

## Hunting on the Range

### Amenity Ranch Boom Spreads East

By Hal Herring, 1-15-07

Wide open spaces inherent to central Montana ranches like this one are attracting a new wave of buyers looking for "amenity ranches" outside the scope of the West's traditional hot spots. Photo by Marshall Hibbard.

The term "amenity ranch" is a part of the modern vocabulary of the West, and the mind's eye is replete with a thousand slick ads in a hundred different magazines: a huge log mansion, picture windows warmly alight, a trout river flowing majestically with towering snow-covered peaks beyond. The fields are lush and green. The scenes of western agriculture as we have come to know it are absent from the vision.

But as land prices in the most scenic and still accessible parts of the west reach astronomical levels, a new breed of amenity ranch buyers is emerging, casting about for land far from the luxury hotspots like Jackson Hole or Big Sky.

This new breed has been priced out of those places, and many of them don't seem to care about that. They don't need ski-town ambiance, wealthy neighbors, or even rushing streams full of native trout. They just want the commodity that is perhaps the fastest disappearing one on earth -- big private spaces, clean air, a place to hunt big game and upland birds and waterfowl.

Once-forgotten farm and ranch land in the plains of the West is teeming with these amenities and often sells for a price that -- for now -- pales in comparison to what's being sold in the Jackson Holes and Big Skies of the region. Over the past decade, many of these properties have been made even more

desirable by enrollment in the federal Conservation Reserve Program or the Wetlands Reserve Program or the availability of Conservation Easements, or a combination of all three -- all of which encourage more wildlife habitat while providing either per-acre payments or tax breaks for buyers.

This new market is driving up land prices from eastern Oregon to Kansas and Nebraska, transforming some of the most marginal operations on the prairies into valuable real estate. Even land in once-forgotten places like the Sand Hills of Nebraska, or the empty country of the Terry Badlands of Montana, is no longer affordable enough to "pencil out" -- produce enough profit to pay for itself -- by producing cattle or crops.

The trend has caused the sporting goods colossus Cabela's to jump into the real estate market with both feet, seeking out firms across the west to affiliate with their recreational land sales arm, called Cabela's Trophy Properties. Cabela's Trophy Properties' manager David Nelson told USA Today in a recent story, "Since we already offer everything that sportsmen and women need to succeed in the field, why not make the field itself more accessible?"

Cabela's is competing in the new market with the original purveyor of flyfishing tackle, Orvis, and with the more established ranch brokers such as Sotheby's of London, a firm that has been selling art and other objects of great value since 1744. Hall and Hall, based in Montana, has been a ranch broker and real estate services company for decades; their agents have long been on the pioneering edge of the recreational ranch sales and management.

The properties offered range from Orvis' 312,170-acre Overland Trail Ranch in Wyoming, which includes 22 miles of the excellent trout fishing and trophy whitetail habitat of the North Platte River (\$47.5 million), to Cabela's just-sold Box Elder Ranch (\$1.95 million). Advertised as a "hunter's paradise," Box Elder is 1,421 acres of upland bird, waterfowl and big game habitat on the austere grasslands near Ekalaka, Montana, almost to the North Dakota line. Hall and Hall just sold the Kootenai Springs Ranch near Stevensville, Montana, a ranch containing extensive wetlands and springfed oxbows of the main Bitterroot River, all meticulously restored by the former owner. That property sold for \$14 million. For the more modest buyer, looking for hunting first, Hall and Hall offers "a small sporting property," the Durfee Creek Ranch, in Grass Range, Montana: 1,120 acres for \$1.25 million. The list of properties is long. Almost none of them will be purchased by traditional farmers or ranchers.

The market is dominated by a generation of realtors who may know less about appraisal values of houses than they do about ideal habitat for Hungarian partridge, pheasants or trophy mule deer. Most

can expertly define the concept of AUMs (the amount of forage required by a 1000-pound animal for one month) or a “grass and cake operation” to a befuddled San Francisco banker, because many, if not most, are the sons and daughters of ranchers and farmers. But they are more likely to have memorized the telephone number of a consulting fisheries biologist or stream restoration specialist than a cattle buyer.

