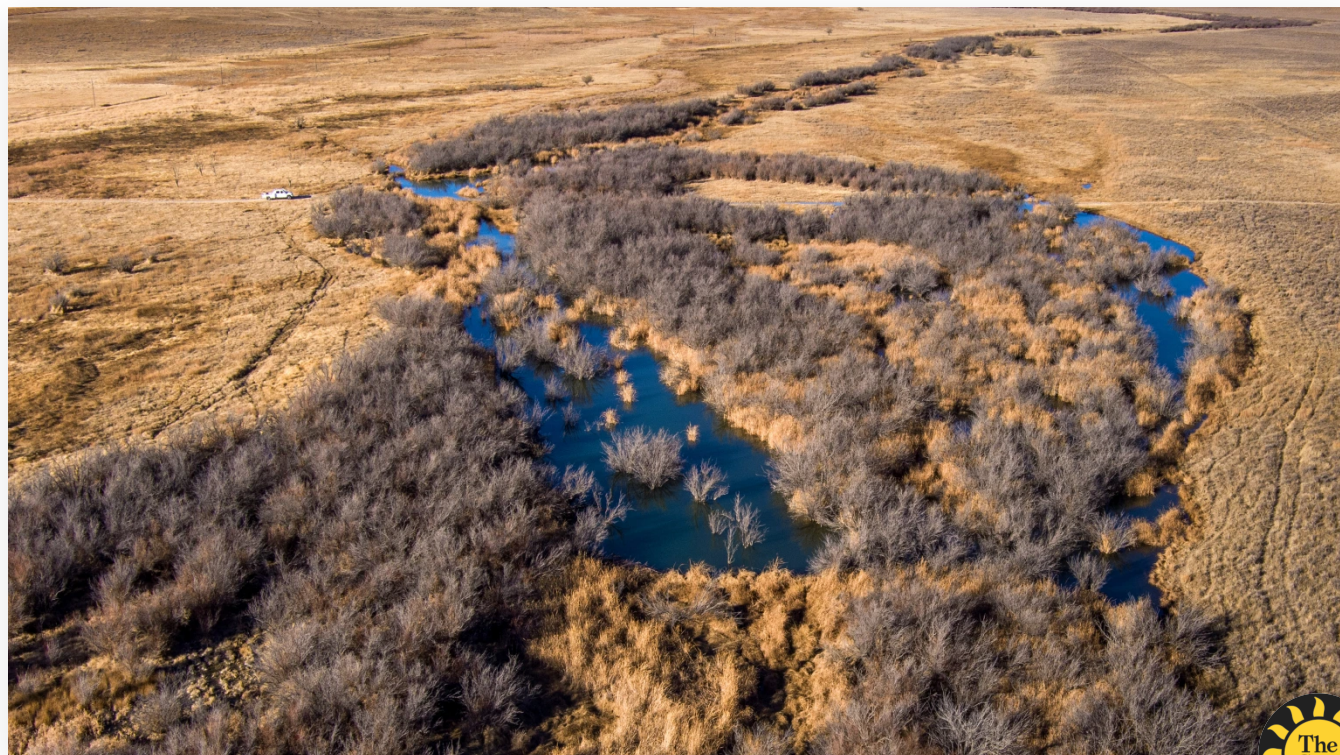


ENVIRONMENT

# A Colorado family tried to save their cattle ranch by betting big on rare birds. It's paying off.




From getting the folks at Audubon to certify the ranch as bird-friendly, to selling carbon sequestration credits for the tall grass, the May Ranch near Lamar is modernizing stewardship.

**Michael Booth** 4:09 AM MST on Dec 5, 2021



The meandering Sand Creek bisects the May Cattle Ranch near Lamar. Beaver dams along the waterway helped create wetlands that draw a unique population of birds—from eagles to sparrows—to the area. (Mike

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**Credibility:**  Original Reporting  On the Ground  Sources Cited

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**L**AMAR — The day that Dallas May started to feel his family ranch’s fortunes solidify, after more than 40 years of raising cattle, was the day he got in his pickup to chase what appeared to be two poachers carrying weapons the size of rocket launchers.

It turned out they were international bird experts from Cornell University’s famed ornithology lab, cradling enormous spotting scopes and hoping to see the elusive black rail.

