

FALL 2001

Listen to the Songbirds...and bring on the Cows

Conventional wisdom said birds and bovines don't mix.
By Dan Dagget

In 1994 Dave Ogilvie started water flowing once again through some old dirt irrigation ditches on the U Bar in New Mexico. At the time Ogilvie rewatered those ditches, he noticed that water leaking through their dirt walls began to reinvigorate trees living along their banks. The trees sent out new shoots. Seedlings started appearing. Among that new growth, Ogilvie noticed flashes of red, yellow, and blue as a variety of songbirds took up residence in the revitalized patches of cottonwood, box elder, and Russian olive.

A year later, the Southwestern willow flycatcher was

listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Grazing was blamed for bringing this songbird to the brink of extinction. Cattle, it was claimed, denuded the riparian areas the birds needed to exist. Conventional wisdom said these birds were absolutely unable to coexist with cattle.

Ogilvie wondered if some of the birds on the U Bar could be flycatchers. He knew that 643 miles of river and adjacent land in the Gila drainage (including the riverside land on the U Bar) had been identified as possible habitat for the bird. Since some of the people calling for protection of the species were also calling for the removal of cattle from this land, Ogilvie was worried. He hired a biologist to do a bird survey. The biologist found Southwestern willow flycatchers—and the largest population yet discovered: 64 pairs of endangered birds were counted on the U Bar in 1995, while 38 were counted along California's Kern River, the next most populous site.

Those high numbers caught the attention of Dr. Scott Stoleson, wildlife biologist for the U.S. Forest Service and Rocky Mountain Research Station in Albuquerque. Unlike some of his peers who stuck to their prejudices that flycatchers and cows couldn't mix, Stoleson undertook a



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The U Bar Ranch cattle share a riparian area with more endangered songbirds than anywhere else.

detailed study at the U Bar. Those studies have indicated that it is neither an accident nor an anomaly that these birds thrive on the ranch in the presence of their purported nemesis. In fact, it seems that cattle ranching, as practiced on the U Bar, promotes and sustains the kind of habitat these endangered birds prefer.

Stoleson found that rather than the dense, undisturbed stands of willows these birds are said to need, the flycatchers were nesting in mature cottonwoods and box elders with a relatively open understory and water nearby. That's

“At that time,” Stoleson says, “the ranch was home to 40 percent of the entire known population.”

As impressive as that is, it's just part of the U Bar's success story. The ranch riparian area serves as home to the highest density of songbird territories in North America—an average of 1,300 per 100 acres. (The next most dense site supports 1,100.) On the U Bar stretch of the Gila, 99 percent of the fish are native species and only one percent are nonnative. The average for other streams in the Southwest is closer to the opposite. The U Bar, which Ogilvie

leases from the copper-mining giant Phelps Dodge, supports the largest population of one threatened fish, the spikedace, and among the largest populations of another, the loach minnow. Both of these species are listed by The Nature Conservancy as among the 500 most endangered species in the United States. Other threatened, endangered or significant species doing well on the U Bar include the common blackhawk (largest known population), Abert's towhee, Bell's vireo, Gila woodpecker, Gila chub, desert sucker and Sonoran sucker.

What these rare creatures seem to be telling us in the most significant way they can—by making their homes and proliferating on the U Bar stretch of the Gila—is that this riparian area on a cattle ranch is managed in the way best suited to ensure their survival and promote their recovery. The people who are putting together the official recovery plan for the Southwestern willow flycatcher, however, have a different take on the matter. The Draft Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Recovery Plan

produced for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) states that its approach is “to determine...the degree and the conditions under which livestock grazing is compatible or incompatible with flycatcher recovery.” Having stated that, the draft plan then goes on to call for “the total exclusion of livestock grazing from those riparian areas that are deemed necessary to recover the flycatcher where livestock grazing has been identified as a principal stressor.”

On the way to this conclusion, the draft plan mentions the U Bar and acknowledges that “information reviewed here also suggests some degree of compatibility between grazing and flycatcher recovery.” Based on this and a stated desire to “avoid recommending undue or unnecessary

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The willow flycatcher has shown that grazing and agricultural operations can be used to heal ecosystems. Their testimony has been dismissed in favor of archaic preconceptions that the only way humans can restore nature is to leave it alone.

exactly the kind of habitat found on the U Bar. The trees are nurtured by the leaky ditches. They reach maturity protected from wildfire by the cattle which clear away the flammable understory. The ditches provide the nearby water which Stoleson's observations reveal is the second most significant factor in the birds' choice of a nest site.

U Bar flycatchers even break with the most entrenched preconception of all—that they cannot coexist with cattle. Stoleson's data shows that areas on the U Bar grazed by cattle support more flycatchers than those that aren't grazed. Not a lot more, but enough to refute the preconception.

From 64 pairs in 1995, the U Bar population of Southwestern willow flycatchers grew to a high of 200 in 1999.

restrictions on a widespread, traditional land-use industry,” the draft plan leaves the door open for some grazing in some areas under certain conditions. In those cases it offers guidelines for how that grazing would be conducted.

