

# In Control of the COWS

BY JESSE BUSSARD

Whit Hibbard prepares cattle for low-stress turnout from corral to pasture.



MATT BARNES



considered an “old tool” in most ranching circles, new applications of stockmanship to range and grazing management were discussed during a recent symposium held as part of the 68th Annual **Society for Rangeland Management Meeting** in February, 2015 in Sacramento, CA. I accepted an invitation to this unique symposium by the event organizer, **Kent Reeves**, a wildlife and rangeland ecologist. Reeves worked diligently to organize this first-of-its-kind event bringing together an eclectic group of seven of the foremost practitioners and researchers in the field.

The night before the symposium, Reeves invited all the speakers for food and fellowship at a local Sacramento brewery. I was fortunate to be able to join the group and knew from the invigorating evening conversation that this symposium was not going to disappoint. The next day’s discussions proved to be some of the

Hibbard, there is merit to consider stockmanship as a larger entity composed of various aspects including LSLH, natural horsemanship, ranch roping, facility design, and dog handling, among others. Of all these aspects, however, LSLH remains the most important component as it is fundamental to and permeates all other aspects of stockmanship.

Using this animal handling methodology, Hibbard noted, requires an understanding of the basic animal behavior principles of flight zone, pressure zone, balance point, pressure and release, and livestock’s survival herd and social instincts. In addition, a learning mindset and positive attitude, along with a firm understanding of LSLH techniques are vital for success.

**Richard McConnell** followed up Hibbard’s comments in his talk saying, “Stockmanship is a team effort between the livestock and the handler. The right technique, timing, and attitude must all be brought together simultaneously.”

McConnell and his wife, **Tina Williams** who spoke twice during the symposium, continue

## Put the herd in their place – it’ll pay off in more ways than one

most extensive and stimulating I had ever heard on low-stress livestock handling methods and the potential they have to provide economic and environmental benefits to rangelands when incorporated with grazing management.

What follows is my synopsis of the high points of this symposium titled, “*Stockmanship: Managing Rangelands with Effective Low-Stress Livestock Handling.*”

### FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

To a packed meeting room, the morning session began with an in-depth overview of the foundational principles, techniques, and known practical applications of stockmanship as practiced by Bud Williams, who many credit as the progenitor of its modern usage. The first speaker, Montana rancher and Editor of the *Stockmanship Journal*, **Whit Hibbard**, defined stockmanship as, “The knowledgeable and skillful handling of livestock in a safe, efficient, effective, low-stress manner.”

In the term’s usage, stockmanship is commonly associated synonymously with low-stress livestock handling (LSLH), but according to

the work of Tina’s father, Bud Williams, teaching LSLH and sell-buy livestock marketing schools across the globe through their company **Hand ‘n Hand Livestock Solutions**.

### SUCCESS STORIES

With a firm understanding of the foundational principles and techniques of stockmanship, the stage was set for the afternoon discussion which featured speakers researching practical applications of using stockmanship as a tool in grazing management both at the ranch and university level. **Steve Cote**, a former National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Soil Conservationist in Idaho and longtime stockmanship practitioner, started off the dialogue by sharing strategies to incorporate stockmanship techniques when herding cattle on horseback.

Cote also touched on his past experiences working with ranchers, range conservationists, and Idaho grazing associations to combine holistic management and planned grazing with LSLH to solve pressing riparian concerns on grazing allotments. High control over cattle is necessary to protect and enhance critical range resources.

Cote described several past success stories of placing cattle using LSLH in undesirable areas on large public land grazing allotments. The results showed stockmanship techniques could help ranchers to obtain this high control, significantly reduce labor requirements, and extend allotment grazing times while meeting or exceeding agency stubble height requirements.

Over the seven-year period Cote worked with his counterparts, he surmised, "Stockmanship is probably the most powerful range management tool ever developed."

A more in-depth explanation of how to apply these techniques to rangelands can be found in Cote's book, *Stockmanship: A powerful tool for grazing lands management*.

Dr. Derek Bailey of New Mexico State University (NMSU) noted grazing distribution of livestock on riparian and upland areas is a critical issue on rangelands. Bailey, a professor and Director of

the Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center (CDRRC), has conducted extensive research on use of LSLH to manage grazing on rangelands across Montana, Idaho, and New Mexico.

"You can solve a lot of these (grazing distribution) problems with fencing, but I am not a recreational fencer," Bailey joked.

Instead Bailey suggests, "Stockmanship is really a great tool to manipulate grazing distribution. It can reduce labor costs, facilitate movement between pastures, and likely improves livestock productivity."