Word was out that while rising seas and hurricanes ravage the birds’ East Coast habitat, the threatened species was cooling it in marshes and ponds that break up 15,000 acres of May Ranch’s dryland operation. People were apparently willing to journey to a dusty corner of Colorado to pay homage to his eco-friendly land management that avoids plowing and employs animals as recycling ruminants.

“We were not trespassing, but we were close,” laughed Andrew Farnsworth, senior research associate at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

May, 63, can’t always see a solvent future for the sprawling, drought-exposed, multi-generational ranch in the Lower Arkansas Valley. Maybe that’s OK — you rarely actually see the black rail, either. The most experienced birders check the black rail box on their life lists simply by hearing the birds’ distinctive *chitter* call.

But if the Mays can piece together all the available evidence that their environmentally progressive property has value, he and his family can sleep at night. It’s an emerging way of ranching and farming, one that





recognizes preservation of habitat amid global climate change can bring income and survival.

The Mays run a biology lab as much as they run a ranch.

The black rails, and discoveries of other vulnerable species like lesser prairie chickens, helped persuade the Audubon Society to make May Ranch a certified bird-friendly ranch with instant name recognition. Saying no to leases for solar arrays or electricity windmills helped them win a valuable conservation easement.

TODAY'S UNDERWRITER

Ducks Unlimited paid them carbon sequestration credits for letting prairie grasses grow. When they agreed to host reintroduction of endangered black-footed ferrets, agencies offered money to help monitor their progress, though the Mays didn't take it.

The Mays still sell purebred, grass-fed Limousin cattle, all 800 animals descended from one young heifer Dallas May's grandfather gave to him when he was 13. But their ranching life is a thoroughly modern mix of environmentalism, opportunism and hustle.





A Great Horned Owl stands atop a post at the May Ranch near Lamar. Wetlands on the ranch provide outstanding habitat for a variety of birds.(Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

“It’s a different philosophy,” May said in late November, standing at his machinery shop, near cages holding 15 priceless, endangered ferrets. The ferrets would eat the prairie dogs, making room for the burrowing owls that need prairie dog holes, drawing hawks and eagles, attracting more birders, who might buy a steak from an Audubon-certified ranch.





“We operate our ranch in a totally natural way,” May said. “We do our best. We’re an island of grass in a sea of developed farmland.”

## Making the model come to life

Paul Evangelista is a Colorado State University research scientist in natural resources ecology, and an expert on modern natural ranching. He doesn’t know May Ranch.

We asked him what an environmentally friendly ranch would look like.

Evangelista described May Ranch, right down to the prairie dog dens.

When he heard the Mays were selling carbon credits for keeping the grass long and the soil intact, Evangelista muttered approving noises over the phone.

“We weren’t talking about carbon sequestration 10 years ago, but we’re talking about it now,” Evangelista said. “Not only because there is a potential economic gain from it, but it’s an important piece in maintaining the entire ecosystem. So we have this really wonderful shift in the thinking of some ranchers.”

Others have acknowledged the Mays’ work. The ranch won a 2021 Leopold Award, named after “Sand County Almanac” author and naturalist Aldo Leopold, given to those “who inspire others with their voluntary conservation efforts on private, working lands.”

The Leopold citation praised the ranch for improving wildlife

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habitat, soil conditions and water quality. Denver Botanic Gardens researchers came to the ranch and “identified more than 90 plant species never documented in Prowers County,” according to the citation from the Sand County Foundation.

The transformation of the Mays’ ranching and farming property, starting a few miles north of Lamar and cut by Big Sandy Creek as it drains toward the Arkansas, began in earnest in about 2012. That’s when the Mays, who had leased property for their high quality Limousin beef for decades, bought the place.

So, on top of every other ranching and farming challenge: a big mortgage, rather than inherited land. To keep Dallas’ favorite meadowlarks singing from the fence posts, he and his wife, Brenda, needed maximum profits.

Grass-fed beef, instead of cattle sent to an industrial-size feedlot to fatten on corn, could fetch a premium from buyers. The ranch conserved precious water by switching from flood irrigation for alfalfa and hay to more efficient drip irrigation.







Dallas May with grandchildren at a gathering before a ferret release on his ranch on Nov. 17, 2021 in Lamar. (Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun)

But with the ranch also needing to support the next generation taking over, three May children and their growing brood of grandchildren, the Mays stretched their marketing and income sources to the fences:

- Dallas learned Audubon, the biggest name in a field that counts 18 million “active” American birders, had a ranch certification program. He invited Audubon Rockies to the property, and biologist and executive director Alison Holloran drove down from Fort Collins. She walked the short grass prairie and stopped by the ponds. Discovering the heard-but-not-seen black rails astonished Holloran.

