheet. Without reliable water, there were no lasting operations—no cattle, no ranches, and no foundation for the rural communities that would eventually grow around these scattered outposts.



The real transformation came in the 1850s with the invention of practical windmills. Daniel Halladay and John Burnham established the U.S. Wind Engine Company specifically to pump groundwater more efficiently. Over the next century, more than six million windmills were erected across the United States, with thousands dotting the Sand Sheet. Ranchers adopted a rule of thumb: one windmill for every thousand acres so livestock never had to travel too far for water. On our ranches, wells with names like Leoncitos, San Eduardo, and Cabeza de Toro became landmarks—some still producing after nearly a century. These windmills fundamentally changed how life persisted here. They turned an arid, surface-water-poor landscape into productive rangeland, sustained cattle herds, supported wildlife, and enabled economic activity that gave rise to the rural communities across the region.









Just as the early settlers turned necessity into innovation, our ranches remain working laboratories. What began with hand-dug wells and windmills has evolved to solar-powered systems, reminding us that groundwater is the irreplaceable foundation of ranching and rural life in the Sand Sheet. That same lesson drives our "management by experiment" approach as we document outcomes with scientific rigor, test new technologies on the ground, and make data-driven decisions that maximize the long-term value of the land for livestock, wildlife, and the communities that depend on economically viable ranches like ours.

GROUNDWATER TODAY: SUPPORTING OPERATIONS, WILDLIFE, AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Today we maintain about 180 wells across more than 217,000 acres. High-volume solar or electric-powered systems, along with a few windmills, feed pressurized pipelines and storage tanks that deliver water to troughs spread across thousands of acres. Quantity matters, but quality matters just as much. Over three-quarters of the wells we operate are considered brackish (>1000 parts per million Total Dissolved Solids (TDS)). We test every well—old and new—because "salty" water, even when cattle can tolerate more than humans, can reduce intake, cause stress, and limit performance. Where suitable water is distant, we run miles of pipeline rather than force livestock to travel too far, an operational reality across most of the ranches.

A reliable water network directly supports our core ranching operations. Adequate distribution ensures good grazing utilization during long dry stretches, helps maintain weaning rates, and enables the flexible, adaptive grazing strategies we test through management by experiment. Without it, carrying capacity drops, range conditions deteriorate, and the economic output that keeps our ranches viable shrinks. Groundwater is equally essential for wildlife. The same water that sustains cattle also sustains the wildlife that makes our ranches a cornerstone of South Texas biodiversity.

Yet the importance of groundwater reaches far beyond our fence lines. Rural communities in South Texas, and across the state, rely on it for domestic wells and small municipal water systems, but also because working ranches sustain the overall economic viability of these regions. Ranching operations provide jobs, support local suppliers and services, generate property and production-related tax revenue, and keep economic activity alive where other industries are scarce. When ranching thrives because groundwater is dependable and well-managed, the communities around us thrive. Without productive ranching underpinned by dependable access to groundwater, many small towns would experience the slow fade of economic contraction, diminished opportunities, and families moving away.

Long-term rainfall records highlight what is at stake—60 percent of years are below average, with extreme swings that turn "below normal" into the norm. In this environment, groundwater is the constant—the anchor that holds both ecological health and economic resilience steady when drought deepens and surface water disappears. We treat it as such every single day: testing, monitoring, building infrastructure, and making data-driven decisions that keep the troughs full, our cattle herds and wildlife populations healthy, and the ranching enterprise economically viable. This is practical, on-the-ground stewardship.

POLICY: HISTORIC FOUNDATIONS, CURRENT REALITIES, AND ISSUES WE NAVIGATE

At East Foundation, we operate under Texas groundwater law as it actually exists—not as an abstract theory. That law traces its roots to the same arid realities that shaped the Sand Sheet more than a century ago.

In 1904, the Texas Supreme Court decided Houston & T.C. Ry. Co. v. East, the landmark case that established the Rule of Capture as the foundation of Texas groundwater law. A railroad company drilled a well that dried up a neighboring landowner's domestic supply; the Court ruled there was no liability. Landowners, the Court held, have the right to pump as much groundwater as they can capture beneath their own property, with very limited exceptions. This legal precedent may have enabled the growth of ranching and rural communities across the Sand Sheet, but the Rule of Capture was never absolute. The 1917 Conservation Amendment gave the Legislature clear authority to regulate natural resources, including groundwater, and over the decades the courts carved out narrow exceptions for willful waste, malicious harm to neighbors, and land subsidence.

The real shift toward modern management began in 1949 with the Groundwater Conservation District (GCD) Act. Today there are 98 GCDs regulating 85 percent of the state's groundwater. They serve as the state's "preferred method" of local groundwater governance. Our ranches fall under three: the Brush Country, Starr County, and Kenedy County Groundwater Conservation Districts. These districts operate within the broader framework of Groundwater Management Areas (GMA) created by Senate Bill 1 in 1997 and strengthened by later legislation. GCDs in each GMA must jointly establish Desired Future Conditions (DFC)—quantified targets for aquifer health, such as acceptable water-level declines—and the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) then calculates Modeled Available Groundwater, the amount of water that can be pumped while meeting those conditions.

This is the reality we navigate daily. The Rule of Capture still gives us broad rights to develop our groundwater resources, but the GCD permitting process, spacing rules, and conservation requirements impose practical limits that protect the long-term viability of the aquifers beneath our lands.

At East Foundation, we do not view these legal frameworks as constraints to be challenged; we treat them as guardrails that reinforce our stewardship ethic. We monitor wells for changes in water quality and water levels and, recently, we began testing leak detection technology as a conservation measure to be better stewards of our groundwater resources. This way, Texas groundwater law—born of necessity in the early 1900s and regulated through local governance today—remains the system we work within to leave the land and the water better for the generations who follow us.

We recently completed a comprehensive groundwater assessment of our ranch lands. It confirms that our current and projected demand remains minimal and well within sustainable volumes—if nothing changes. One only needs to follow state and local news, however, to know that change is coming. The city of Corpus Christi, for example, is actively developing rural well fields on thousands of acres in Nueces County, while large municipalities across the region are increasingly turning to rural lands to secure brackish supplies as freshwater sources become strained. The result is growing pressure on the very aquifer that sustains our ranches, our rangelands and wildlife, and the economic viability of the surrounding rural communities. Annual withdrawals from the South Texas portion of the Gulf Coast Aquifer remain modest for now, yet they are accelerating as regional municipal and industrial demand grows. Recharge is limited, while depletion rates in some areas already exceed natural replenishment. As a result, the TWDB classifies portions of the aquifer under DFCs that accept a controlled, or "managed decline," of water levels. This approach recognizes that groundwater is a finite resource requiring careful stewardship rather than unlimited extraction.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

"...they don't care much about the land, most of them. They're only interested in what's under it. They'll use up your water or leave it polluted with salt if you don't watch them. There'll come a time in this country when a barrel of water is worth more than a barrel of oil." –Elmer Kelton, *The Time it Never Rained*.

Kelton's words recounting the drought of the 1950s, published in 1973, feel relevant and even urgent today as we actively manage a declining groundwater resource in a region where multi-year droughts are the defining condition. Prolonged





droughts reduce forage availability, lower weaning rates and weights, and add pressure on every well, pipeline, and trough we maintain. Layer on the threat of rising salinity, drawdowns in well levels, over-extraction risks from competing demands, and the steady pull of municipal and industrial growth, and the challenge becomes clear. Groundwater from the Gulf Coast Aquifer is finite, slowly recharging, and under mounting stress—yet it remains the sole reliable lifeline for our livestock, wildlife, and the rural communities whose economic viability depends on productive ranching.

