

Rough and Beautiful Places

Raising forage and families at Nevada's award-winning Maggie Creek ranch.

By Carolyn Dufurrena

Jon Griggs is something of a contradiction. He's a cowboy through and through, but one who is as comfortable with a PowerPoint presentation and a crowd of visitors from town as he is on the back of a horse. His border collies ride in the backseat of his pickup as he bumps across the frozen meadows of Maggie Creek ranch in the weeks before spring turnout. He shoots a piercing blue-eyed glance at a couple of 4-H heifers, making sure nobody's ready to calve this morning. To the north the last of the snow melts on the low juniper-dotted hills of the Adobe Range and on Swales Mountain, the big empty summer country at the south end of the Independence Range.

Griggs spent his childhood in Owyhee, Nev., with his mom's family while his father was in the Air Force during the Vietnam War. He lived the life of a military family in places as far-flung as Alaska and Louisiana, but he came back to Nevada for good in 1985, buckarooing at the Petan Ranch and later at Warm Springs outside Eureka. He landed at Maggie Creek, 200,000-some acres of private and public land in the railroad checkerboard country of northeastern Nevada, in 1991.

"All that moving around," he says, "makes you want to attach yourself to a piece of country." He rode for the Searle family, who bought the ranch in 1975. In 1998 they made him the manager. Avid hunters and out-

doorsmen and -women with Midwestern roots, the Searles live on the place all summer and ride and brand with the crew.

Griggs runs a crew of 11 at Maggie Creek, but it's not just buckaroos in a bunkhouse; the ranch supports families as well, so 34 adults and children call Maggie



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Paislee Stevens, 5, is one of a dozen kids growing up on Maggie Creek ranch. She watches her dad and the branding crew from the pickup in 2015.

Creek home. "I've been fortunate to raise a family here," Griggs says. He has two freshmen, son Wyatt at the University of Nevada, Reno, and daughter Mackie at Elko High School.

The ranch turns out 2,000 head of Angus cattle in mid-March. They'll calve mid-March through April, working their way north across the Adobe Range onto Swales

Mountain, a vast unfenced swath of sage and bunchgrass which includes 50,000 acres of public land. Two creeks run mostly north-south watering this mountain, Susie Creek and, further on, Maggie Creek are both potential habitat for the threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout. Springs are few and far between.

"It's a challenge to graze here," Griggs says. "We move early and often in the spring. We want every plant to reach seed-head maturity. We don't get there every year, but that's our goal. We grow forage for cattle and the wildlife we share the range with for two to three months of the year. Then we have to bank that grass for the rest of the year."

The cattle work their way north and west. "We typically gather into riparian pastures, rest a day or two, and then move into the next pasture," Griggs says. Water gaps provide stockwater for cattle while protecting the streams. In a typical year the herd works its way up one side of Swales Mountain, returning down the other. Cowboys gather into fenced pastures along the way to brand and wean calves. "We try to stay out till New Year's," Griggs says. There are some years when getting home over the Adobe Range is nip and tuck through deep snow.

The ranch has been around in one form or another for better than a century. The headquarters ranch was started by George Hunter and George Banks—an orphan who



PHOTOS COURTESY BLM



When Jon Griggs arrived at Maggie Creek in 1991, Susie Creek (left) would go dry every summer, even in a high-water year. Collaborative conservation practices implemented by the ranch with BLM wildlife biologist Carol Evans over the next 25 years have resulted in landscape-level changes. Even in the fourth year of drought, Susie Creek had water all summer in 2014 (right).



was raised as Hunter's brother—in the meadows that straddle the Hastings Cutoff portion of the California Trail, now the Interstate 80 corridor. Deeded homesteads north of the highway were added over time, including the McKinley Ranch and Red House, “about a thousand acres of hay meadow” to the north.

Edward M. Hanks in his cowman's memoir, “A Long Dust on the Desert,” wrote about the country in the 1800s: “Fent Fulkerson and his wife came to Nevada in the early 1860s and they lived here the rest of their lives. Fent used to tell me how all the creeks on the north side of the Humboldt River ran almost on top of the ground when he first came to this country. These creeks, Maggie Creek, Susie Creek, Rock Creek, and Antelope Creek, to name a few, overflowed and made an abundance of feed for livestock. These creeks today have washed down to bedrock and it isn't easy to get the water out, so there isn't so much feed.”

At some point in the ranch's history, Maggie Creek was straightened to facilitate irrigating the hay meadow at Red House, as was common practice at that time. The creek almost immediately down cut about 30 feet.

Susie Creek was in even worse shape.

