

Porkies, Prairie Dogs and other Useful Varmints

DAVID PLOWDEN

FROM THE HIGHWAY, the Lasater Ranch looks the same as any other cattle operation out there on the rolling plains between Limon and Colorado Springs. Corral, barn, and ranch house are set well back from the road. There is a windmill or two. The cottonwoods spread out along the creek. The grass is short and straw colored. The bulls and heifers appear in good shape. As for Lasater himself—he fits, too. Tan and lean, he would seem the prototypical cowman going about his business in a prototypical sort of way. And yet for all the appearances of conformity, Tom Lasater is about as traditional as a Yankee *taco*. While most other cowmen are committed remorselessly to a personal war against nature, Lasater leaves nature alone. He regards his 25,000-acre ranch as a protected wildlife area, and posts it as such. Under a rigid, self-imposed no-kill policy toward predators and poisonous weeds alike, he eschews the pesticides and herbicides favored by other ranchers, and tolerates no shooting on his land. For the 1,100 head in his herd, there are a few concessions: artificial water holes, and supplemental feed in the winter. But by and large, Tom Lasater lets his cows fend

for themselves. "I like to sit back and let nature do the work," he says. "She's a hell of a lot smarter at it than we are."

Lasater was born in south Texas some 60 years ago. His frontier cattleman father had owned a 400,000-acre spread there, and when the elder Lasater died, Tom returned from Princeton University to take over the operation. He not only took it over but redirected it by developing the Beefmaster, a crossbreed of Brahman, Shorthorn, and Hereford, and one of the few new strains certified in this century by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Land values in south Texas began to skyrocket in the 1940's, so Lasater went north into Colorado to find a new home for his Beefmaster. Near Matheson, he found the high, dry country appealing. The ranch he selected was a ramshackle affair and the land, he recalls, "was all fenced up into little parcels." But Lasater would soon change all of that. The herd was moved north first. Then, in 1950, he brought his family to Matheson, too. "We just came up for the summer," he says, "and forgot to go back home."

Lasater's partnership with nature is no newfangled arrangement induced by Earth Day enthusiasms or soul-searching reappraisals of the order of things. Curiously, for the son of a pioneer, his understanding of ecological principles developed at an early age. In Texas, he was appalled by what he now calls the "promiscuous" poisoning of predators and weeds by cowmen. He once followed a cowman's bait line and observed the carnage wrought by the 10-40 poison. "They didn't just get the animals they were out to get with those baits," Lasater recalls. "They got everything. I vowed then I'd never get into that kind of thing if I were running things." And, with one instructive exception, he hasn't.

When Lasater first came to Matheson, he found the ranch overrun with rabbits. "There were just jillions of them everywhere," he says, with that magnificent taste for hyperbole common to so many cowboys. Lasater left the rabbits alone, though other cowmen warned him he was making a mistake. Soon, he noticed a significant increase in the number of coyotes on the ranch. "I mean there got to be just jillions of them, too," he says. "Well, you can imagine what happened. The

coyotes were here because there was plenty to eat, and by-and-by they leveled off that rabbit population. Then most of them moved on, but they sure left behind a neat maintenance crew, just to make sure those rabbits never got out of hand again. Now the rabbits and coyotes are in balance. And they're in balance because we left both alone."

Coyotes set most cowmen's teeth to grinding. Not Lasater's. In all these years of ranching, he says he has lost relatively few calves to coyotes. Says Lasater: "An appreciable percentage of the coyotes' diet is composed of insects, rabbits, rodents, etc. Hence, they are not dependent on beef."

According to Lasater, cowboys don't appreciate porcupines much more than coyotes. Once, the cottonwoods along the creek bed of the Big Sandy were infested with the animals. The porkies were out on the limbs of the cottonwoods, chewing away on the dead wood—in effect, pruning the trees. "I figured they must have known what they were doing," says Lasater. "So I left them alone, and after a while they moved on. Then I hear from some other people around here that they're losing their cottonwoods. The trees are dying all over the place. But not on my place. So I asked some of these people if there had been a lot of porcupines around, and they said there had been, until they shot them out of the trees. Cowboys will shoot at anything. They've been doing their best to ruin this land for a hundred years."