Just as the devastating Drought of Record in the 1950s became the catalyst for sweeping changes in Texas water policy—spurring construction of major reservoirs, expanded groundwater development in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and the strengthening of Groundwater Conservation Districts—today's multi-year drought carries the same potential. For more than five years, Texas has seen conditions that echo those of the 1950s, including prolonged drought, falling water tables in some areas, and increasing pressure from municipal and industrial demand. Large urban centers are now actively considering brackish groundwater development from rural aquifers like ours to meet their growing needs. Because most of the Gulf Coast Aquifer beneath our ranches is already brackish to saline, significant export pumping could accelerate drawdown and salinity intrusion, threatening the long-term viability of the resource that sustains our ranching enterprises and the rural communities whose economic health depends on productive working ranches. We see the signs of that future right here in South Texas—well interference, groundwater exports from rural counties to urban areas, and the very real possibility of challenges to the locally led regulatory authority of local Groundwater Conservation Districts.

As land stewards, ours is a long game that acknowledges the perpetual nature of the land. It is embodied in the simplest definition of stewardship, leaving things better for those who follow us; in our case, the land and the groundwater resource we've been entrusted with. We celebrate the short-term wins—another reliable solar well online, improved wildlife metrics, stronger economic returns that sustain jobs and local businesses in our rural counties—but we never lose sight of the bigger picture. We view the purpose of management as seeking to maximize the long-term value of the ranch by adopting a "management by experiment" mindset. When making decisions about groundwater—whether retiring another high-maintenance windmill for a solar-powered high-volume system, laying miles of pipeline to deliver water to distant pastures, or testing new monitoring technologies—we ask ourselves the same questions. Will this make a difference? Is this an enduring solution? Can the next generation build upon this? Adopting this mindset results in future-focused daily routines and actions. It shifts us from chasing short-term fixes to building resilience that lasts. This is precisely where our long-game mindset for stewardship becomes indispensable.



When ranching thrives because groundwater is dependable and well-managed, the communities around us thrive.

In the face of an aquifer in "managed decline" and the threats that come with it, the long-game mindset is not optional—it is the only path forward. By continuing to blend science, deliberate experimentation, and the patient work of stewardship on our 217,000-plus acres, we not only protect the water beneath our feet but also strengthen the economic backbone of the rural communities that depend on working ranches like ours. What we learn today and the actions we take will keep the troughs full, the rangelands healthy, and the communities viable for those who inherit the responsibility of stewardship long after we are gone.

At East Foundation, the story of groundwater beneath our 217,000 acres is one of perseverance, stewardship, and quiet hope. From the hand-dug wells and windmills that first allowed settlement in the Wild Horse Desert, through today's network of solar-powered systems and pipelines, to forward-looking innovations in water development and conservation, our work has always blended historic lessons with science and deliberate experimentation. We manage a groundwater resource in slow decline under very real threats—persistent and recurring drought, diminishing water quality, and competing demands that test Texas water rights and pit communities against each other. Yet, we do so with the clear understanding that good science equals good management. What we learn strengthens our operations and offers practical, applied lessons for other ranchers and landowners across Texas.

By stewarding our groundwater today through monitoring, conservation, and policy leadership that protects the interest of rural landowners and communities, we protect our water resources so that the same deep sands, the same aquifer, and the same working landscape remain productive and life-giving for generations to come. ◊



THE WILDLIFE

By Jason Sawyer

WILDLIFE AS A RESOURCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Wildlife are among the most visible and valued features of South Texas ranchlands. Native and nonnative species alike contribute to the ecological function, cultural identity, and long-term value of working ranches across the region. At East Foundation, stewardship of wildlife resources is inseparable from stewardship of the land itself.

Our approach to wildlife management is grounded in the belief that sustainability on working lands depends on maintaining resilient ecological systems while also supporting productive ranch operations. Wildlife populations, livestock production, habitat condition, and economic viability are interconnected components of the same landscape. Stewardship therefore requires balancing multiple forms of value simultaneously—ecological, operational, economic, and societal—while making decisions in an uncertain and changing environment.

Many of the wildlife species and habitats we value in South Texas persist because of ranching, not in spite of it. Large working ranches continue to sustain some of the most intact native rangelands remaining in Texas, providing habitat for game species, migratory birds, pollinators, predators, small mammals, and threatened or endangered species such as the ocelot.

MONITORING, INFORMATION, AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Our general management framework is built around increasing and sustaining the long-term value of a South Texas ranch. This 'value creation' mindset recognizes that the land resource supports a portfolio of other assets and resources, and that long-term value is maximized when management improves the land base over time and recognizes both the synergy and competition among different enterprises or resource uses. In other words, we want the optimum mix of 'enterprises' rather than the maximization of any one portfolio feature to the detriment of another.

"The livestock operation may be the first thing someone associates with a ranch," says Garrett Stribling, East Foundation Ranch Business Manager. "We see livestock, wildlife, and other activities that the land supports as contributors to the long-term value of the ranch."

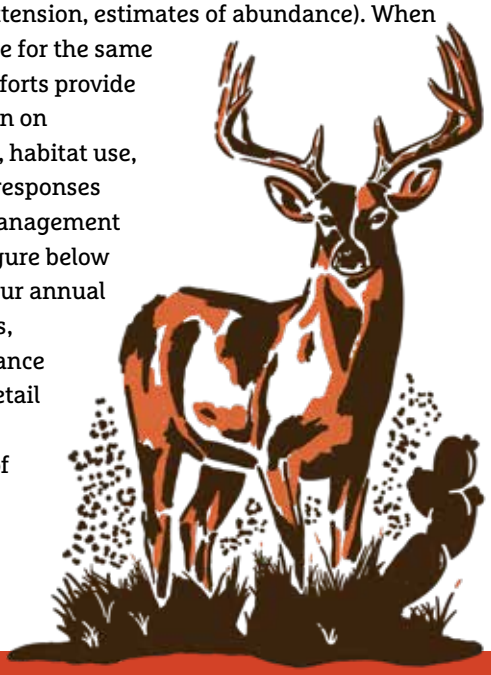
Value creation from wildlife, fundamentally, is predicated on the presence and density or relative abundance of different species, and their persistence—what is out there? Will they still be here tomorrow? Will there be more, at least as many, or fewer of them? These simple questions help to set management objectives:

1. Identify and curate a resource inventory of wildlife species on our ranches
2. Sustain or increase important populations over time, within the constraints of the resources available
3. Identify and mitigate threats to population viability or sustainability
4. Increase or ensure the resilience of populations
5. Identify responsiveness of wildlife to management decisions
6. Capitalize on complementarity among whole-ranch portfolio elements and mitigate negative competitive forces

Each of these objectives serves to set direction and aims for management, but leaves open a variety of possible approaches to achieve them.

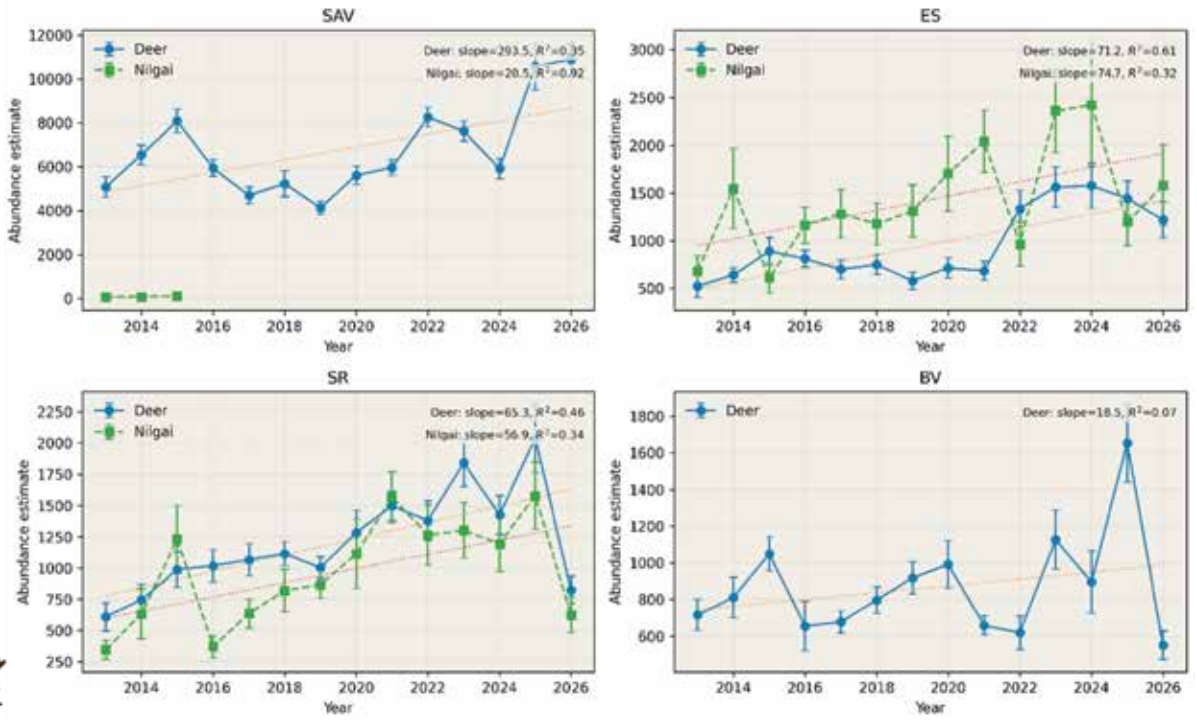
Of course, good management depends on good information to drive decision-making. Long-term monitoring programs are central to our management approach, because they allow us to better understand wildlife populations, habitat conditions, and how ecological systems respond to changing environmental conditions and management actions over time.

