

# RUNNING HARD AND



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# FAST AT THE ROCKER B



## *Pronghorn and cows, ranching and health care — they all work together at a West Texas ranch*

By Mike Barnett

**P**ronghorn antelope. Also known as the Sagebrush Rocket. Maybe the Desert Racer. It's an animal with a need for speed. And they hold a special place in Cody Webb's heart.

"They are resilient enough to outlive everything else and we are fortunate enough to get to see them," Webb says. "To me, they are very much an icon of the American West. The song where 'the deer and the antelope play?' Well, here they are."

Webb has a vested interest in the fastest mammal in North America. A herd of 250 pronghorn runs the vast stretches of the Rocker b Ranch, located near the tiny West Texas town of Barnhart. Webb serves as wildlife coordinator and oilfield liaison for the ranch.

Pronghorn are essentially an Ice Age relic. They evolved to outrun American lions and cheetahs. Pronghorn are the ultimate survivors.

"They are absolutely the speedster of the Plains," Webb says. "I like to see them up on the hills, staring at you and knowing they can outrun you at the drop of a hat, and outrun your horse, too."

The herd at the Rocker b is on the easternmost range of pronghorn antelope in Texas. You will also find them in the Panhandle and Trans-Pecos regions of the state.

Pronghorn have been here since the land was first ranched nearly 150 years ago, and certainly long before that. The commitment to keep them here runs strong at the Rocker b, and with the ranch's owner, The Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in Dallas.

"We think it's our job to preserve what we have," Webb says.

### **The Rocker b story**

The relationship between the Rocker b and Scottish Rite Hospital for Children is unique.

The first tract of land for the ranch was purchased in 1871 by the Sawyer family from Wisconsin. Named the Bar S Ranch, it was purchased by Sen. William Blakley in 1954. He changed the brand to the Rocker b. Blakley donated the ranch to the hospital in 1964.

The nonprofit hospital, conceived as a polio hospital for children in 1921, has grown to be one of the leading pediatric orthopedic hospitals in the nation. ►





operation. They run primarily Angus and black baldy cows with a few reds mixed in. They also have a small but growing registered Hereford herd. Angus and Hereford bulls are used on the cows. Cattle on the 180,000-acre ranch are mostly worked on horseback, and the cowboy traditions of the Old West continue to run deep.

Cody's father, Dennis, is the director of ranch operations. His mom, Tammy, works as the office manager. His wife, Sarah, is the equine breeding manager.

The ranch and hospital have been a perfect fit, according to Webb.

There is a culture of excellence at the hospital that is well understood by the Rocker b cowboys. Both are leaders in their industries. And the Rocker b hands consider themselves part of the hospital care team.

"We may not be in the operating room or the X-ray room, but we are very much a part of the care team out here," Webb says. "We are very proud of who we are, and we are very proud of what we do."

All profits from the ranch go to the hospital. Children are treated regardless of cost, even if they are not insured. It is an aspect of the relationship between hospital and ranch that is instilled in the Rocker b cowboys, most of whom have toured the hospital to see what they do and who they are working for.

"We explain that in being part of the care team, when we sell a hunt or we sell calves in the spring, or we sell a horse, down the road that can equate to a handmade prosthetic for a child with a missing limb, or a halo for a child with scoliosis, or training for dyslexia," Webb says. "That's the important part for us."

In fact, many Rocker b employees and their families have been treated at the hospital.

"I think that kind of makes it come full circle," Webb says.

### **A commitment to brush control**

At heart, the Rocker b is a commercial cow-calf

Horses are raised for the cowboys' remuda but are increasingly becoming another source of income. The focus is on raising an athletic horse that will work as well on the ranch as it will in the roping or cutting arenas.

Wildlife is also important at the Rocker b. Whitetail deer are the mainstay of the wildlife operation. Mule deer, javelina, wild turkey, bobwhite and predators are also part of the mix.

But it is efforts to increase pronghorn habitat that provide a good explanation of the Rocker b land improvement and conservation approach.

Brush control is at its center.

Pronghorn like open areas and vast areas of thick mesquite are ever-present in this rough country. Webb will target an area, aerial spray it, and wait three years until it is completely dead.

"Then we start knocking it down with a pasture renovator and tractor and we're able to open up large areas of the country," he says.

Connectivity is made by going in with an excavator and opening lanes, clearings and senderos.

"On average, we want those to be about 300 yards wide," Webb says. "Anything shorter than that gets hard to maintain the regrowth."

Individual plant treatment controls regrowth as it appears.

"It's more cost-efficient to spray this stuff when it is smaller rather than when it gets bigger," he says.

As land is cleared, the plan is to follow it up with

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prescribed burns in the future and go from there.