Bailey's research focuses on comparing use of LSLH versus conventional methods to herd cattle away from riparian areas to upland grazing lands. He recommends when using LSLH to target cattle grazing within a pasture, cattle should be herded away from riparian areas during mid-day (noon to mid-afternoon). While traditionally considered an early morning activity, herding

during mid-day takes into account the cow's diurnal (**EDITOR: *hang on while I look that one up... it means occurring every day***) behavior patterns and allows the animal adequate time to drink, in turn reducing the desire to return to riparian areas. It was found strategic placement of supplements, such as liquid mineral blocks and salt, also helped to make herding and settling cows in targeted grazing areas easier.

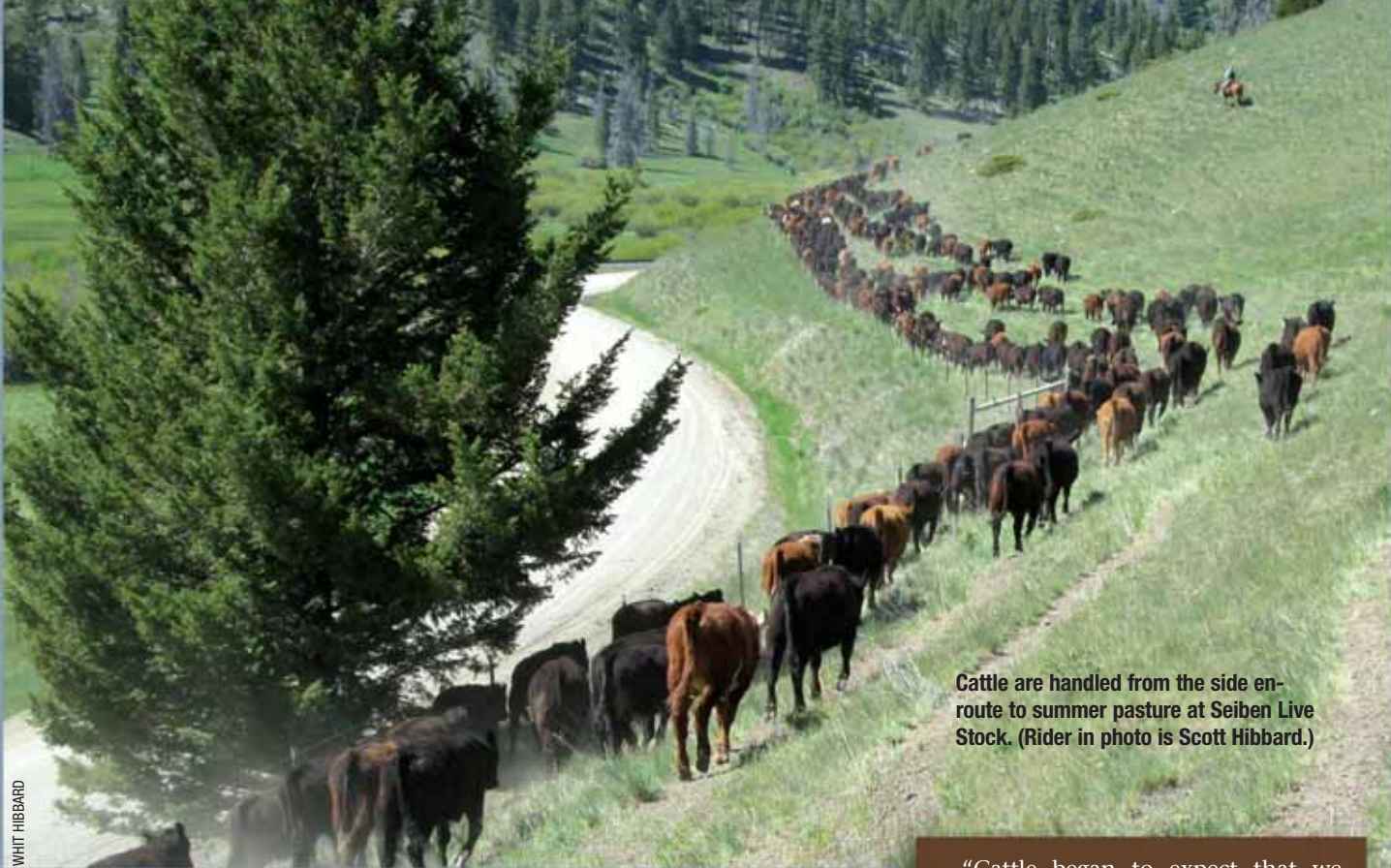
Bailey clarified before attempting these techniques, "You must prepare animals to take pressure and teach them that you can guide their direction of movement."

