

Conservation Showcase

Restored Ranch Gives Hope to Disabled Vets

Most ranches nurture and sustain cattle or sheep. But the Barker Ranch in West Richland, Wash., also nurtures and sustains the spirits of our nation's injured soldiers.

For disabled military veterans who thought they could no longer experience the joy and exhilaration of hunting in the great outdoors, the 2,000-acre Barker Ranch's rich wildlife provides the opportunity to rekindle that experience.

Key figures in this mission are Michael Crowder, ranch general manager and wildlife enthusiast; Micah Clark, executive director and founder of the nonprofit organization Camp Patriot; and Jerry Bartlett, a retired three-star Army general and Barker Ranch shareholder.

A serendipitous meeting at a local watering hole in downtown Richland led to a fast friendship, and then a unique outdoor hunting — and healing — opportunity. Bartlett had the idea to host a duck hunt for a group of disabled veterans through Camp Patriot. When Crowder offered the ranch as a hunting venue for Camp Patriot, Clark jumped at the chance to use the ranch's premium duck-hunting location.



Trying out a blind at the ranch are (from left) Micah Clark, Camp Patriot executive director, and Jerry Bartlett, Barker Ranch Ltd. president, who are joined by an unidentified hunter and veteran enjoying the facility.

“The veterans that have come out have had a blast; it’s an opportunity to come to a place that’s reserved for their membership only. It’s a premium spot to bring them to and a great opportunity to come to Barker Ranch and participate in what these guys do out here,” says Clark.

For more than four years, Barker Ranch has annually donated a duck hunt to Camp Patriot, which also provides all the gear, licensing fees and lodging for the group through donations.

Camp Patriot's motto is “Giving back to those who have given.” Their mission is to give disabled veterans an opportunity to experience outdoor adventures and prove to themselves that they still have the capability to do the things they loved before they were disabled.

“That’s the whole idea: to get these guys into the outdoors and create a paradigm shift, and show them that life isn’t over,” Clark says. “They may have to live their life differently with disabilities, but they have the ability to get outdoors and press on.”

Crowder participates by leading the group to the best hunting locations on the property. “It’s really the highlight of my year,” says Crowder.

Conservation Showcase (continued)

But none of this would be possible if Barker Ranch was left the way it had been found. Historically, the wetlands on Barker Ranch were destroyed to make way for cropping, grazing and other agricultural practices. When the current owners took over, they made it their mission to avoid agricultural activities that could further damage the land.

At that time, Bartlett, president of Barker Ranch Ltd., made a commitment to wetland restoration and non-consumptive uses of the land.

To restore the nearly eight miles of wetlands on the ranch, he contacted the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which he heard about from friend and colleague Ivan Lines, who was state biologist at the time.

The NRCS, working in conjunction with Ducks Unlimited and many other state and federal agencies, helped Bartlett set up a series of Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) easements on his land.

The NRCS's WRP assists eligible landowners in the restoration, creation, protection and enhancement of wetlands on their property through a voluntary, environmentally safe and cost-effective manner.

Because the Barker Ranch in central Washington is home to various types of water fowl, "the shareholders are drawn together through their common enjoyment of waterfowl hunting and the associated environment," says Jerry Bartlett, former president.

Everything done on the ranch, all day long, is for the sake of conservation, he says. Dikes

and water control structures were used to restore the wetlands; about 150 wood duck boxes were placed on the land by the Richland Rod and Gun Club for nesting habitat; and the only irrigated crops are there for the waterfowl to feed on.

In the future, the ranch's manager, Michael Crowder, plans to turn back to the WRP restoration plan laid out by the NRCS, which hasn't been entirely completed.

"It's a lot of work — more hours than I would like sometimes. But the work is self-rewarding; you don't have to have someone tell you you've done a good job when you pull up to a pond and see three different groups of wood duck broods. It's neat to see them come back year after year," Crowder says.

The only cattle on the ranch are used for grazing as a vegetation management tool. The entire ranch is covered in wetlands and associated upland wildlife habitat. Tall wheat grass and Russian olive trees line large ponds throughout.

The property is managed for the benefit of waterfowl and other native wildlife, including ducks, geese, pheasants and mule deer, which, as it turns out, is also beneficial to longtime sportsmen.



The wetlands on Barker Ranch attract all types of wildlife, including pheasants and wood ducks.



A restored wetland in central Washington is an example of how landowners working with NRCS can convert property to more pristine conditions.