Webb makes it sound simple. But it is hard to imagine the scale of what is happening at the Rocker b. Webb thinks long-term.

“You have to think we have to do this; now how do we keep it that way? And follow up,” he says. “That’s where the IPT and fire and everything like that come in.”

There is also another important technique that the ranch uses in pronghorn management. Antelope will not jump a fence, but they will

crawl under it. Barbed wire fences are built with a slick wire as the bottom wire, to encourage antelope to move throughout the ranch. And they even improve on that. At crossing points on the fence line, they take the bottom wire and raise it 18 inches.

“So, this summer we will probably put in 160 of those,” Webb says. “We want to create as much connectivity as we can. The pronghorns are not as easy to find anymore because they are moving around more. Which is good. We want them to.”

The challenge is to manage for cattle first, then for multiple species of wildlife.

Fortunately, cattle and antelope are not direct competitors. Cows like grass, antelope prefer forbs. Both deer and antelope browse forbs but prefer different habitats.

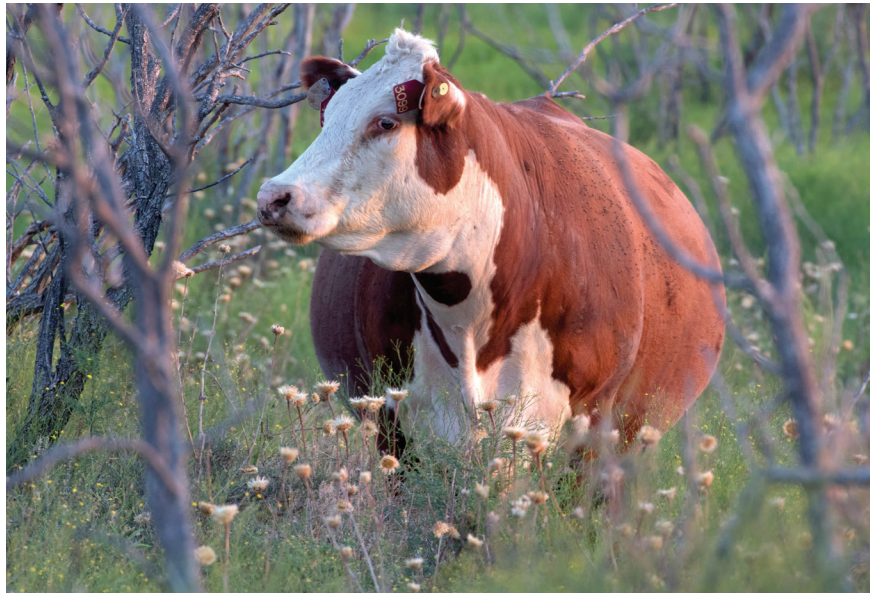
And managing brush for antelope benefits everything, Webb says. Here is how it works:

He looks at an area targeted for improvement and asks, “What do I want it to look like?” And then, “what is the most cost-efficient way to treat it?” He will follow the contour of the land as much as he can when he makes his plans.

“And then we’ll put strips in and that creates connectivity,” he says. “That opens areas for pronghorn to travel through, brush strips for deer to travel through and the edge habitat is really hard to beat where you have brush coming into an opening. That is great for pretty much everything we have.”

Addressing one area of habitat improvement tends to help other areas, Webb says.

“Anything we do for pronghorn is good for cattle. It’s good for quail,” he says. “Deer do like the brushier



stuff, but we open up lanes and they do like the edge habitat. So, by doing brushwork you are really helping everything. It all fits together like pieces of a big puzzle.”

While whitetail deer are actively managed to produce income, pronghorn are actively managed to grow the herd. Only a few of the older pronghorn bucks are harvested each year, making way for younger, more fertile bucks to stamp their genetic imprint on the herd. No pronghorn does are harvested.

### Time for reflection

It’s the end of another long day of fixing what’s broken, maintaining what’s not, checking cows, busting brush, figuring out what you weren’t able to get to today and planning an agenda for tomorrow.

For Cody Webb, as daylight dims and the coolness of evening steals the hot afternoon, it’s a time of reflection. Of friends and family, of the outfit he works for and for a job he adores.

“I get to do wildlife. I get to do cattle. I get to do horses. I get to do range management. Everything,” he says. “And at the end of the day, it all goes to the good cause of improving the health of children in great need. I enjoy who I work for. I’m proud to be part of that team.”

And don’t forget his beloved antelope. The pronghorn herd on the ranch currently numbers about 250. He thinks the ranch can support many more. And with the commitment of the ranch and hospital to conservation and diversity, he thinks that goal is well within reach.

“The antelope were here before we were,” Webb says. “They were here before the whitetail deer. And God willing, pronghorn will be here long after we’re gone.” ■