By her own account, Holloran’s visit to May ranch was a “poop my pants” moment. “Oh my goodness,” she recalls thinking.

“I promise you, you’ve got more secretive marsh birds on this ranch than anybody can imagine,” Holloran told May. The ranch was quickly added



the certification program, and later designated one of Audubon's

international Important Bird Areas.

May Ranch doesn't sell directly to the public, but buyers can resell the beef at a premium. Some Colorado restaurants feature beef from Audubon-certified Colorado ranches named on the menu.

- Natural foods grocers will pay more for beef certified as GAP — rated by Global Animal Partnership for features like grass-fed, and avoiding use of antibiotics or hormones. The Mays could reach GAP level 4, but decided to shoot for level 5: No physical alterations of the cattle.



The Audubon seal of approval for ranchers, grocers and restaurants to use in marketing.

The Mays' 800-odd Limousin never leave the ranch until slaughter, instead of being finished at a feedlot. They are not branded or castrated, and calves are weaned naturally.

- The conservation easement was a major boon. Conservation groups pay ranchers for easements if the owner gives up development rights and agrees to keep the land as open space.

May learned that to be legal, easements must be based on foregoing real, assessable value. Wildlife habitat, as attractive as it is to some, does not count. A developer would not pay extra for that. But the May Ranch adjoins a power substation, and is blasted by the hot sun and the same prairie gusts that power windmill farms across southeastern Colorado. He's fielded dozens of offers to lease his land for solar arrays or windmills, whose power could be cheaply plugged into the grid through the substation.







American Tree Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds take refuge from a nearby owl in a tree at the May Ranch near Lamar. Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

The Conservation Fund, backed by the Nature Conservancy and others, was willing to pay to make sure that never happened.



Dusty Downey is a Wyoming rancher in sight of Devil's Tower, a naturalist, and the conservation ranching program lead for Audubon Rockies. He was involved in certifying May Ranch for its Audubon endorsement. The pressures on family ranches to sell to tract home developers, or shopping malls, or to plow land for cash crops fence line to fence line, are relentless, Downey said.

“They are all thinking, ‘If we can’t make it, we’re going to start subdividing and selling off to be a Walmart parking lot,’ ” Downey said. “And that doesn’t do wildlife and birds any good at all.”

## Looking for good vibes from good stewardship

May, who is a Colorado Parks and Wildlife commissioner, is certain that the tough, counter-historical management decisions the ranch has made come with their own karma.

Leaving the prairie dog colonies alone, for example, made May Ranch a prime prospect for the endangered black-footed ferret. Most ranchers and farmers are at constant war with coyotes. The May Ranch has never shot, trapped, poisoned or otherwise killed a coyote, May said, unless it was inadvertently hit by a car late at night.

“And in 45 years, as tens of thousands of calves have been born on this ranch, I can honestly say we’ve never lost a calf to predation,” he said.

After discovering the black rails, birders from Audubon, Cornell and other conservation groups visited the ranch often enough to find — hear — the shy birds at marsh edges every month. That meant they were nesting and breeding instead of migrating, and adding back to a species population has fallen an estimated 75% across the nation.





The conservation groups brought resources, so that the Mays could build underwater structures imitating beaver dams to slow water flow and back up more marshes, to support more birds.

Karma, however, frequently rides in on the tail end of a dust storm of irritations. Farmers have always complained they have self-appointed partners in the form of bankers. Now eco-friendly ranchers have teams of third-party auditors. The water quality folks, the easement assessors, the carbon sheriff — it's not just the birders who knock on May's door asking for the keys to his cattle gates.

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Seeking the sanction of outsiders is now a necessary part of environmental ranching, said Downey, of Audubon Rockies. Donors and consumers want to know that certifications and awards are based on observation and science.

“We want to hold ourselves to the highest standard possible when it comes to Audubon for our conservation minded membership,” Downey said. What's new to ranchers is also new to exacting environmental activists.

“Ten years ago, the marriage between conservation and the ranching community ... that was a tough conversation to have,” he said.

Having walked his pastures for nearly half a century, and now passing the ranch on to his children and their cowboy-hatted grandchildren, May is used to playing the long game.