East Foundation conducts extensive helicopter surveys, camera surveys, vegetation monitoring, avian monitoring, and small mammal surveys across our ranches. These efforts provide periodic (annual, in most cases) estimates of wildlife density (and by extension, estimates of abundance). When compiled over time for the same locations, these efforts provide critical information on population trends, habitat use, recruitment, and responses to weather and management influences. The figure below is an example of our annual monitoring results, displaying abundance estimates of whitetail deer and nilgai antelope on four of our ranches.



DEER AND NILGAI ABUNDANCE ESTIMATES BY RANCH









These data, collected as part of our annual large mammal helicopter survey, show the annual fluctuations in population estimates that result from variable weather and habitat conditions from year to year. Importantly, they also show overall that in spite of annual variation, these populations are stable to increasing over time. The apparently large change from 2025 to 2026 surveys for Buena Vista (BV) and Santa Rosa (SR) ranches also illustrate why trend data are important. These apparently large reductions are consistent with the drought conditions experienced most severely at these two locations in the second half of 2025 and early 2026. Evaluating departures from the prevailing trendline helps us to identify shocks and evaluate relationships between weather, management actions, and population change. Perhaps more importantly, these types of data along with supporting information from our vegetation monitoring and weather reports, will allow us to evaluate resilience in these populations—how rapidly low estimates return to the trendline.

For whitetail deer, bobwhite quail, and small mammals, we augment our survey efforts with direct capture sampling techniques. For deer, each fall we invite university students from across Texas, and increasingly, across the US, to gain experience in aerial capture methods as we collect the morphological and demographic data that more fully inform insights into population dynamics. For both quail and small mammals, we work with research partners and recruit seasonal technicians to conduct trapping across locations, to collect similar morphology and demography information for those populations. As we compile and combine these data streams, we are better able to envision management actions that alter population growth rates and determine potential opportunities and limitations in our system to secure our long-term objectives.

Monitoring at scale is a significant challenge. While the data that these efforts generate are valuable and needed to inform management decisions, they are expensive, can yield variable results due to sampling limitations, and provide only a snapshot in time. As we sustain these efforts to generate long-term trend data, we also seek to continuously enhance our capabilities while reducing the cost and labor burden of monitoring efforts. Important pilot efforts using camera grid arrays and automated recording units on the landscape are underway. By developing these methods, we aim to get similar estimates of density and demography that we derive from our traditional methods, and then are able to collect these more frequently than we can do with annual surveys.



"In our avian monitoring effort, timing can really matter," says Andrea Montalvo, research scientist. "If we are able to use recording units, we might be better able to capture seasonal differences in the avian assembly as migratory birds come and go from the ranch and inform our management more fully."

This enhancement would provide greater insights into the sources of population changes and greatly improve our ability to detect threats to population viability. Of course, gathering and processing the volume of raw data generated by these systems is a new challenge. We are working with university and corporate partners to develop the workflows,

artificial intelligence models, and data structures that will allow us to effectively convert raw data into information in a timely manner, bringing us closer to real-time responsiveness. We have deployed camera grids and are collecting data specific to whitetail deer, nilgai, and even ocelots. Audio recording devices are being deployed to improve our avian monitoring programs and quail surveys. We will continue to collect traditional survey data, as the current 'gold standard' that we can compare new methods against, but we are optimistic that in time, these new approaches will meet or exceed the standard, and that we will be able to deploy them at larger spatial scale and lower cost than traditional helicopter-based survey efforts.

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Aldo Leopold's often-cited five tools of wildlife management—the gun, the axe, the plow, the cow, and fire—remain, at least metaphorically, essential concepts for today's managers. Most influence wildlife indirectly by shaping habitat and ecological conditions. Harvest management, however, is one of the clearest direct interventions. For species such as white-tailed deer, bobwhite quail, and nilgai, selective harvest offers one of the few practical ways to influence population size and demographic structure. It is also a primary means through which wildlife creates value on working ranches—economically, recreationally, and culturally.

Arguably, most wildlife management efforts on private lands occur in the context of harvest, and management objectives are often framed in demographic (deer) or abundance (quail) objectives that are relevant to enhancing harvest opportunity or experience. Because of this, both the abundance of wildlife potentially available for harvest and expectations about the long-term sustainability of those populations are important contributors to the present value of working ranches in South Texas.

"Bobwhite quail are a very valuable asset in South Texas," notes Range and Wildlife Scientist Abe Woodard, "in part because their numbers have declined across other portions of their historic range. We have a long-term project evaluating sustainable harvest rates and their relationship with population dynamics so that we can better inform management decisions and help ensure bobwhites remain part of South Texas landscapes for generations to come."

Sustainable harvest rates for bobwhites are those that do not result in substantially larger overwinter mortality rates than would natural attrition. But natural attrition rates can be high, and a series of challenging weather conditions can cause larger shocks to the system, making resilience a critical factor in bobwhite population persistence. We don't control the weather, and so management strategies for bobwhites focus on the one thing we can control—harvest intensity - and the things we can influence, like habitat conditions and efforts to improve habitat that allow quail the best chance to respond.











"We don't know enough about how nilgai move across the landscape, and how they may or may not serve as hosts for vector-borne diseases. So, along with our research on movement and population dynamics, we are conducting disease surveillance in this species to better understand their role."

– Ashley Reeves, Research Veterinarian



Nilgai represent another example of the complexity often involved in wildlife stewardship on working lands. Introduced to South Texas nearly a century ago, nilgai have become an established and increasingly valued part of the regional wildlife portfolio because of their sporting interest, meat quality, and adaptability to South Texas rangelands. At the same time, their flexible dietary habits and large body size raise important management questions regarding competition for forage resources, habitat use, disease dynamics, and interactions with both livestock and native wildlife species. "We don't know enough about how nilgai move across the landscape, and how they may or may not serve as hosts for vector borne diseases," says Ashley Reeves, research veterinarian. "So along with our research on movement and population dynamics, we are conducting disease surveillance in this species to better understand their role."

Our management approach has generally focused on stabilizing nilgai populations through selective harvest of males and meat harvest of females to avoid excessive population growth and overuse of limited rangeland resources. Ongoing East Foundation projects examining nilgai movement, habitat use, disease risk, and population parameters are intended to improve our understanding of the species so that management objectives—and the strategies used to achieve them—can be based on stronger information rather than assumption alone.

"Ultimately, we would like to develop an optimization framework for nilgai management," says Landon Schofield, range and wildlife biologist. "This would allow managers to examine their resources and objectives and set population size targets for nilgai, livestock, and native wildlife species. This is not an 'all or none' solution, and the right mixture may be different for different operations."

