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In the Shadow of Change

Jack Payne's fight and passion for ranching in Nevada's high desert.
By Leanna Lehman

It's three degrees at Cold Springs Station, darkness blankets the vast Nevada sky and a sliver of light dances atop the Desatoya Mountain peaks to the East. The loneliest road in America—Nevada's Highway 50—leads the way to the unmarked dirt road winding north into some of the state's most rugged terrain.

Nearly 80 miles east of Fallon, beyond the remnants of the old Alpine Ranch where a one-room schoolhouse and dilapidated stone barns still stand, Jack and Rachel Payne's working cattle ranch rests at 5,418 feet in elevation nestled into its namesake, the Clan Alpine Mountains.

Jack and Rachel took over the Clan Alpine ranch in 2017 after leasing portions of it for 12 years, eventually taking on the entire operation. They later purchased the ranch from Rachel's father, Mick Casey, continuing a family tradition of raising beef cattle that spans more than 70 years.

ABOVE: Bell Flat coming off the winter range and part of the land being claimed by eminent domain. AT TOP: War Canyon looking toward Cow Canyon in the northern Alpine Mountains.

Behind the ranch house the sun crests, casting its half-light on Dustin Stephens of Baker Aircraft as he readies his R44 Raven II, signaling the beginning of this mid-February day gathering cattle. For Jack and his team today's work, like most days, will outlast the available daylight. Here, the wild beauty of the American ranching West is the making of stories and tells the tale of an extraordinary cattle roundup and what it means to keep a legacy alive. It also tells of some modern-day challenges that ranches like Clan Alpine face.

Today Jack needs to gather nearly 350 head of cattle from the aptly named Cow Canyon on the western slopes of the Clan Alpine Mountain Wilderness. The landscape

is unforgiving: dry, brushy range canyons and snow-topped mountains, expansive and formidable.

Traditional roundups aren't feasible here in winter. The solution—herding by helicopter. "We never know if we can afford it. Using the helicopter is very expensive," Jack admits, "but when all factors are considered, like BLM trespasses, bulls of undesirable genetics escaping the gather, a cow not having her calf weaned on time and such, we really can't afford not to use the helicopter."

Dustin, a highly skilled pilot, has been helping Jack gather for the past six years. During the roundup, he guides the helicopter with uncanny precision, dipping and circling over the herd, nudging cattle without causing them to panic or stampede—like a well-seasoned hovering stock dog.

Jack runs cattle over 1.2 million acres, leasing land across multiple properties, including BLM land. Today Jack, the pilot, and a 12-man ground crew round up cattle spread across 100,000 acres. With the helicopter, it's all in a day's work. As Jack takes in the aerial view, he shares some of the pressing concerns of the ranch. Despite mountain

Clan Alpine Ranch shares range with thousands of feral horses.

ABOVE: Jack Payne with Izzy. BELOW LEFT: Emily Payne pushes cows at East Gate Ranch with Wilson riding along and Coelho assisting nearby. BELOW RIGHT: Dustin Stephens with Baker Aircraft on a roundup in February.

springs and artesian wells, water—or the lack thereof—is an ever-present worry. Unlike cattle in greener regions that need one to three acres per head, desert range cattle need 10 to 20 acres—or even up to 50 acres in extreme conditions—to find enough feed. Pipelines and tanks need continual monitoring. The only thing sparser than vegetation here is water.

Wild horses also make the Clan Alpine Mountain Wilderness their home. While possessing undeniable beauty and evoking the spirit of the West, these horses pose a considerable threat to Jack's operation. "Hundreds of horses will come in and suck the stock tanks dry, leaving the cattle waiting clear into the middle of the night for a drink of water," Jack says. "Horses also paw out forage and browse species like shadscale and four-winged saltbush, which the BLM monitors for rangeland health. However, cattle get blamed for the damage."

According to Jack, government regulations compound the environmental challenges he and Rachel face. Like most Nevada ranchers, Jack grazes his cattle on federal land. "We're limited in the number of cattle we can have," Jack says, explaining that the BLM's appropriate management level of horses in Cow Canyon and Edward's Creek is 900 head. Jack estimates that there are more than 4,000 horses there.

"For the last 20 years, there hasn't been a single horse gather in this area. In addition to no gathers, Nevada's Department of Wildlife has been paying a handsome bounty for mountain lions to protect both mule deer and

bighorn sheep," Jack explains. "Mountain lions were the only thing keeping horse populations in check."

Jack recalls that when they first came to the Alpine Ranch 25 years ago, 15 mares would have 13 colts in April, but only three or four would remain by June. With the mountain lion numbers drastically diminished, the same 15 mares now have 10-plus colts remaining in June. This has allowed horse numbers to explode. "Thousands of horses over three million acres. After a controversial 2022 large-scale land transfer, further expansion now disrupts Jack's operations, as it has recently claimed 439 acres in Dixie Valley through eminent domain.