“In 1991, even in a good water year,” Griggs says, “Susie Creek would go dry.” What could be done to make it better? He and BLM wildlife biologist Carol Evans started talking. It helped, Griggs says, that

“When you're talking about cattle, you're talking about a love of the land, and when you're talking about my family, you're talking about love of the land. It's a complete circle of family and land and hard work and rough and beautiful places.”

BEKAH KLARR, GRANDDAUGHTER

“she came in here with a smile instead of a baseball bat. Together we took some big steps starting in 1991, but I don't think anybody really realized the landscape-level

Jon Griggs manages 200,000 acres of public and private land (and 11 cowboys) for the Maggie Creek ranch. He is always trying to make things better for the grasslands and for the families who call the ranch home.

impacts they would cause. There wasn't ever really any talk about ‘rehab.’ It was just all baby steps.”

They implemented a conservation plan that resulted in fencing off the majority of the riparian areas in both creeks, leaving water gaps for the cattle. Corners were allowed to silt in; willows became established in the middle of meadows. Beavers showed up, and Evans convinced Griggs to wait and see what would happen instead of cleaning them out. The beaver ponds brought the water table up. The sagebrush died back and was replaced with wet meadow grasses. “By 2014,” Griggs says, “even in the midst of drought, Susie Creek had water all summer.” He adds, “It should really be called Susie Creek ranch.”

Griggs, with the support of the Searles, undertook a major collaborative project with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), and Trout Unlimited, to name just a few



COURTESY NCBA

A commitment to protecting the farm and ranch land in their care: Maggie Creek ranch received the prestigious 2015 National Environmental Stewardship Award from a group that includes National Cattlemen's Beef Association and National Cattlemen's Foundation. From left: David Petty, Iowa River Ranch; Scotty Searle; Dave Owens, DOW Agrosiences; Betsy Searle; mom Sally Searle; ranch manager Jon Griggs; Heather Johnson, FWS; and Sid Brantly, NRCS.



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Branding is hard work but a lot of fun for kids growing into the ranching tradition. Left, Andy Stevens helps daughter Paislee, age 4, ride her first bronco in 2014. Veteran Luke Baumeister lends his expertise. ABOVE: Jon Griggs heads a calf for his daughter Mackie, age 13.

partners, to improve the ranch waters' ability to support the fish. Fish-friendly culverts installed in Maggie Creek allow the trout full access to the stream. "Baffles inside create pools, kind of like a fish ladder," Griggs says. "The highest set of baffles diverts water for irrigating the meadows." Other projects include a reservoir built to enhance wetland habitat for birds and the Columbia spotted frog, at one time considered for threatened status under the Endangered Species Act. Sloughs downstream of irrigation ensure that waters reentering the Humboldt River are cleaner than they were coming into the ranch. A Safe Harbor Agreement, a voluntary accord between FWS (represented by NDOW) and the ranch, provides assurances that FWS will not impose restrictions on private land as a result of conservation actions.

"I forget sometimes that we're on private

land," says Evans. "We've just sort of blurred the lines. We've had a common vision of the watershed and what the land should look like. You can have fisheries habitat and wildlife habitat. You can have a really healthy ecosystem and a sustainable ranching industry too."

According to Susan Abele, head of Nevada Partners for Fish and Wildlife, over 25 miles of Susie Creek has been fenced and rehabilitated to the point where Lahontan cutthroats could be reintroduced to the stream within a few years. The upshot of it all is that Maggie Creek ranch is committed to making the place the best it can be. Griggs, humble as always, is quick to add: "We're not the perfect ranch. We're not even the best ranch." But every decision is made with the health of the land in mind.

Maggie Creek received the prestigious

2015 National Environmental Stewardship Award, "presented to farmers and ranchers who demonstrate a commitment to protecting the farm and ranch land in their care." It is sponsored by Dow AgroSciences, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), FWS, National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), and the National Cattlemen's Foundation. In retrospect, it seems almost inevitable.

"Over the past 40 years we've tried about everything," says ranch spokeswoman Louise Searle Klarr. "We want to stay ahead of the curve. We don't want to be complacent. We always want to know more about what's going on on this ranch than anybody. Under Jon Griggs' management, we are just humming along."

The bronze statue that comes with this honor sits on a big shellacked plywood table in the ranch office. It's next to Griggs' 2014 Cattleman of the Year Award, which he doesn't even mention. It's a lovely piece, but it's not the important thing. The important thing is out the north windows, across the highway, up in the high country. The bunchgrass is starting, a Chinook is blowing. The creeks will soon be running bank-full with more water than Elko County's seen in years, and Jon Griggs will be up there on his red roan horse in those rough and beautiful places, keeping an eye on things. ■

Carolyn Dufurrena writes from the Quinn River Ranch, another rough and beautiful place in northwestern Nevada.