
*“Stewards Of
The Land”*

RIVERSIDE STORIES

STEVE WOOTEN

Landowner in Kim, CO

AS A FOURTH generation cattle rancher in southeastern Colorado, Steve Wooten, owner of Beatty Canyon Ranch, has been living and working on the land that his great grandfather purchased back in 1929 for most of his life. Now, joined by both the fifth and sixth generations, Steve has devoted his life to the proper care of his family, land, and cattle, learning everything he can about anything in between.



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The task of removing tamarisk and other invasive plant species from many miles of riverside habitat is daunting, but ranches like Steve’s provide a perfect example of how effective the rehabilitation efforts can be, and just how important being a good steward of the land is. “Our work has also resulted in other private landowners coming and asking questions, and talking to contractors about costs,” he explains. “It’s spurring a lot of action.”

It is this passing of information that is so critically important to Steve, as he knows the future generations are the ones that will ultimately be responsible for continuing the

efforts.

Having passed on the reigns of growing the family business to his children, Steve is now content to support them in any way he can. “The best way to create succession in a family business is to get the older views out of the way and let the young take care of the business,” Steve says. “We’ve put our children in charge of just about everything.” He thinks it’s incredibly important to let his children take over in this way, considering them far more prepared than he was, citing, “In our family, everyone has to go to college. You don’t get to work on the land unless you are educated.”

This philosophy has been true for generations, as Steve recalls his grandmother doing everything

she could to teach him about the land he was on. “When we were driving the herd and we’d pass by plants; she’d always quiz us on them, getting us to think critically about where we were,” he remembers. “We were always trying to learn. That family-type anecdotal exchange of knowledge is probably what made us want to be learners, biologists, and pathologists, in order to understand the complete complex ecosystem here.”

Thanks to landowners like Steve Wooten, the river restoration efforts are starting to have a visible impact. With his example, further riparian rescue can continue, and potentially have a lasting impact in the eyes of this and future generations. ■

Photography Credit: Zach Mahone

In recent years, Steve has been focused on the pressing issue of repairing the river systems that run through his property. The Purgatoire River and Chacuaco drainage, both of which have been severely damaged by invasive plant species encroachment, span several miles of his land. Tamarisk (salt cedar) has become an enormous problem for him, as he recalls, “We used to have four-foot-tall tamarisks, but by the time we started addressing them they were 20-foot tall, and they completely encroached both sides of the channel,” adding, “The willows were gone. It became a monoculture of tamarisk, for sure.”

So for over four years, Steve, along with both Americorps crews and private contractors, cleared out the tamarisk from the Chacuaco drainage. They tested whether or not such an undertaking could be successful, and which method of removal might work best for the rest of his property. He found success, as many have, with the mechanical removal of the invasive plants. “Today there are almost no tamarisk in the Chacuaco,” he proudly states. “Sometimes we have to go back and spray herbicide, but we’ve reached a point where the seed in the ground is no longer viable.”

“Once we finished that project, we continued the work on our portion of the Purgatoire River,” Steve explains. “We’ve been at that for five years now. We’ve probably covered two to three miles of the Purgatoire already. Every year, it’s amazing. Once we do that initial work, we see the seedlings of the native willows coming back in. If



This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with Beaty Canyon Ranch and the Purgatoire Watershed Weed Management Collaborative, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

To learn more about other individuals doing great work along rivers, visit <http://tamariskcoalition.org/about-us/riverside-stories>.

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