White-tailed deer remain one of the most important wildlife species on South Texas ranches, both culturally and economically. Deer also provide one of the clearest examples of how wildlife stewardship depends on long-term habitat management rather than short-term population manipulation alone. Much of our current deer research focuses on understanding how habitat capacity, forage availability, vegetation structure, and drought conditions influence deer movement, recruitment, and density across working rangelands.

From past observations and prior research, we know that some of the oscillations in population size are the result of very low recruitment rates in certain years, usually attributed to drought. During these periods, fawn survival can decline sharply, while adult mortality may remain relatively stable except among the oldest age classes. While this is a natural response to periodic drought conditions, such failures could be exacerbated if they coincide with some other shock to the system, like disease introduction or emergence of a pest like New World screwworm. This 'double shock' could also deplete the adult population and make recovery difficult or make even light harvest rates unsustainable.

We are working to evaluate the response of local populations to management strategies that could buffer this system and promote resilience. Some management strategies may effectively "raise the ceiling" by increasing habitat capacity through improvements in forage production or vegetation structure. Others may "raise the floor" by helping stabilize populations during periods of environmental stress such as drought; an example of this sort of strategy might be supplemental feeding of deer. Rather than assuming which strategies work best, we evaluate them experimentally under real-world ranch conditions so stewardship decisions can improve over time. Ultimately, this will not only inform our responses to changing conditions but help us to identify the best return on investment in population management, especially when some strategies may result in benefits to other portfolio assets. For example, brush management that maintains adequate cover but increases herbaceous plant production is expected to benefit deer by increasing the food supply but might also improve conditions for other wildlife species or livestock production systems. These 'two-for-one' strategies may generate greater long-term value.

INFRASTRUCTURE, DROUGHT, AND RESILIENCE

Water is one of the most critical resources sustaining working ranches in South Texas, and the development and maintenance of water infrastructure remains an essential component of ranch stewardship. In the Wild Horse Desert, surface water is ephemeral and unreliable, so much of our infrastructure focuses on groundwater production and distribution through wells, pipelines, and watering points designed to support livestock operations across large landscapes.

Historically, these systems were developed primarily around livestock needs and behavior, using water distribution to improve grazing distribution and more efficiently utilize available forage resources. At the same time, we have long assumed that these developments also provided important ancillary benefits for wildlife species, particularly during periods of drought stress.

Interestingly, relatively little information exists demonstrating how species such as white-tailed deer actually use these water developments under varying environmental conditions. Water availability may also



"Endangered species management provides one of the clearest examples of how wildlife stewardship, policy, and working lands intersect."

– Lindsay Martinez, Research Coordinator



influence the value or efficacy of other management actions, such as supplemental feeding or habitat improvement investments.

"We understand the relationships between water distribution and livestock distribution pretty well," says Eddie Reyna, ranch operations manager. "But as we gain more detailed understanding of how this might also add value to the wildlife populations, that could influence how future water infrastructure projects are designed, located, and prioritized."

POLICY, STEWARDSHIP, AND WORKING LANDS

"Endangered species management provides one of the clearest examples of how wildlife stewardship, policy, and working lands intersect," says Lindsay Martinez, research coordinator. For private landowners, the presence of a listed species represents more than a conservation issue alone. It also raises important questions regarding future operational flexibility, regulatory certainty, the ability to continue historic management practices, and impacts to the value of working lands.

At East Foundation, we view the continued presence of species such as the ocelot as evidence of long-term stewardship and functioning habitat on South Texas rangelands. We are proud that these species continue to persist on our working ranches. At the same time, the long-term persistence of rare species depends heavily on the willingness and ability of private landowners to remain active participants in stewardship.

For that reason, we actively engage in policy and conservation framework discussions intended to align the public interest in species recovery with workable management approaches for private lands. Efforts such as the development of a Safe Harbor Agreement supporting ocelot reintroduction are intended to provide landowners with the regulatory assurance necessary to continue stewardship activities with confidence, while recognizing and rewarding stewardship by protecting and increasing the value of operations and assets.

LONG-TERM VALUE

South Texas rangelands have never been static landscapes. Drought, fire, grazing pressure, wildlife populations, invasive species, and changing environmental conditions have shaped these systems for generations, and they will continue to do so long into the future.

At East Foundation, we believe sustainability is ultimately tied to stewardship that creates and maintains long-term value—ecological, operational, economic, and societal. Healthy wildlife populations, functioning rangelands, productive ranches, and resilient habitats are interconnected outcomes emerging from thoughtful management of the same landscape.

The future of ranching in South Texas is bright, and the continued stewardship of working ranches will help ensure that the region remains the "last great habitat," where livestock production and wildlife continue to coexist as some of the most important components of the ranch resource portfolio. Together, they ensure the long-term value, resilience, and sustainability of ranches and ranching across South Texas for generations to come.













THE HERD

By Garrett Stribling



FROM GRAZING RESOURCE TO MARKET COMMODITY

Grazing has been a part of South Texas since the Spanish first brought cattle here in the 1500s, and it has shaped the landscape we steward today. A lot has changed since then, including the type and breeds of cattle and the management under which those landscapes are operated, but ranching is still a vital part of this ecosystem as large, contiguous ranches have preserved critical habitat for wildlife species that call this part of Texas home. East Foundation aims to continue that form of stewardship in perpetuity by managing an economically and environmentally sustainable cattle operation through data-informed management.

Aside from the land itself, the cow herd is one of the most visible and valuable parts of any ranch. Ranchers take considerable pride in their cow herd, a culmination of years of meticulous selection and decisions to develop the type of cattle they desire.

"These animals represent a significant but diverse asset on the balance sheet of the operation," said Jason Sawyer, chief science officer. "A cow herd is not a homogeneous group of cattle, but rather a variety of individuals that range in age, breed composition, and productive value. The wider the range, the greater variability of the asset, which can be advantageous in some scenarios and not so in others."

As managers, we are tasked with stewarding the cow herd, optimizing it for efficiency to operate in our harsh South Texas environment while generating a product that commands a premium in the market. By taking a systematic, data-driven approach, we are able to begin tackling this unique challenge.

HERD AND PASTURE IMPROVEMENT

Our cow herd looks significantly different from what it was just a few years ago, and dramatically different from decades past. Historically, the cattle that inhabited East Foundation Ranches, LLC were primarily a cross-bred, heavily *Bos indicus* influenced type of cow that had adapted to the harsh environmental conditions of the Sand Sheet, episodic severe drought, disease, and limited and brackish water supplies. Cattle were difficult to manage, leaving grazing management nonexistent. These animals were bred for survival and thrived in that respect. However, when we think about stewarding a resource and optimizing it for maximum productivity, the cow herd was an



area where we could utilize the foundation we had in order to build an asset that added value to the ranching operation financially, while simultaneously serving as a valuable research opportunity.

To begin implementing improved management practices on both the land and our cattle, key improvements needed to be made, including building and improving fences, roads, and water infrastructure. Across expansive tracts of land, cattle were territorial, often overutilizing areas of rangeland and completely disregarding others. This patchy grazing distribution increased opportunities for invasive species of grass and brush to overtake once-productive areas, decreasing the grazing capacity for cattle and wildlife. Not only are cattle more difficult to gather from larger pastures, but the distance from water and working facilities makes it challenging to move cattle without the use of a helicopter. To help solve that problem, initial cross-fencing projects decreased pasture sizes from an average of 30,000 acres to a more manageable 3,000 acres.

Water and its availability is the most vital resource a landowner has. Providing consistent access is important for both cattle and wildlife. In the Sand Sheet, surface water is ephemeral, brought on by infrequent but sometimes heavy precipitation, and disappearing as quickly as it appears. As managers, we cannot depend on surface water on our South Texas ranches. Having reliable wells and distribution systems to provide access for both cattle and wildlife is paramount, as these are often their only water sources. To address water availability concerns, we have invested significant capital in reinforcing our water infrastructure and building additional supply to reach areas previously under-utilized or not utilized at all.