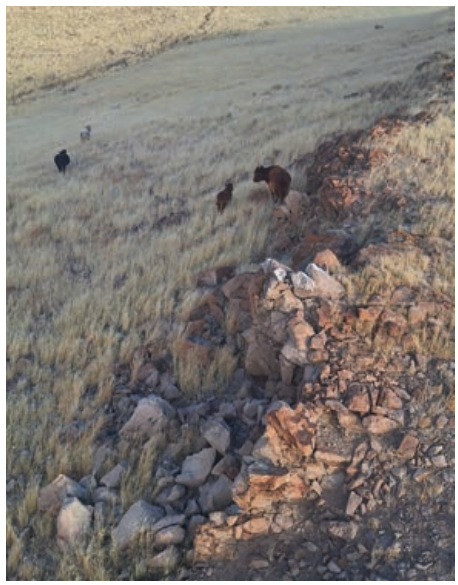
"The BLM forces us onto private land, and the Navy takes it," he begrudges. Additionally, Jack purchased the 439 acres with the help of small business and Farm Service Agency loans. "Government agencies loaned us the money, and now another government agency is taking the land and leaving us owing millions for land we can no longer use."

To make matters worse, in an alleged funding battle over road maintenance in Dixie Valley, which is part of the Fallon Range Training Complex and west of his grazing allotment, the road was ground up and is now impassable for cattle trailers. "The one route to round up cattle in the area is now gone, another factor forcing expensive alternatives to traditional gathering. If it wasn't for strict government timelines, regulations, and our active sale-barn business in Fallon, we would definitely go back to the traditional ways of working our ranches strictly on horseback."

Jack also owns Nevada Livestock Marketing, a popular local sale yard in Fallon that supports his ranch and offers a reliable market for local ranchers. "When cattle come in, I make sure they sell for what they're worth. If a 400-pound steer is worth $420, he shouldn't sell for $350. That's not fair to the seller." Jack works to keep prices stable, ensuring they don't dip too low. "It's not rocket science. Treat people the way you want to be treated."

Together, the ranch and sale yard support each other, helping both survive in a market that imports beef, drives prices down, and exports it at the same time.

Jack doesn't run the Clan Alpine Ranch alone. His team includes 10 to 13 full-time ranch hands and additional cowboy day labor to maintain the ranch year-



ABOVE: Driven out of the Desatoya Mountain range high country by early snow and 15 miles to corrals, Jack and crew make do with a rim rock, trucks, trailers and head dogs. RIGHT: Dustin in the helicopter sweeps the draws for cows separated from the herd at Shoshone Meadows, north end of the Alpines. BELOW: South fork of the Owyhee River on the Idaho-Oregon border at the C Ranch.

concentrate on small water resources and instead of managing the horses, the BLM decided to 'flip-flop' the grazing time of use to force the cattle up to 8,000 feet in the winter. That's when the springs are all frozen solid and the grass is covered in several feet of snow on the northern slope."

Jack also believes that at the behest of BLM environmentalists, the bureau's grazing plans are its way of forcing ranchers like him out of business. Having to winter graze in the high country results in higher-than-average livestock losses, forcing Jack to make decisions he can afford. "That's why I run a $200 Corriente cow instead of a $3,000 Angus."

Adding to his regulatory woes, the Navy's Fallon Range Training Complex now covers

ABOVE: Bulls ready for gathering at Alpine Flat, below Augusta Canyon. BELOW: Cattle roundup at the C Ranch in Oregon before transport back to Nevada.

round. One of Jack's top hands, Amie Morris, went to school at the University of Nevada in Reno and leaves to run the Oregon C Ranch operation in the spring and heads back to Clan Alpine in the fall to help with everything from fixing fences to branding and gathering. Jack and Rachel's daughter, 21-year-old Emily, basically runs the Nevada ranches.

"She spends most days on a horse or dirt bike with her good dogs, Earl, Willie, and Rooster," Jack says with pride. "She brands calves, pumps wells, drives trucks, gathers and ships. Then she comes to town and sorts thousands of cattle for our feeder sales."

Her brother Garrett, 18 and still in high school, is also essential to the Clan Alpine Ranch. Jack says that Garrett's always ready to pitch in, whether it's welding or working cattle. "I hope they take over [the ranch]," Jack muses. "Otherwise, what am I doing this all for? I love it, but it's for the legacy."

More than just a rancher, Jack is also

a political voice for the small cattle producer, advocating for policies that will help ranchers thrive. He was proud to host rallies in support of Donald Trump at his sale yard in 2020 and again in 2024. For Jack, the rally wasn't just about politics, but about getting the right policies in place to help American family ranchers, who often find themselves on the losing end of foreign trade deals and government regulations.

Jack remains committed to ranching despite the ongoing regulatory struggles, military land expansion, environmental challenges, and volatile beef prices. "Ranching's not always profitable, but I've got to keep doing it," Jack says. "It's in our blood. It's all we really know how to do." ■

Leanna Lehman is a Nevada Press Association award-winning journalist and a published author. She is also a third-generation Nevadan with a love for her western heritage.