On one occasion, when Lasater was still new in Colorado, he allowed some local officials to dissuade him from his no-kill management policy. There was a substantial prairie-dog town on the ranch. The officials said that was bad, so Lasater baited the area with poison. Later, a foreman new to the ranch asked Lasater why it was that the grass in one particular area was richer and thicker than anywhere else. Lasater looked for himself. It was the site of the prairie-dog town. The extirpated doggies had clearly aerated the root system of the grass that grew over their tunnels. Now, Lasater imports prairie dogs. He is determined to establish them once again as a functional component of the ranch's ecosystem.

An important component, of course,

This story is taken from Floor of the Sky: the Great Plains, a Sierra Club Landform Book by David Plowden, a free-lance writer and photographer who has authored a number of books including The Hand of Man on America.

Publ. Oct. 1972

(continued)

is the grass itself. And here again Lasater lets nature call the shots. No chemical fertilizers are broadcast about in an effort to squeeze from the soil what the soil cannot naturally give. No exotics are brought in. Lasater simply relies on the durability of the native grasses, the blue gramma and western wheatgrass. Over the course of a year, he tries to leave at least half of his rangeland ungrazed, so that the grass has a good chance to recover and to come in strong and well rooted the next time the herd passes through. As for locoweed and Lambert's crazyweed, largely the products of overgrazing in times before his own, Lasater leaves the control of these poisonous plants to natural succession. And slowly the native grasses are choking them out. Lasater hasn't lost a heifer to locoweed poisoning since 1949.

The hardiness of the herd can be attributed to Lasater's leave-it-to-nature management philosophy. He has not allowed himself to forget, as others most assuredly have, that this high country was once buffalo range. Now, the Beefmaster has filled the buffalo's niche, and Lasater permits nature to make this succession a strong and lasting one, too. Much of the cross-fencing from the 1940's has been ripped out and rolled up into what Lasater calls "bone piles," so the bulls and heifers are free to range from creek bottom to hilltop. And since stocking is light, overgrazing is not a problem.

Though nature from time to time may be hard on the herd, Lasater can be ruthless. He insists that every cow have a calf in the weaning pen each year, or off she goes to the block. Over the years, he has shown that this results not only in good economics, but sound genetics. He has been quoted as calling it a "survival of the fittest—where we define *fit*."

In the culling process, Lasater has built into his stock a high-yield capability. He does not care what the cow looks like, and he speaks with contempt of the traditional rating prac-

tices of cattle breeders who are out for blue ribbons at the county fairs. "What a cow looks like," he says, "has little to do with the taste of a T-bone steak. I'm only interested in producing the best beef efficiently."

Left to themselves, nature, Beefmaster, and the likes of Tom Lasater might go on forever doing just that on the Colorado plains. But even the big world of sky and grass and occasional springs is hitched to the larger world around it. And the larger world is closing in fast.

Water, for instance. Two aquifers surface on the ranch at Matheson—the ubiquitous Ogallala and the Fox Hill sandstone formation. Yet Denver, 85 miles to the northwest and sprawling ever outward, is draining the former, while the level of the latter declines as irrigators mine the Ogallala to the south. "We'll see the day," says Lasater, "when water out here will be more valuable than oil."

Lasater is also less than optimistic about the future of the independent range operator. On the one hand, he sees the industry becoming increasingly centralized through the integration of everything from breeding to distribution under single management. On the other, he sees the cowman being pushed into marginal country. Or, what is even more likely, the cowman being forced to turn to recreation, to "bring in the dudes." Some ranchers in Texas, says Lasater, are already earning more money from the sale of hunting rights than from the sale of beef. Lasater himself allows as how he sometimes thinks he should become a vegetarian and take in city slickers for a living. "Trouble is," he adds, "I can't stand vegetables—and like dudes even worse."