A sign advertises a ranch for sale in the Paradise Valley. Photo by Chris Lombardi.

And so far, they operate in a market that seems immune to the ups and downs of more traditional real estate. Jim Taylor, who was raised on a ranch near the Crow Reservation in Montana and has worked at Hall and Hall since 1972, explains, “I get these calls from buyers and they say, ‘Hey Jim, haven’t you heard? The real estate market is in the tank!’ But I go back to what Will Rodgers said, ‘Buy land, cause they ain’t making any more of it.’ We are dealing with a different commodity here.

“Yes, prices for houses and developed properties go up and down, and they are building more and more of them, every day. But they aren’t making any more ranches, and we have a growing bulge of people who want these kinds of properties and have the money to buy them.”

He adds, “They are buying views, buying wildlife, buying privacy. They want to own a whole valley, own their boundaries.”

That “growing bulge,” of these buyers, according to Taylor, “comes from everywhere, but if you want to categorize, you could say, investment bankers, or the owners of small companies that have been monetized –say a mom-and-pop company producing some kind of widgets that makes \$1 million in revenue every year, and somebody wants to buy it. And there’s old money in it still. More and more, this is an accepted method of investment for old money. Or for anybody.”

While the trend is difficult to quantify, the “bulge” of buyers clearly has ranchers and farmers in many places seeing green. According to a source at Landwatch.com, which specializes in amenity properties, there has recently been a surge in sellers looking to tap into the vast new market. Three months ago, Landwatch.com listed 600 properties for sale. Today, there are 3,000. “We are getting a lot of interest from sellers here,” the source said. “I guess Montana is not just for Montanans anymore.”

Dax Hayden, who owns Hayden Outdoors, LLC, a Denver-based affiliate of Cabela's, explains that the rapid rise in the cost of land leased for hunting in other parts of the country is also driving his sales in the West. "We have clients who have leased property for years, and they have come to the point where they can get together and buy hunting land for the same price."

Such a boom in lands once considered fly-over country will have far reaching effects on the Great Plains. It is a redefinition of the term "working landscape," a recognition that, in a world growing more crowded by the day, solitude and wildlife have become a commodity that outstrips the value of crops or livestock, at least on more marginal lands. As Jim Taylor says, "Some places are just going to evolve to whatever their best use is."

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<p>Above: Gary and Diana Banbury of Virginia are building their dream home at the base of Sheep Mountain, on a lot in the Wild Horse Ranch subdivision created by Brooks Realty and Advisory Group. Gary Banbury, a mining engineer who once lived in Encampment, says,

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Comments

By jeff, 1-15-07

What happens to small towns, who sold farm implements and service to working ranches, when the surrounding ranches no longer are working ranches? I think this trend continues the consequences of CRP fallow land, and that is the withering of the small Montana communities.

Give me the cattle in the water and the sweetheart blm leases anyday over a helicoptered in nobility.

By Robert Hoskins, 1-15-07

This is a wonderful story and I thank Hal for writing it. What disturbs me the most about this story is the implication for hunting and fishing: the continued privatization of wildlife. What I see developing out of the amenity real estate boom with its focus on hunting and fishing is a 21st form of European feudalism; we've already got it going with the really huge ranches such as the one belonging to Ted Turner. Now we're seeing the same process creep outwards, like an amoeba.

Hal, in your preparation for this piece, did you gain any insights as to the increased privatization of our public wildlife in this real estate pattern?

By Marion, 1-15-07

Jeff, I agree with you, but the rancher has become the poster boy for most hated of the year. The number of articles and comments cursing ranchers are legion. It is my personal belief that getting rid of ranchers is part of the impetus for ever growing wolf populations that are never high enough as long as there is a ranch is left standing.

By the time greens realize they have cut off their own noses, it will be too late. It is sad and I hate seeing ranches disappear, as Robert said things will become much like European feudalism as ranches become owned by big operators and the public land is off limits to all but a few exclusive people that can hike in.