Mapping and planning water infrastructure helped meet current needs and inform future infrastructure development as our management opportunities increased. We also built water lots (gated fences) around every water source to control access for cattle, allowing us to better influence cattle movement across the landscape. If an area is being over-utilized, we can close access to that water source and drift the cattle to an area with greater forage availability. We use this same practice to gather cattle, only allowing access to areas close to working facilities, resulting in better gathering rates and management.

As we improved our ability to manage the movement and handling of cattle, we had opportunities to increase management in other areas. Implementing a vaccination program seems obvious but it is hard to do when you're unable



to get the cattle into the pen. With effective infrastructure in place, we collaborated with our veterinarian to implement a stringent vaccination, deworming, and disease-testing protocol across all classes of cattle at all the ranches.

Reproduction is the most economically relevant trait in any cow-calf operation. When calves are born 365 days a year, it makes the herd difficult to monitor and manage for many reasons. In that scenario, a rancher is often weaning calves as their mothers already have a new calf at side or are about to drop the next one. Not only does this put unnecessary physiological stress on the cows, but it also makes it difficult to put together sets of uniform calves to market due to an extremely variable age spread amongst groups. To address this, in 2017, we implemented a confined breeding season of 90 days.

"Keeping a non-pregnant cow is like paying for groceries just to let them expire," said Eddie Reyna, ranch manager. "Placing reproductive pressure on the cowherd enabled us to identify the productive cows and remove the non-producers."

SCIENCE-BASED AND DATA-DRIVEN

Implementing these initial practices led to significant directional swings for the cowherd. This allowed for finer-tuned management and the opportunity to dial in on what our goal was: to operate an efficient, sustainable production system that maximizes the value of the cowherd. We now have the foundation to apply research and economic principles to management, driven by data collection from our livestock and rangelands. We outlined our goals through five key strategies:

1. Increase the carrying capacity to increase production value
2. Increase direct livestock production value.
3. Improve the value of our products
4. Improve our data and recordkeeping to improve our decision-making and estimate value creation
5. Enhance wildlife value

We use these strategies to guide our decision-making, forming the foundation for how we think about management.

To begin implementing these strategies, we had to rebuild the cow herd. By putting pressure on the cow herd to perform under strict reproductive criteria, raise a calf every year, and rebreed in a 90-day breeding season, we underwent a significant reduction in inventory, but the females that remained formed the base of the new herd. These cows had proven themselves to be reproductively

efficient and well-adapted to their environment, but there was an opportunity to increase the value of their offspring in the market as well as the future of the cowherd. We implemented a genetic shift by outcrossing Red Angus, a breed not already part of the cowherd. Red Angus genetics allowed us to add hybrid vigor, which can improve fertility, survivability, and growth traits. It also improved the uniformity of the herd. While uniformity can mean a lot of things, in this case, we saw immediate results in uniform color pattern, as well as in body size and type. The original cow herd was a mix of all colors and types stemming from previous breeds with a heavy *Bos indicus* influence. Adding Red Angus genetics moderated the variation to shades of red, adding value to the animals we market and to the overall operation.

Introducing new genetics gave us the opportunity to rapidly change herd genetics. The cattle looked physically different, but we needed additional data points to be able to measure actual changes in performance. Keeping track of animals on an individual basis allows us to see differences between herds and within individuals. We use electronic identification (EID) tags to identify each animal in the herd. This 15-digit number is tied to that animal in our inventory system, where we keep track of all their information. Each time an animal is gathered, new records are entered, including weight, pregnancy, and lactation status, as well as physical location. This baseline information allows lifetime records to be built for each animal.

With any change we make, we want to know the results of that management. There has been a debate among many cattlemen in Texas regarding how much *Bos indicus* influence you need in your cowherd for them to be productive. The answer is, "it depends on where you are." While data shows that too much *Bos indicus* can negatively affect cattle carcass quality and thus reduce market demand, there is not much data on what that percentage is. As operators in an area that demands cows be able to handle the harsh environment, some *Bos indicus* influence is necessary, but what is that optimal amount? That question frames our breeding program as we try to determine what the ideal female for a South Texas ranch is.

The cow-calf business is different than other segments of the cattle business. The cow is a capital asset which generates a product (a calf), and the sale of that product needs to cover the operating cost of the asset and its depreciation for the year. Our goal is to develop a female that minimizes her yearly operating cost while maximizing her production each year. By generating these efficient females, you lower the cost of production and create greater opportunity for profitability. We select for moderate-framed females that should be more efficient in our environment; however, that selection was previously based solely on physical appearance. We also introduced Santa Gertrudis bulls to add back some *Bos indicus* genetics to the cowherd. To answer our question of how much is optimal, we needed additional data points to determine that value.

Genomic testing has been prevalent in the cattle industry for decades but has mainly been used in the purebred side of the business. While there has recently been more uptake in commercial cows, most producers do not have an outlet or use for the genetic information. As we have rebuilt our cow herd and are looking to increase our ability to select the optimal female, this technology provides great value by allowing us to determine

Seeking the Perfect Mix



Bos taurus (European-origin cattle such as Angus and Hereford) and *Bos indicus* (zebu-type cattle such as Brahman) represent two fundamentally different evolutionary adaptations. *Bos taurus* cattle excel in temperate climates with high growth rates, carcass quality, and reproductive efficiency under moderate conditions. They lack the physiological tools needed for sustained performance in heat and humidity: fewer sweat glands, tighter skin, lower heat tolerance, and greater susceptibility to external parasites.

Bos indicus cattle evolved in tropical and subtropical environments. They possess larger numbers of sweat glands, loose skin and dewlap for greater surface area, a lower metabolic rate under heat stress, and stronger resistance to ticks, flies, and many internal parasites. These traits allow them to maintain appetite, fertility, and weight gain when temperatures routinely exceed the comfort zone of pure *Bos taurus* animals.

In Texas—particularly South and coastal Texas—the practical solution has long been strategic crossbreeding. Infusing 25–50% *Bos indicus* genetics into commercial herds produces hybrid cattle that combine heat and parasite tolerance with acceptable growth and carcass traits. The result is improved survivability, lower death loss, better reproductive rates through long, hot summers, and the ability to utilize the region's variable forage and limited water resources more efficiently. Without this influence, pure *Bos taurus* herds face chronic heat stress that reduces conception rates, slows gains, and increases the need for intensive management—making *Bos indicus* genetics foundational to economically and ecologically sustainable cattle production across much of the state.

the actual breed percentages of each animal in the herd and then correlate that to her individual productivity. Perhaps an even greater benefit is the ability to determine parentage on our calves. When you have hundreds of animals in a herd, it is difficult to determine which animal sired or birthed another. Genetic information allows us to build models looking at a cow's individual production—evaluating what calf she raised, how much it weighed, and where it ended up, either at the feedyard or back in the herd as a replacement heifer. With this data, we can begin to identify our optimal females from a production standpoint. Knowing their breed composition can inform future breeding decisions as we attempt to replicate those results. This information will also inform our management decisions and feed into the economics of the business as we think about optimization of production—having efficient cows that fit and thrive in our environment while maximizing the value of that resource. Today, we are building a cow that can produce a calf that demands a premium in the market and a female that can stay in production for a long time.



As we have improved the cowherd, we have also worked hard to improve the management of our land. Grazing management is the foundation of what we do, and we aim to always improve how we manage that forage resource. South Texas is well known for intermittent and prolonged droughts broken up by above-average rainfall. It tends to be boom or bust from a forage standpoint, which makes it difficult to manage as a resource. Ample wildlife populations of white-tailed deer, bobwhite quail, and nilgai antelope add to the complexity, making it even more vital to take a comprehensive approach to management. We have evolved from large, continuously grazed pastures to combining cow herds into grazing rotations. This allows us to give pastures time to rest and recover when the rain does come, and therefore better manage forage utilization and production. The ability to move cattle has increased our gathering rates, made our pastures more resilient, and has stabilized inventory.