Secondly, understanding of the "zig-zagging" technique is essential to initiate movement when leaving a riparian area. Direct the herd from the back of the herd using a "T", zig-zagging in a 90-degree pattern to your desired direction or target. Initiating this movement from the herd can be difficult, but will become easier with time.



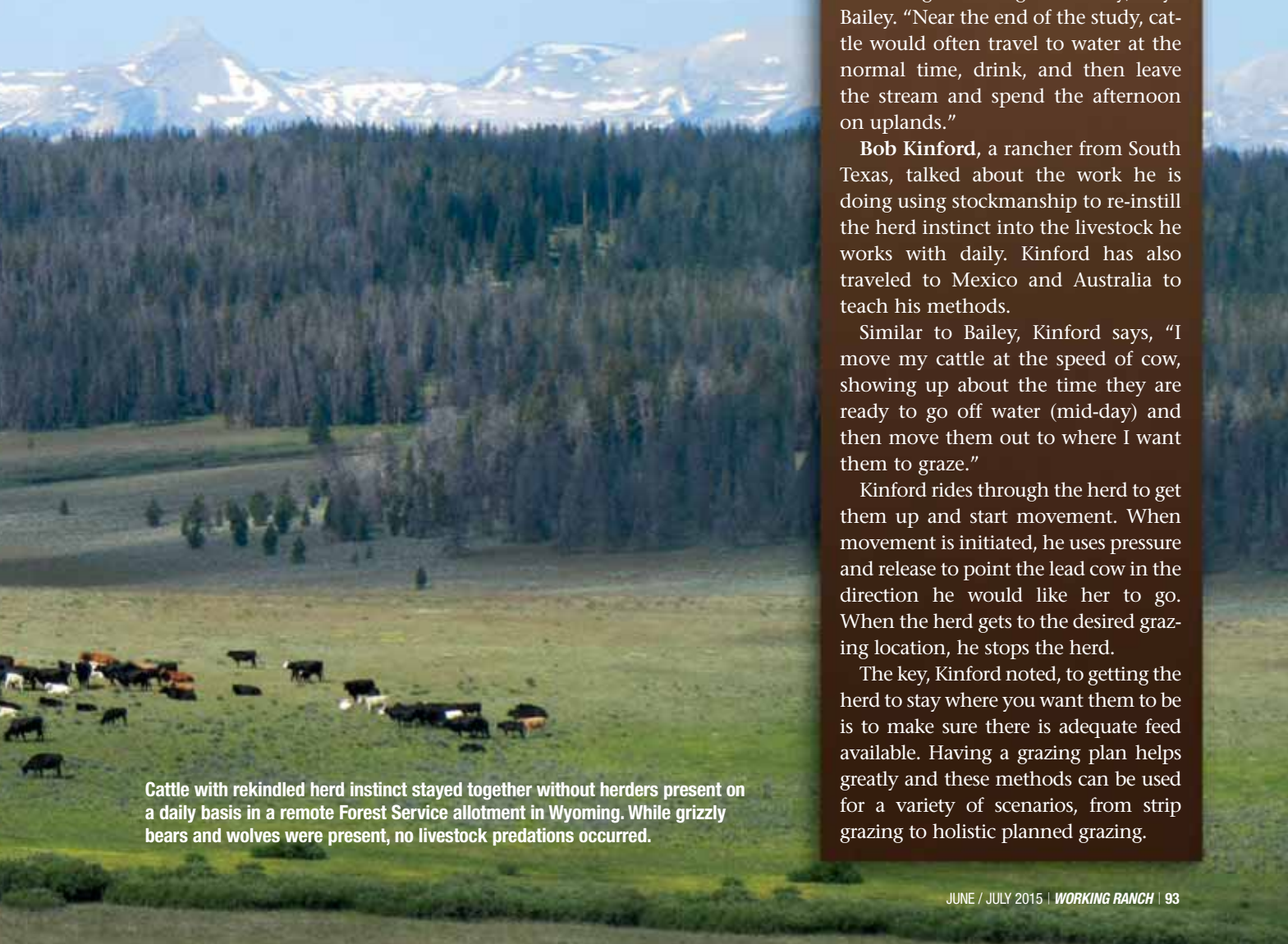
**"I move my cattle at the speed of cow..."**

**—Bob Kinford**



WHIT HIBBARD

Cattle are handled from the side en-route to summer pasture at Seiben Live Stock. (Rider in photo is Scott Hibbard.)



Cattle with rekindled herd instinct stayed together without herders present on a daily basis in a remote Forest Service allotment in Wyoming. While grizzly bears and wolves were present, no livestock predations occurred.