By scott, 1-16-07

Great article. Having been part of "amenity ranch" industry for 18 years I can offer a couple more thoughts. First, talk of "feudalism" is a bit over-wrought. The settling of the West has always been a dynamic combination of large money from out of region (rail roads, cattle barons, timber companies, super-wealthy) and "homesteaders" with far fewer means. It just so happens that today's homesteaders have more money than the land-rich and money-poor working farms and ranches. While I think any

westerner should rightly treasure and support our farming and ranching heritage, the realist in me recognizes that the land transfers in question would not be occurring if the farms and ranches going on the block were still profitable ag operations and/or there was interest in the younger generation of ranchers to stay on the land. The majority of the new homesteaders I work with care deeply about habitat quality, wildlife and open spaces and are good land stewards. If the trend in land transfer is disturbing, I suggest less hand wringing about the good ol' days and more effort to keep working ranches solvent.

By jeff, 1-16-07

Scott, I guess I care a lot more about the people in the towns who are affected, that particular small town Montana way of life, and less about the "habitat quality, wildlife and open spaces". The ranching family will cash in, but the infrastructure that supported that way of life disappears.

By sagebrush, 1-16-07

It is a new feudalism.

And working ranch is a misnomer if these guys are getting CRP payments. We are subsidizing the fat cat welfare non-farm.

By Hal Herring, 1-16-07

Jeff, Scott, Robert, sagebrush, Marion, and all,

Thanks for the comments. Re. the new feudalism, economic and social impact to rural communities, and the influence on wildlife, hunting and public access, you are all singing my song.

As I talked with people for the story above, these issues came up again and again. I hope to explore them here at New West very soon.

You know, without tipping my hand, one of the things that just kept occurring to me while working on this was the Jeffersonian idea that the yeoman farmer--the smallholder-- was considered to be the backbone of democracy.

And obviously, there's less of those around every year. Jefferson believed that the demands of the land and landownership forced a kind of pragmatic moderation on the yeoman that was ideal for the American democratic experiment (and ideal for juries, according to many older lawyers I've spoken with). As I look now at our country, so many people seem to hold these extremist views-right, left, or something I haven't quite figured out yet....and I cannot help but wonder if the loss of the yeomen is not a part of that. Just a thought.

Hal

By Robert Hoskins, 1-16-07

Hal

I look forward to your further explorations of this topic. These quiet events are truly the ones that speak the most about the future of our lands, rather than the events that grab everyone's attention.

As you approach the issue from the standpoint of Jeffersonian democracy, however, I would recommend a cautionary approach. The yeoman farmer is more of a myth than a reality.

Having grown up in the Jim Crow, very rural, semi-feudal, agricultural South--my grandfather owned what might be termed a small tobacco plantation, and was land rich and not quite cash poor, thanks to tobacco price supports that originated in the Roosevelt administration that my grandfather nevertheless hated with a passion, (well, I suppose FDR didn't expect gratitude from the conservatives who benefited most from his socialist wealth distribution policies), so that he was a Republican in the Solid South--I can say we were surrounded by yeoman farmers, and most of them belonged to the Klan. This being the Civil Rights era, that made things interesting, especially when we had a couple of black families living in ramshackle log cabins on our land. (That's actually where I learned how to hunt--from illiterate black men living on our land; I had a quite Faulknerian upbringing). A few of the local yeoman farmers followed the old Scotch-Irish dictum, "corn sells better by the jug than by the bushel," if you grasp my meaning. And a few of the local farmers were the salt of the earth, what Jefferson had in mind when he wrote about yeoman farmers. It's just that it seemed there were damn few of them.

As in any agricultural community, it was the yeowomen farmers, as it were, not the yeoman farmers, who kept things going; it was these women who were the glue of the community. Faulkner's depiction of the former slave woman Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* could just as easily have been a depiction of a poor white woman, many of whom found themselves in the same situation as Dilsey, the kind of women who stand out in James Agee's wonderful book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee should have added Women to the title.

I don't think applying the term "neo-feudalism" is inappropriate, despite Scott's comment above--privatization of the land away from the commons means eventually aristocratic control of most of the land by a landed class, such as that to which my grandfather belonged. We have the whole history of European land policy behind us to demonstrate that fact.