As we are always looking for ways to increase our carrying capacity (how many animals our land will support), we have also deployed virtual fencing technology at our El Sauz ranch. Virtual fencing follows the same basic concept as invisible fencing for pets. We utilize a GPS collar that fits around the cow's neck and communicates to an installed tower and then to a cell phone. Fences can be drawn on a phone and communicated to the collars in real time. As the animal approaches the (virtual) fence, it will receive a tone that warns them they are approaching the boundary. If they cross the fence, the collar will deliver a corrective shock. After a short training period of just a few days, our cattle at El Sauz adapted to the system, and we have over 99% containment within the virtual fence. Instead of cattle deciding where to go across a 20,000-acre pasture, we can now move them across the landscape using a rotational system. With fencing costs at over $20,000 per mile and an average lifespan of five years in coastal conditions, these collars are a flexible and cost-effective alternative. This technology has allowed us to increase carrying capacity and gain operational efficiency by pushing cattle to previously underutilized areas of the ranch. While we are still in the preliminary stages of implementation, it shows promise as a long-term management tool.

Another tool we have utilized to increase the productivity of our ranches is brush management. Mesquite and huisache, common to South Texas, can create monocultures across the landscape and choke out other brush species beneficial to wildlife, while simultaneously decreasing forage production. To address this issue, we take into consideration grazable acres, utilizing remote sensing data to observe brush encroachment over time, a never-ending battle in South Texas. As we evaluate an area for brush management, we look at the brush and forage makeup, how large the area is, and if it is for forage production or operational efficiency. For example, areas near working pens and traps need to be clear to facilitate gatherings, so we use a tank mix that will target more species and then use mechanical clearing if necessary. However, on large pastures where forage enhancement is the goal, our tank mix will specifically target mesquite to open up the canopy and improve forage production. We aim for an optimal mix of brush to open space that benefits both cattle and wildlife. We are currently developing a 20-year brush management plan to better prioritize and track our brush management, allowing us to make more informed decisions in the future.

Managing the cow herd on East Foundation ranches involves much more than just running cows. The cow herd is a business, a management tool, and a resource to be stewarded.

"We operate a living laboratory that is constantly changing and take a comprehensive approach to management that is informed by data we collect from our own operations," said Jason Sawyer, chief science officer. "Our goal is to constantly learn from what we do—collecting the results and utilizing these data to make better decisions while sharing what we learn with other ranchers, so their operations may also benefit. We don't have all the answers, but we strive to learn more and do what is best for the land and everything that depends on it."



"Our goal is to constantly learn from what we do–collecting the results and utilizing these data to make better decisions while sharing what we learn with other ranchers, so their operations may also benefit."

– Jason Sawyer, Chief Science Officer







THE HUMAN RESOURCE

By Tina Buford

EMPOWERING TEXAS'S NEXT GENERATION OF NATURAL RESOURCE LEADERS

Texas is defined by its vast working lands—more than 125 million acres of privately held farms, ranches, and timberland that form the backbone of the state's economy. These landscapes produce food and fiber, filter our water, and provide abundant resources for our native wildlife. We rely on the natural, productive capacity of the land. In return, the land requires informed and experienced people with fresh perspectives on stewardship practices that address long-standing natural resource challenges.

In South Texas, where working lands coexist with rich biodiversity that contributes to resiliency, a quiet revolution in education and leadership development is underway. Managing more than 217,000 acres of native rangeland across six ranches, East Foundation is developing a human resource as important as rangeland and water—the people who will shape Texas's future. Through our ranching, science, and education programs, and through collaboration in strategic partnerships, the Foundation integrates professional and leadership development deeply rooted in the stewardship ethic. This approach not only equips young Texans with practical skills but also instills a long-game mindset of responsible management that benefits both the land and the life that depends on it for future generations.

We operate our lands as a working ranch, living laboratory, and on-the-ground classroom. Here, ranching, research, and hands-on learning converge to show how working lands can support both economic productivity and ecological health. This approach helps meet an important need: preparing future professionals and community leaders to care for finite resources like land, water, and wildlife, while investing in the people who will carry that work forward.

BUILDING LEADERS

At East Foundation, stewardship means more than conserving natural resources; it means managing them responsibly so they can be valued across generations. That same guiding principle shapes how we approach professional development across South Texas. In a time of rapid technological change and shifting workforce needs, Texas needs leaders who can make data-driven decisions and navigate competing demands.

Education

We know that tomorrow's workplace demands more than technical knowledge. It requires traits such as reliability and adaptability, earned through experience. By rooting professional development lessons in the day-to-day operational realities of a working ranch, these lessons translate seamlessly to broader professional contexts: resource allocation, risk management, and sustainable innovation. At East Foundation, we put stewardship practices into action, study the results, and share what we've learned to build informed leaders. This "management by experiment" approach encourages participants to view challenges as opportunities for innovation, a vital skill in any future workplace.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR AMPLIFYING IMPACT

Our effort to develop the next generation of land stewards does not work in isolation and requires many pathways to create awareness, drive appreciation, and foster advocates. This effort starts in the classroom by partnering with organizations like the Texas Wildlife Association. Together, we deliver interactive, TEKS-aligned curricula on wildlife and natural resource conservation. Taking the message to the masses opens the door by creating awareness of our natural landscapes and why they matter.

Once awareness exists, we then foster their appreciation of working landscapes. The cornerstone of East Foundation's education efforts is the Behind the Gates™ program, which opens the gates of our San Antonio Viejo and El Sauz working ranches to students. These Field Days provide hands-on, science-based learning for grades 4–12, and partners like H-E-B and Las Huellas help make this opportunity available at no cost to the participating schools.

The Land Stewardship Ambassadors (LSA) program, offered in partnership with the Witte Museum, takes the next step in cultivating ambassadors for the land. This program aims to increase awareness of land stewardship principles, promote civic engagement, and inspire students to pursue careers that support land stewardship. Alumni stories of their personal experience in the program highlight pathways into natural resource-related degrees.

For higher learning, the Foundation invests in university collaborations to support graduate research in three main areas: Land Stewardship and Management, Wildlife Management and Conservation, and Livestock and Ranch Management. These opportunities provide professional development through applied research on issues impacting the long-term viability of working ranches.

We've been working hard to expand our education opportunities in South Texas, while ensuring that we are developing future land stewards. Our education programs focus on delivering effective programs in the classroom, on the land, and in partnership with like-minded organizations.

DURING THE 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR, OUR EDUCATORS HAVE REACHED:

13,587
Classroom Students Reached With Wildlife By Design Programs

3,828
Students On Ranch Field Days

40
Land Stewardship Ambassadors Graduates

Our education efforts are made possible because of the following generous donors:

Texas Farm Credit

Our Texas Our Future

H-E-B

San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo

SWBC

Albert and Margaret Alkek Foundation

Thomas and Sonja Vandivier Charitable Fund

Wildlife Systems Est. 1987 San Angelo, TX









By offering immersive experiences that balance practical skills with cutting-edge research, we're preparing the next generation of stewards for complex challenges. We foster a culture of innovation, collaboration, and respect for the land, empowering future generations to become influential leaders in the field who are equipped with the knowledge and passion to shape the future of Texas rangelands.

East Foundation alumni from these programs have gone on to become emerging leaders in conservation, ranching, and natural resource management across Texas and beyond, applying their hands-on experience to solve real-world challenges in land stewardship and wildlife conservation.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: FROM STUDENTS TO STEWARDS AND PROFESSIONALS

East Foundation, in partnership with Texas Farm Credit, offers a spring ranch management internship for students interested in natural resource management. Interns gain hands-on experience across foundation programs, field operations, ranch operations, and administration, with an emphasis on integrating range science into cattle, wildlife, and land management. Through activities such as cattle work, ranch maintenance, vegetation surveys, and facilities support, interns build practical skills in stockmanship, ranch economics, husbandry, plant identification, forage assessment, and infrastructure management while working alongside East Foundation staff.

Texas Farm Credit, a customer-owned cooperative providing financing, insurance, and risk management services to support rural Texas agriculture, has a history of investing in education and community initiatives for young and beginning farmers and ranchers. East Foundation emphasizes the development of technical knowledge and practical skills, while Texas Farm Credit prioritizes business acumen and external advocacy. Our coordinated effort will amplify impact by integrating these strengths, fostering well-rounded professionals equipped for sustainable ranching careers.

