

# Grazing & Wildlife Conservation: The Best of Both Worlds

## Background

Recently, a major management shift has begun on ranches, and grazing lands across the state. Increased market prices, feed, and input costs have created the need for many ranches to diversify their operations and move away from strictly livestock grazing, to wildlife, and recreational uses to meet their bottom line, and remain economically viable. This can be done on most any operation by managing for the essentials: food, water, shelter, and space. However, many factors must be considered including species of interest, stocking rate adjustment, available habitat, market, available infrastructure, and economic return.



## Process

“Take half, leave half.” This rule of thumb is quoted by most managers and range professionals, but why? A certain amount of forage needs to be left for the health of the plants themselves, but when managing for livestock and wildlife, competition between species must be considered. Sheep and goats may compete for valuable forbs and browse needed as wildlife food. Cattle graze on the grasses necessary for wildlife cover. Stocking rates may need to be adjusted to reduce this competition, or a rotational grazing system could be used to rest pastures and maintain wildlife food and cover sources. Deer, quail, turkey, and many other species require anywhere from 6 to 12” grass cover for nesting, fawning, thermal or escape cover depending on season. Providing necessary cover will keep the wildlife on your place. To quote the country band Alabama “Leave some green on the ground.” Adding water sources more evenly distributed across pastures will not only spread livestock out while grazing, but it will maximize the use of wildlife across pastures. Remember, when providing water for wildlife that includes predators which may need to be controlled. Livestock grazing can also be a valuable tool for managing usable space for wildlife. Pastures that may have too much grass cover, and limit quail movement can be grazed to open up understory. Rotating mineral and feeding locations can also create small natural food plots by increasing ground disturbance and promoting beneficial forb growth like ragweed, crotons, and broomweed. Consider wildlife in brush management as well. Leave older taller trees near water for turkey roosts, and some areas of heavier brush for deer escape and travel lanes. Leave beneficial shrubs such as Little Leaf Sumac, Lotebush, 4-wing Saltbush, and Catclaw in cleared areas for “quail houses” and wildlife browse.

## Summary

In short, provide the habitat your species of interest needs, along with the cattle herd, and both can benefit greatly. The animals and the land can be healthier, as well as your bottom line. This also allows your management system to be more flexible so that your income is not restricted to one source. The more inviting your ranch is for different wildlife species, the more will call your place home, and the more you have to market.



**Texas Section Society for Range Management**

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*Providing Leadership for the Stewardship of Rangelands Based  
on Sound Ecological Principles*