“Cattle began to expect that we would begin herding at mid-day,” says Bailey. “Near the end of the study, cattle would often travel to water at the normal time, drink, and then leave the stream and spend the afternoon on uplands.”

**Bob Kinford**, a rancher from South Texas, talked about the work he is doing using stockmanship to re-instill the herd instinct into the livestock he works with daily. Kinford has also traveled to Mexico and Australia to teach his methods.

Similar to Bailey, Kinford says, “I move my cattle at the speed of cow, showing up about the time they are ready to go off water (mid-day) and then move them out to where I want them to graze.”

Kinford rides through the herd to get them up and start movement. When movement is initiated, he uses pressure and release to point the lead cow in the direction he would like her to go. When the herd gets to the desired grazing location, he stops the herd.

The key, Kinford noted, to getting the herd to stay where you want them to be is to make sure there is adequate feed available. Having a grazing plan helps greatly and these methods can be used for a variety of scenarios, from strip grazing to holistic planned grazing.



JESSE BUSSARD

## REDUCING LIVESTOCK LOSSES TO PREDATORS

In addition to a tool that improves grazing management, stockmanship is also proving to be useful to promote livestock-predator coexistence on rangelands. **Matt Barnes**, Rangeland Stewardship Director for Bozeman, Montana-based People and Carnivores, shared the on-ranch research he is conducting with ranchers in Montana and Wyoming using stockmanship to train cattle to emulate landscape-scale patterns wild herds exhibit in the presence of their native predators.

“Prey animals, when they encounter a predator, can either stand their ground or run. Running is generally not good because it triggers the chase response,” explains Barnes. “It’s not a matter of being bigger or stronger, it’s a matter of behavior and that’s what we want to try to emulate with grazing management.”

Barnes’ research analyzed several different herding methods including close herding, termed “rodearing”, combined with night-penning, LSLH, and then revisiting rodearing after the herd instinct was rekindled. On their Montana project, the rodearing scenarios were not successful; however after several days of herding with LSLH, the group of comingled heifers they worked began to stay together, exhibiting what Barnes refers to as “rekindled herd instinct.”

A similar project was run in cooperation with two ranches and the U.S.



DR. DEREK BAILEY

**(Top)** Matt Barnes discusses how rekindling herd instinct in cattle improves grazing management and can be an effective strategy to reduce livestock predation. **(Above)** In Dr. Derek Bailey’s research, data was collected from GPS collared cows to measure time spent in targeted grazing areas. **(Below)** Rekindling herd instinct in comingled steers increased effective stock density and promoted more uniform grazing. (Rider in photo is Matt Barnes.)



WHIT HIBBEARD

Forest Service in a known predator-inhabited area of the Wind River Range in northwestern Wyoming. While the results are preliminary, the fact no depredations occurred during the trials proves hopeful. Barnes accredits this to the larger herd sizes used and rekindling of the herd instinct, noting in many scenarios where grazing management has been intensified, livestock losses have generally been greatly reduced or eliminated.

## CONCLUSION

It's still conceivable some ranchers will not view stockmanship and more specifically LSLH as a viable alternative to solve rangeland issues or target cattle grazing, as this is clearly an activity that requires commitment to learning and can at times be more labor-intensive. However, the evidence presented at this symposium clearly shows this time-tested skill set is a viable option to improve rangeland health and grazing management, as well as a possible means to reduce livestock losses to predators.

It's obvious that in order to obtain success, a firm understanding and adoption of LSLH is necessary, as well as a commitment to continual improvement of skills. From my observations, the people who have adopted stockmanship techniques



JESSE BUSSARD

**Front row from L to R:** Steve Cote, author of *Stockmanship: A powerful tool for grazing lands management*; Dr. Derek Bailey, professor at NM State University; Bob Kinford; Kent Reeves, The Whole Picture Consulting, Inc. **Back row from L to R:** Matt Barnes, Rangeland Stewardship Director of People and Carnivores; Whit Hibbard, editor of the *Stockmanship Journal*; Tina Williams and Richard McConnell, Hand 'n Hand Livestock Solutions.

find herding cattle to obtain a land management goal to be a fun and gratifying experience. Instead of work, they learn to look forward to the experience, and when these methods are

used properly, the livestock do too.

As Dr. Derek Bailey says, "The true key to success for integrating stockmanship into rangeland management is to have fun!" **WR**

**Dr. Derek Bailey (center) worked with graduate students, Mitch Stephenson (L) and Steven Lunt (R) to study if targeted cattle grazing using LSLH could be used to reduce fine fuel loads and enhance rangeland health.**



JAY RODMAN