Aligning the two outfits was an easy decision as both partners share a Texas-centric focus on youth development in ranching and agriculture. Together, the partnership will build a pipeline of skilled ranchers, scientists, and financial stewards.









A MODEL FOR TEXAS AND BEYOND



"East Foundation's approach to professional and leadership development serves as a model that can be replicated," said Neal Wilkins, President and CEO. "It transforms passive learners into active stewards and future leaders equipped for dynamic workplaces. By connecting youth directly to the land, we cultivate the passion, knowledge, and commitment needed to sustain South Texas's rangelands and economy."

As the state grows, initiatives like this—intentional professional development and education rooted in the stewardship ethic—ensure the people of Texas will be prepared to manage its working lands for generations to come. Strong communities, viable working lands, and healthy ecosystems mean a shared prosperity for all Texans. This is a lofty goal. To achieve this, the long game of investing in our youth through mentorship and genuine engagement will yield the greatest impact.

Due to the efforts of our team and valued partners, tomorrow's workplace and community leaders are being forged today; not just in classrooms, but in the living landscapes that define our state and provide for all Texans. ◊

"East Foundation's approach to professional and leadership development serves as a model that can be replicated. It transforms passive learners into active stewards and future leaders equipped for dynamic workplaces. By connecting youth directly to the land, we cultivate the passion, knowledge, and commitment needed to sustain South Texas's rangelands and economy."

– Neal Wilkins, President and CEO



Our People

Our people are the boots on the ground who work diligently to promote land stewardship through our ranching operations, management-focused research, and educational programs. Below are highlights of East Foundation's recent hires and promotions, as well as news regarding recent awards.

RECENT HIRES



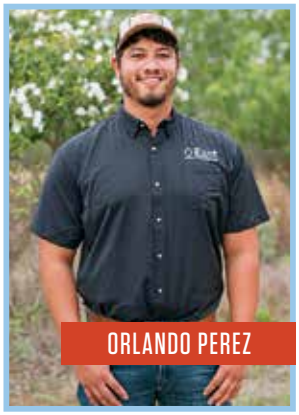
Matt Lagow
Facilities and Grounds Foreman
August 2025

As Facilities and Grounds Foreman, Matt Lagow manages, expands, and improves East Foundation facilities in Hebbronville and on the ranches. Before joining us at the Foundation, Matt owned an electrical contracting business in Colorado for 20 years. Prior to that, he was a commercial and industrial electrician in the Dallas-Fort Worth area for 10 years. In his first year at the Foundation, Matt has renovated one of our research bunkhouses to significantly increase housing capacity and is working on several other improvements to provide additional housing at San Antonio Viejo.



Ernesto Garcia
Unit Foreman
August 2025

Ernesto 'Ernie" Garcia is a unit foreman on San Antonio Viejo. He is responsible for managing ranch operations in his unit, including overseeing cattle crews, working cattle, feeding, and maintaining their living conditions. Growing up in Lasara, Texas, Ernie comes from a family with deep roots in the agriculture industry and has a passion for the future of ranching. In his free time, he trains horses and competes in ranch rodeos.



Orlando Perez
Facilities and Grounds Technician
December 2025

Orlando "Orly" Perez is the facilities and grounds technician for East Foundation. He assists the facilities and grounds foreman by addressing electrical and plumbing issues in facilities and maintenance, and in the presentation and preservation of the grounds at the ranches. Orly has worked closely with Matt on several renovation projects, with more planned through 2027. Prior to working at East Foundation, Orly completed a double major in Criminal Justice and Environmental Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He worked at All Star Nutrition in Pharr, Texas, for four years and at Farm and Ranch in San Isidro before that.





Jerry Flores
Educator
May 2026

Jerry Flores is East Foundation's newest educator. In his position, he'll help deploy our Behind the Gates℠ Education Program by educating students in the classroom and on the ranches about wildlife adaptations and land stewardship through hands-on, field-based learning experiences. Jerry has a B.S. in Psychology with a minor in Sociology from Texas A&M International University. Prior to joining East Foundation, Jerry worked as a wildlife educator at Casa Reptile. He delivered educational programs for schools, organizations, and community events, making natural science concepts accessible, interactive, and engaging.

PROMOTIONS



Rafael Guerra
Water Systems Foreman
February 2025

As Water Systems Foreman, Rafael Guerra is responsible for managing and maintaining the water systems throughout the ranches, including the water systems at headquarters for residents and those for wildlife and livestock. Every day, a crew of several ranch hands joins Rafael to check and repair solar and electric pumps, fix water troughs and cisterns, and replace old water lines that are no longer in use. Before joining us at East Foundation, Rafael worked at Farm and Ranch in San Isidro. In addition to managing water systems, Rafael is skilled in landscaping, operating heavy machinery, and welding.



Tina Buford
Director of Strategic Partnerships
June 2025

Tina Buford is a native Texan and a sixth-generation rancher. As the director of strategic partnerships, she is responsible for developing and managing high-value partnerships that support our mission of advancing land stewardship through ranching, science, and education. Her new position plays a pivotal role in enhancing the Foundation's impact through strategic alliances, collaborations, and co-investment opportunities. She has a B.S. in Rangeland Ecology and Management from Texas A&M University and a Certificate in Ranch Management from Texas Christian University. Prior to joining us at East Foundation, she spent 15 years working alongside her sister, father, and uncle at the H. Yturria Ranch, managing both cattle and wildlife.



Masi Mejia
Education Outcomes Manager
April 2026

Masi Mejia serves as the education outcomes manager for East Foundation. In her position, she leads impactful natural resources education programs across South Texas and supports the delivery of engaging, standards-aligned lessons for students in grades 4–12. She has a B.S. in Environmental Conservation of Natural Resources and an M.S. in Wildlife Science from Texas Tech University, providing a strong academic foundation for both classroom and field-based learning. Masi has extensive experience working with youth, educators, and community partners, coordinating hands-on learning opportunities that connect students to real-world land stewardship.



Elisa Velador
Education Curriculum Manager
April 2026

As Education Curriculum Manager for East Foundation, Elisa Velador connects teachers and students to conservation through both classroom instruction and hands-on experiences on the land. She designs and implements educational programming for Behind the Gates℠ and serves as an instructor for the Cameron County cohort of the Land Stewardship Ambassador program. Before joining East Foundation, Elisa spent eight years teaching high school science, followed by nine years as a conservation educator with our partner, the Texas Wildlife Association, where she helped develop many of the education programs we still use today. Elisa holds a B.S. and M.S. in Biology from the University of Texas at Brownsville & Texas Southmost College and is a certified Texas Master Naturalist.

AWARDS AND APPOINTMENTS

Masi Mejia Awarded the Outstanding Achievement—Commitment to Community Engagement Award from the Society for Range Management



At the 2026 Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management, Masi Mejia, our manager of education programs, was honored with the Outstanding Achievement —Commitment to Community Engagement Award.

Masi is integral in various programs that connect students to land stewardship, conservation, and the future of working landscapes. From Land Stewardship Ambassadors to Behind the Gates classroom and field lessons, her efforts have impacted many young folks in South Texas. She helps connect students to the land, guides them through lessons, and continues advocating for many of them long after the programs end.

Masi Mejia Elected to Texas Chapter of the Wildlife Society Leadership from 2025—2027

Masi Mejia, manager of education programs, was elected to a three-year term for the Texas Chapter of the Wildlife Society, serving as Vice-President, Presiden-Elect, and President from 2025 to 2027. In her leadership role, she will advance the organization's shared mission of excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education.

Ashley Reeves Awarded the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture Horizon Award



The University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture Horizon Award recognizes outstanding achievement in the University of Tennessee Agricultural Research System.