Nor do I think that the spread of these amenity ranches is necessarily the best use of the land. What's the best use of the land from a strictly economic point of view founders when one asks what's best from an ecological point of view. From the latter perspective, the land is still fragmented, even if the amenity ranchers are interested in hunting and fishing and wildlife habitat.

In an area that was the base habitat of an animal such as the bison, 35-acre ranchettes and bison don't get along. I'd rather see bison.

And if someone wants to whine about bison, there's no inherent reason why the Buffalo Commons, or the Big Open, is incompatible with human community. After all, bison existed compatibly with Native American communities for 10,000 years. One just has to think of communities organized in ways that are different from how they're organized now. With "commons" thinking, it works.

At bottom, we should always be thinking about what we "own" in common, our land and wildlife heritage, and how we can prevent private entities from gaining control of our common heritage. There's where the amenity ranch furthers the feudal mistake, which we have been making now for over a century in the West; privatization is always the radical, extreme point of view.

Robert

By mike, 1-16-07

I certainly sympathize with those of you who do not want the ranchers to go away. I am working my rear off to keep from going away and, so far, I have been successful. With regard, however, to those poor folks in the small towns who depend on my money, I can tell you that, in my experience, they are more than willing, bless their hearts, to make more money doing easier work for the amenity ranchers than continuing to do what I need done. The two kids who used to do my fences are now working at an art gallery; no joke! They drive the delivery truck and tack little brads into the corners of frames to hold pictures of guys doing what they used to do. The old guy who used to work at the feedstore is now making more money at a very nice and very upscale local steakhouse. It's ridiculous; it's like having your dinner order taken by Gabby Hays; but, he's overjoyed that his back doesn't hurt so much. The drugstore now has a fancy gay 90s themed lunch area and soda fountain; the sheriff's deputies now shave and wear clean clothes; and a new hospital is being built. I can't get my troughs rebuilt because the ranchhand who knows the best way to seal them is now plumbing new houses, is making lots more money, and says the work is lots warmer and easier. The New West has pluses and minuses, mostly



minuses so far for me. The points about fragmentation of the range and the impacts on wildlife and the environment is general are all on target; but, those poor people in the small ranching towns are not necessarily hurting as badly as the mythology might portray.

By Robert Hoskins, 1-16-07

Mike's comments were delightful to read, if painful for him to write. Here in Wyoming, though, the folks he's talking about have left the small towns and have headed to southwest Wyoming to work the gas rigs at megabucks per hour, not to mention watch the minerals industry poach deer and pronghorn habitat and tell us that's progress for the country.

By Marion, 1-17-07

Mike, I only hope that you can hang on, I for one really hate to see the small rancher go. They are under assault from every turn.

I get so sick of the absolute lie that ranchers grazing is "subsidized". Those making this claim over and over are those subsidized hikers and backpackers who pay nothing. At least they didn't until this year, I understand the new NP pass will include using all public lands and is going to be \$80/year. Of course they still won't be paying "market price" like they insist ranchers should do.

These same folks have not learned when they got most of the "subsidized" timbering stopped, they were supposed to pay to use the forests then, but a lot ignored it. Once they get rid of the "subsidized" rancher, they are going to find out just how many of their perks were paid for by ranchers, and the federal employees have no intention of losing their jobs, so it will cost even more to access public land. Of course that may depend on getting access to that public land thru those feudal lords.

By Scott, 1-18-07

Jeff and sagebrush, no offense, really really, I was born and have spent my entire life in the west, not a poser, and love it as much as you. The thing is it ain't the old days anymore and wealth from other places is exploding land values out here and there is no yesterday anymore. Its changed and will change even faster in our life time. The question in my mind, and as a father of of a MT born child, is what, given this change, my daughter will see when she is my middle age. I wish too that things, (land transfers) weren't moving so fast, but its not like this is a new phenomena -- been going on as long as I have been alive. All of us who care need to unite under some common banner and ground. I can't help but think of the third world rainforests and cultures going under on a daily basis and can't help but think that moralizing on the changing Western US is little more than a luxury.

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