The heifer from his grandfather, that would become the genetic matriarch of every Limousin now grazing his property, was born in 1971. He and his brother, Bon, spent decades perfecting the breed and learning artificial insemination until their Limousin, historically adapted to dryland grazing, were pure.



An American Tree Sparrow clings to withered sunflowers at the May Ranch near Lamar. Many farms plow under all plants and weeds, reducing potential habitat. (Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Looking across his pastures that tilt south toward the Arkansas and the low-angle December sun, May, though, is thinking back to 1871, and before — before fences, before settlers riding burgeoning railroad systems wiped out most wildlife — to when bison walked the same land. Their hooves broke the hard soil and planted seeds; their grazing and defecating spread and fertilized grasses.

Regenerative grazing with cattle, if handled right, can help bring back that original prairie ecology, May said. Though definitions vary, regenerative grazing can include moving animals so they stomp weeds and fertilize in new areas, encouraging native grasses, and avoiding tillage.



“The extent and maintenance of prairies is dependent on disturbance, and that disturbance being fire or grazing, primarily,” said John Carlson, a grassland conservation coordinator in the West resources specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “Cattle on the landscape mimic pretty well what bison historically did.”

Experts, emphasizing the “if handled right,” agree. Running fewer cattle, but of a pure breed with a higher payoff; rotating pastures; avoiding pesticides; all are part of the term regenerative grazing that “just popped out of nowhere in the last couple of years,” Evangelista said.

He sees it working, he said, from high mountain pastures, to the San Luis Valley, to the southern plains bisected by the Arkansas. And working better, sometimes, than the stewardship of land officially set aside to protect the environment.

“When I’m looking at biodiversity in Colorado, our hotspots in biodiversity today are on private lands,” Evangelista said. “They’re no longer in the public lands, in part because our public lands are getting overrun by users.”

Audubon wants to be part of easing the demonization of big ranches as beef factories.







The May Ranch cattle operation near Lamar operates as an Audubon Conservation Ranch receiving incentives for good grassland stewardship. The May family's philosophy toward ranching has resulted in a unique home to a diverse bird population, as well. (Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

“I don't think people realize that if we don't have these large-scale ranches like we do, once it becomes a Bed, Bath and Beyond parking lot, there's no turning back,” Holloran said.

The changes in attitude influenced a big move by CSU this summer. Previously, Evangelista said, the university's agricultural college taught ranch management. As of July, students can get a master's degree from the new Western Ranch Management and Ecosystem Stewardship program.

The idea is to ground future generations of ranchers in a “basic ecological understanding of the land,” said Evangelista, who helped design the degree.

“I do actually think ranching may be more of a solution to the problem than the general public has made it out to be,” he said.

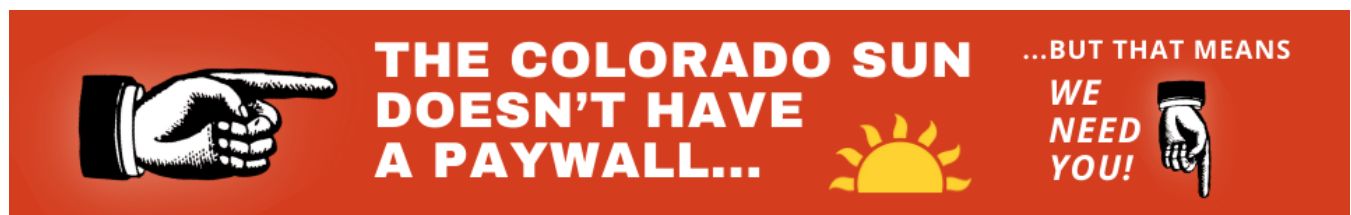


Riley May, Dallas' and Brenda's son and a force behind the carbon sequestration agreement, gets to hear the piercing black rail calls every time he parks his truck at the end of the day near his family's home close to the Arkansas River bottoms.

Cornell's Farnsworth, not trespassing at the ranch back in 2016 but scouting for a national "big day" of species identification when the Mays showed him the black rails, said the family's deep enthusiasm for what their land can offer is apparent the moment they start talking.

Dallas, Farnsworth said, is a role model for how farmers and ranchers should think about wildlife and habitat.

"It's a combination of a kind of anachronistic thinking," Farnsworth said. "My land is important — I want to use it in ways that I can survive, but also do the right thing."



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**Michael Booth**

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