Ashley Reeves received this honor in recognition of her contributions to wildlife conservation, endangered species recovery, and disease surveillance in the livestock-wildlife interface. Her work bridges veterinary science and wildlife management, and she currently serves as the reproductive advisor for the Ocelot Species Survival Plan. In addition to her research, Reeves is committed to mentoring the next generation of conservation scientists.

Kristine Robb Elected to Society of Southwest Archivists Leadership from 2025—2027



Kristine Robb, manager of information systems, was elected to a three-year term with the Society of Southwest Archivists, serving as Vice President, President, and Immediate Past President from 2025 to 2027. The Society of Southwest Archivists is a professional organization dedicated to archival administration, records management, and the preservation and use of recorded heritage.

East Foundation Ranches Awarded the Cow/Calf National Beef Quality Assurance Award from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association



Winners of the 2026 Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Awards were announced during CattleCon 2026 in Nashville, Tennessee. The National BQA Award recognizes outstanding beef and dairy producers, marketers, and educators who best demonstrate animal care and handling principles in their day-to-day operations.

By integrating BQA practices, including facility design, herd health management, and worker safety, into our broader stewardship mission, East Foundation Ranches ensures that our beef meets the highest standards of quality and integrity. This holistic approach bridges the gap from ranch to dinner table, reinforcing trust in the product we produce, and embodying "the right way is the only way." ◊









CURRENT SCIENCE SPOTLI

OCELOT RECOVERY UPDATE



East Foundation continues to lead the charge for ocelot recovery in South Texas. We steward some of Texas's last remaining ocelots and their habitat on El Sauz, conduct extensive research on the cats, and partner with others to develop conservation plans supporting ocelots' persistence and recovery. Our ocelot work exemplifies the importance of private land stewardship for ocelots and other wildlife.

In all of the United States, ocelots persist in just three counties along the Gulf Coast in deep South Texas. Within this area is El Sauz, where ocelots are currently being monitored by camera traps and live trapping. Monitoring, completed in partnership with Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute (CKWRI), support studies that span ocelot health, diet, genetics, reproduction, habitat, movements, population dynamics, and more. One highlight from ocelot research in 2026 was documentation of five female ocelots at El Sauz that were either pregnant or actively nursing kittens. This showed that our working cattle ranch is supporting endangered ocelot reproduction. East Foundation and CKWRI have also expanded ocelot research efforts to look at ecological interactions between ocelots and other carnivores in South Texas (bobcats and coyotes) plus the small mammal prey populations that all three carnivores utilize. In the last year, study of bobcats, coyotes, and small mammals extended two hours inland to San Antonio Viejo—a planned ocelot reintroduction site.

East Foundation, universities, agencies, and zoos made progress this year in efforts to translate ocelot research into plans to breed ocelots and reintroduce them to San Antonio Viejo. This will establish an additional, geographically distinct ocelot population in Texas. With potentially fewer than 120 wild ocelots remaining in the state, the breeding and reintroduction program will play an important role in expanding ocelots' numbers and range in Texas. In late 2026, the CKWRI Ocelot Conservation Facility in Kingsville will be completed and ready to begin serving as a location for breeding a source stock of ocelots for release to the wild. The Facility will initially be populated by ocelots provided by U.S. zoos, who have created a Saving Animals From Extinction (SAFE) program to support ocelot recovery in Texas. Wild ocelots from Texas or other locations in the cat's range will be paired up with zoo-born ocelots for natural or assisted breeding. East Foundation has been banking genetic material from wild ocelots in Texas for years to prepare for assisted breeding efforts.



Ocelot kittens born at the Ocelot Conservation Facility will be conditioned to be wild. This will require raising them in large, semi-natural enclosures where they have access to dense native vegetation and live prey. Once ocelot offspring attain about one year old and show suitable exploration, hunting, and human avoidance behaviors, they can be released on San Antonio Viejo. These ocelots—which will be descendants of individuals on display in zoos around the country—will start a new ocelot population in a part of Texas that has been without ocelots for decades. This marks a pioneering and exciting future for science-based, private landowner-led recovery of an iconic native species.

GHT

By Lindsay Martinez



You can't manage what you can't measure. This fact motivates much of East Foundation's Science Program. Whether it's seasonal range conditions, annual wildlife population changes, or cattle herd productivity, East Foundation measures resources. The long-term and large-scale datasets we assemble during monitoring allow us to assess the impacts of environmental conditions and management practices on resources. This ultimately helps us make informed land stewardship decisions. Birds and mammals are two classes of resources that we highly value and work hard to monitor.

LARGE MAMMAL MONITORING BY HELICOPTER SURVEYS

In 2026, East Foundation hit the one-decade mark of an ambitious aim to consistently monitor multiple species of large mammals across much of the Foundation's 200,000 acre-plus ownership. The effort began in 2016 through a partnership with Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute. Since then, researchers annually spend Januarys in the air, conducting helicopter-based surveys for deer, nilgai, feral hogs, and javelinas at the El Sauz, Santa Rosa, Buena Vista, and San Antonio Viejo ranches.



The surveys help researchers estimate yearly population densities of regionally important native and non-native game species. Over the decade, East Foundation has documented increasing densities of deer, feral hogs, and javelinas on our properties. We've also observed instances of year-to-year decreases in nilgai densities in response to population management. During the surveys, our researchers don't just count the number of animals seen and compare totals to previous years; we also collect data on the age and sex classes of deer and nilgai. Ratios of males to females and offspring to adults can provide insight into both dynamics within the populations and potential future population trajectories.

As large mammal survey efforts continue, East Foundation will keep tracking populations while also assessing best practices for monitoring. For helicopter surveys, we assess factors like the ideal time of day to conduct surveys. We are also exploring other methods like drone flights and game camera grids that can collect the same or similar data with lower time and resource expenses.

NEXT GENERATION AVIAN MONITORING

East Foundation and Texas A&M University recently partnered to test new methods for monitoring birds on East Foundation ranches. We've historically monitored its bird populations—consisting of over 200 species—by deploying a large team of trained technicians across the ranches to listen for birds and identify their calls in the field. We collected a decade's worth of bird population data using this method, but it was effort-intensive.

An alternative method for monitoring birds is using autonomous recording units, or ARUs. Once ARU devices are deployed, they can record bird calls around the clock—without the need for daily in-the-field technicians. Recordings can be downloaded and bird calls analyzed using artificial intelligence programs, further reducing human effort. The ultimate purpose of ARUs is to provide low-effort, continuous, and passive monitoring of birds.

To test ARUs on South Texas rangelands, Texas A&M researchers placed ARUs around East Foundation ranches and are evaluating their ability to identify birds in different habitat types, under different weather conditions, and at different distances. Avian researchers have also identified a few focal bird species for additional studies associated with the ARU effort. These include northern bobwhite quail—an important game species that is also monitored using helicopter and roadside surveys and trapping—and native owls—who are mostly active overnight and at dawn and dusk. Overall, the avian monitoring project with Texas A&M is aimed at continuing to track bird populations on East Foundation ranches while exploring innovations for monitoring birds most reliably and efficiently.

East FOUNDATION

SPONSORS

Investing in a Bright Future for South Texans

Engaging with like-minded sponsors is an important aspect of East Foundation's mission to promote the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education.

Support from our sponsors functions as a force multiplier for the Foundation, enhancing our ability to deliver on our mission and programs. Together, we educate and promote future leaders, professionals, and conservation-minded citizens who value and support our rangelands, as well as the private land stewards who make Texas a vibrant, diverse, and unique place for people and wildlife to live.

Special thanks to the following sponsors who have invested in East Foundation's mission, programs, and facilities.

CAESAR KLEBERG FOUNDATION FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

CCA TEXAS

Our Texas Our Future H-E-B

Quail Coalition Sooner State

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To find out more about partnering with us through sponsorship opportunities, contact Director of Strategic Partnerships, Tina Buford, at tbuford@eastfoundation.net.



Thank You To Our Partners

East Foundation engages with like-minded partners at both the individual and organizational levels to fulfill our mission. Our partners consistently demonstrate a commitment to excellence in land stewardship and natural resources conservation education. Thanks to the following partners for working alongside us to promote land stewardship for generations to come.



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