

PRODUCER PERSPECTIVE:

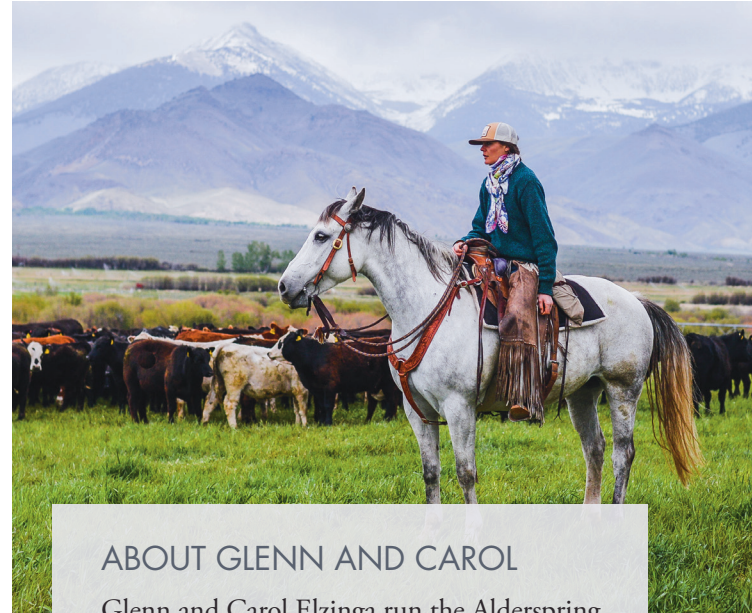
Keeping Wolves Away with Interns and In-herding

BY KATE RASMUSSEN

When the Alderspring Ranch began summering cow-calf pairs in their BLM and Forest Service leases outside of May, Idaho, they needed to figure out how to manage the impact of their cattle on the landscape and keep wolves from taking a toll on their bottom line. Melanie Elzinga and her father Glenn, founder of Alderspring, hauled horses and riders to their 48,000-acre public range every day hoping the human presence would be enough to keep the wolves away. Their effort helped with their wolf issue but the time and resources it took didn't pencil out. In 2015, Glenn launched a new approach to the challenges they faced on the remote allotment by starting a range riding program.

Alderspring Range Riders, consisting of one crew boss and a handful of interns, herd the cattle all summer, starting in the lower part of Alderspring's BLM lease and working their way up into their Forest Service allotment. Using a method Glenn refers to as "in-herding," the riders keep cattle on fresh grass all day and prevent livestock impact on the landscape, especially riparian areas. The riders put the cattle in a moveable electric poly wire pen overnight to keep the herd from scattering and prevent altercations with wolves. They move the cow camps about every two weeks to lower the impact on the landscape.

Melanie is Glenn's oldest of seven daughters and a crew boss for their summer cow camp. Along with managing the cattle and grass, she mentors the new crop of Alderspring interns and teaches them how to herd cattle. Interns are a critical component to Alderspring's



ABOUT GLENN AND CAROL

Glenn and Carol Elzinga run the Alderspring Ranch in May, Idaho along with their seven daughters and son-in-law. The Elzingas have over 25 years of experience marketing their beef direct to consumers.

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in-herding strategy. Most of the interns come from natural resources, ecology, and conservation backgrounds and get into the riding, livestock, and camping skills as the summer goes on. Most have limited agricultural experience—which turns out to be an advantage in a lot of ways. Seasoned cowboys or cowgirls looking for a real wild west gig chasing cows and roping calves likely won't find what they're after at the Alderspring cow camp. "It's not what people expect it to be up there. Aside from protecting riparian areas and managing the herd to improve the condition of the range, what we're also trying to do is keep our cattle full and fed and help them gain weight while they're up there. It's a lot of keeping cattle in a pretty tight bunch and sitting there, watching them eat the entire day," Melanie said.

For a while, they hired minimum-wage riders for the summer, but they've had enough interest from people who want to do the job for the education and experience that they're able to take on interns willing to work for a stipend rather than hire on employees. As long as they have one crew boss who knows the drill, the Alderspring interns just need to be competent learners and have an interest in conservation management. "For a city kid, they're totally out of their element. They have no idea what to do. They have to ask a lot of questions, but they're also not expecting this super exciting experience where they're roping and doctoring cattle and riding colts and broncs." By the end of the summer, the interns come out understanding what it takes to keep an animal gaining weight on grass and to take care of the landscape while doing it.

Melanie has found that a receiving period for interns is important. After the interns arrive in the spring, they spend two weeks learning basic stockmanship and horsemanship skills, how to hook up a trailer, firearm safety, and camping skills. The first couple weeks on the range can be a little rough but the interns tend to catch on quickly. Glenn and Melanie also found that it's best to do four-day stints on the range and then rotate riders to prevent burnout.

As for the wolves, Melanie hasn't had an issue with wolf predation since starting the in-herding program. They now run yearlings on the summer range rather than pairs because of the direction their business has gone. Melanie noticed this change worked well for in-herding. The yearlings were more manageable than cows on the expansive summer range because they were more likely to stick together in a herd. She found that cows with calves tend to break off into smaller groups and spread out, making it difficult to manage the cattle and the interns. "Yearlings are very herd oriented and pretty malleable in terms of behavior," said Melanie.

Hosting interns isn't for every operation. A passion for sharing an agricultural experience with others goes a long way. Melanie sees the program as a huge benefit to people who otherwise wouldn't be exposed to production agriculture. "Even if they don't go into a field of agriculture or ranching down the road, I feel like this is a really good experience to understand how good food is produced and how these pieces of the natural world fit together," said Melanie.

Photos by Melanie Elzinga



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