

Conservation SHOWCASE



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Ranch Stewardship and Natural Resource Agency Partnership Improve Habitat for Mule Deer Recovery

MT. VERNON, Ore.—The mule deer population in the Murderers Creek basin in central Oregon has dropped dramatically from 30,000 in 1980 to just 5,900 today, prompting natural resource agencies to partner with local landowners in an effort to reverse the growing trend.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), with funds provided through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), is working with landowners in Grant County to implement conservation practices to restore mule deer habitat. To widen the scope of these efforts, NRCS partnered with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) in collaboration on the Mule Deer Initiative (MDI), an ambitious restoration project with the goal of maintaining a mule deer population of 9,000 in the Murderers Creek basin. The current population accounts for only 65 percent of that goal.

Roger and Meredith Ediger are excited to be a part of this restoration effort. The Edigers raise Hereford, Red Angus, and Simmental-cross cattle on the Box T Ranch in the Murderers Creek basin. The diverse ranch landscape spans from the John

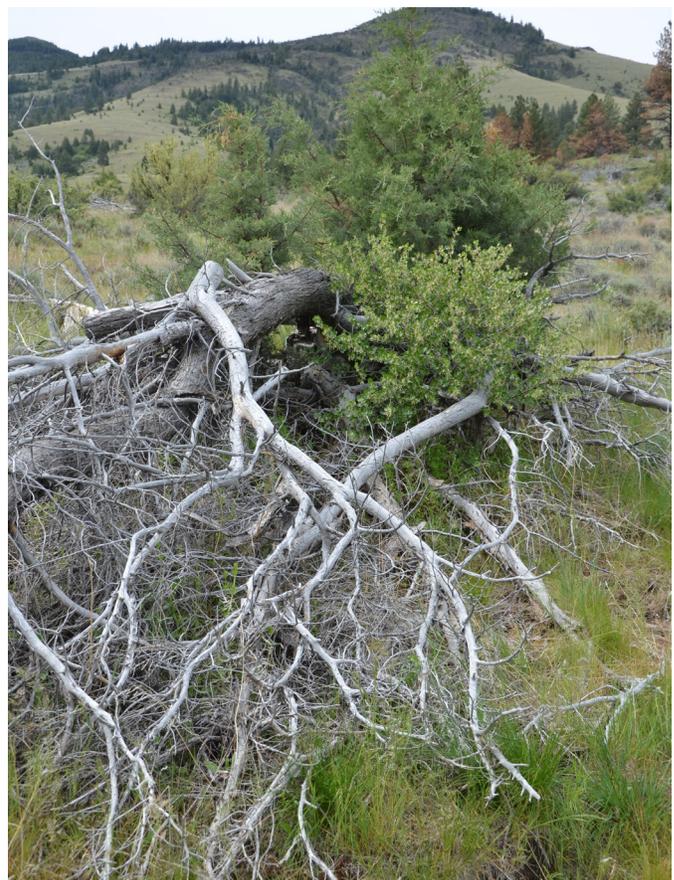
Above: Roger Ediger partnered with NRCS to restore mule deer populations on his Murderers Creek ranch

Day River up to U.S. Forest Service land on the McClellan Mountain ridge and covers 3,697 acres of critical mule deer winter habitat.

Both Roger and Meredith are concerned about the welfare of the wildlife that share their land. “We want to do all we can to help the mule deer recover,” Roger said. “The way Meredith and I were reared, hunting in the natural world was an important part of life, and we grew up on wild game. We have an acute awareness and appreciation for the world around us and for the wildlife.”

In Oregon, mule deer migrate to lower elevations to escape winter snow cover. However, in recent years, this land is being lost to development. What remains is threatened by the expansion of western juniper that crowds out the native forage on which mule deer depend on for food. Also, by out-competing native vegetation, western juniper has enabled two invasive annual grasses, Medusahead and Ventenata, to emerge in the Murderers Creek basin. These two invasive species out-compete native grasses, decrease biodiversity, reduce livestock and wildlife forage production, and degrade the ecological function of rangeland. As the mule deer’s remaining habitat shrinks, the land becomes overused and can no longer sustain large populations of wildlife.

To combat this growing trend and ensure the most effective use of resources, NRCS is working with ODFW to identify specific geographic regions where habitat restoration will be most beneficial for mule deer. NRCS has already removed 2,500 acres of juniper in the past three years, including 150 acres on the Ediger’s ranch. NRCS has contracted with numerous landowners in the area to remove an additional 2,000 acres over the next two years.



150 acres of juniper have been removed to date from Box T Ranch.

To begin the restoration process on the Ediger’s ranch, NRCS first developed a conservation plan. The plan outlined treatments to cut and burn western juniper in order to remove standing trees and seedlings, while also destroying noxious annual grasses.

Roger is happy to continue a legacy of conservation that began when his uncle, who owned the ranch before him, first noticed the increasingly harmful presence of juniper on the land.

“Uncle Jack would say, ‘If we don’t do something about the juniper, it is going to take over the place,’” Roger recalls. “He’d then go out in the foothills and cut down junipers with a bow saw.” Despite his uncle’s best efforts, juniper continued to take over the territory. By the time Roger took over the farm, the outbreak would require special attention. “We



A trough on Box T Ranch provides wildlife and livestock easy access to water.

were very happy when the NRCS program came along to help us," Roger said.

By removing western juniper, the Edigers are making room for desirable grasses and forbs to grow, which will leave fewer opportunities for annual grasses like Medusahead or Ventenata to invade. The Edigers are also encouraging the growth of winter shrubs, such as bitterbrush and mahogany, native perennial bunchgrasses, including bluebunch wheatgrass and Idaho fescue, and robust riparian vegetation, all of which are good sources of forage for mule deer. Several large stands of bitterbrush and mahogany already dot the slopes of the Box T Ranch. After the juniper removal and prescribed burns have been completed, Roger plans to seed additional native bunchgrasses.

In addition to clearing mule deer habitat of harmful invasive species, the Edigers are also working to ensure safe and easy access to water. With technical and financial assistance provided through EQIP, the Edigers have added troughs that capture water directly from springs on the property. These troughs provide a water source for wildlife and livestock alike. Escape ramps were built inside the troughs to provide small animals and birds easy access in and out. By providing several watering troughs across the ranch, the Edigers prevent potential damage to the habitat caused by overuse.

While progress is already noticeable, the process is nevertheless slow and likely to last a lifetime. Roger's legacy will be in knowing that his work ensures the land will be liveable and workable for future generation, both human and animal alike.

And it seems certain that Roger's grandfather, John Masson, who emigrated as a young man from Scotland in the 1890s and homesteaded this land, would approve of Roger's efforts to improve and preserve it.

Repeating his grandfather's words in a Scottish brogue, Roger quotes "Aye laddie, if ya don'na take care o' the land, it will na take care o' ya."



The Edigers' efforts to remove invasive grasses benefits both livestock and wildlife alike.