It would be reasonable to expect these grazing guidelines to be based on David Ogilvie’s practices. After all, his Southwestern willow flycatcher recovery project is the most successful yet. It even outperforms the draft plan’s ace in the hole—removing all grazing. The U Bar has three times as many flycatchers as the most successful preserve and 10 times as many as some. But instead of using Ogilvie’s holistic goal-directed management as a model, the draft plan would have grazers conduct their activities according to a set of rules drawn up by the technical subgroup. The fact that the draft plan’s grazing guidelines are not based on Ogilvie’s management means none of the Plan’s \$104 million will be spent recreating the most successful flycatcher recovery project known. In fact, since the plan’s rules would serve as obstacles to applying a goal-based management approach like Ogilvie’s, you could say the plan’s millions would be spent making sure the U Bar’s success will never be repeated.

The U Bar is “an extremely unique situation,” says Greg Beatty, of FWS’s Phoenix office. “Much of the rest of the flycatcher’s habitat is very different.”

Federal agent Beatty is right. The U Bar is unique, but that uniqueness is not a matter of physical characteristics. What is unique about the U Bar is that it is managed according to goals, not rules, and that its success is so outstanding. As I write this, the ongoing Southwestern willow flycatcher count for 2001 on the U Bar stands at 138. Two similar-sized preserves that border the U Bar have seven flycatchers between them.

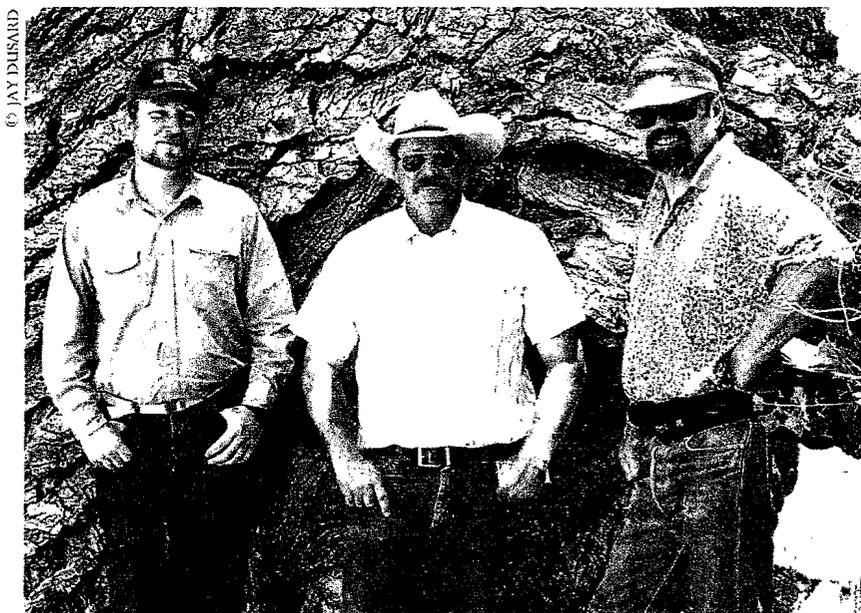
If this situation were taking place in any other area of human activity, it would inevitably result in a scandal. If a sports star were outscoring his teammates by 138 to 7, and the coach announced he was going to bench the star and use the play of the underachievers as a model for the whole team, the fans would be screaming for the coach’s head. They would accuse him of pursuing another agenda besides winning.

That’s what appears to be happening here. The draft plan’s “other agenda” is habitat protection. The writers of the plan have made the assumption that habitat protection is the best route to flycatcher recovery. David Ogilvie’s suc-

cess makes it clear that we don’t need to remove people from the land to bring the Southwestern willow flycatcher back from the brink of extinction. Nor do we need to further cripple the agricultural economies of rural communities.

Beatty pointed out that if the practice of using cattle grazing and ranch management to create or restore flycatcher habitat is ever going to be accepted widely, other successes in other locations are going to be necessary. As for obstacles presented by the draft plan, “Do it on private land,” suggested Beatty. “The Endangered Species Act, and therefore the draft plan, don’t apply on private land.”

David Ogilvie knows from experience that any action on private land that involves federal money or adjacent federal land or involves land between the high-water marks of a stream requires consultation with FWS and therefore



Forest Service wildlife biologist Scott Stolesen, left, with rancher Dave Ogilvie, center, and environmentalist Dan Dagget. Diverse interests are working together for the birds.

comes under the ESA. As an example, Ogilvie points to the fact that the first in a series of projects on private land that would expand the U Bar’s exceptional habitat has already come under FWS scrutiny and been delayed and reduced in scope.

Working with U Bar owner Phelps Dodge Inc., the Quivira Coalition and EcoResults, David Ogilvie and Scott Stoleson are collaborating to use pole plantings, off-road vehicle exclusions, restorative grazing practices, and re-watered dirt ditches to further expand the Southwestern willow flycatcher’s most successful recovery by as much as 150 acres.

That is, if the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Recovery Plan, as it is finally approved, doesn’t stop them. ■