

## Audubon Conservation Ranching program

The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) and the National Audubon Society are building a partnership with ranchers to boost imperiled native grassland bird species. The Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) program helps ranchers implement grazing and haying practices with benefits for birds and cattle producers.

Audubon certifies that pastures provide habitat friendly to birds. MDC provides expertise to help ranchers acquire certification. Cattle producers get a premium price for their beef and better wildlife habitat. Audubon's "green seal" follows products from certified ranches into the marketplace, allowing consumers to recognize beef and bison products that come from ranches committed to grassland habitat conservation.

"What Audubon is certifying is not the food but the habitat," said Cindy Tolle, a Kansas City native who operates Evergreen Ranching and Livestock LLC in South Dakota. Her company provides beef for food services at Truman Medical Centers hospitals in Kansas City and Lee's Summit, and Evergreen Ranching is expanding sales to other outlets in the region.

Audubon has enrolled ranches in the ACR program in 13 states, including Missouri. MDC helped develop certification guidelines for conservation ranching, and staff now helps cattle producers make habitat improvements to qualify for the program.

"We pack (beef) for the organic people, too," Tolle said. "But this is the only thing going in product labeling that certifies wildlife habitat."

### **Benefits for birds**

Ongoing studies at two Missouri ranches in the ACR program show an increase in quail numbers and nongame grassland birds, said Rick Rath, MDC private land conservationist. Rath has walked among the native forbs and warm season grasses in pastures at Round Rock Ranch in Dade County. Round Rock sells cattle to wholesale and retail outlets marketing ACR beef, and the ranch is also developing its own private label for direct sales to consumers.

"The ranch's habitat for wildlife is really good," Rath said, "about as good as it gets."

Birds native to prairies and open woodlands are imperiled throughout the United States, primarily due to habitat loss. In Missouri, less than one-tenth of one percent of unplowed native prairie remains. Many fields that are green with grass don't offer plant species types that benefit birds that feed and nest in grasslands. Native plants have open spaces at ground level that birds can easily move through, and they host native insects that are crucial to bird diets.

The ACR program encourages ranchers to use grazing and haying management plans friendly to birds. Native warm season grasses are used in forage rotations along with cool season grasses, legumes, and winter cover crops on grain fields. The variety of plant species and density gives ground-nesting birds the cover and food they need for rearing broods, feeding, escaping predators, and over wintering.

"We have more than 10,000 acres of grassland habitat in Missouri enrolled in conservation ranching," said Chris Wilson, Audubon's ACR national director. "That is land we know is

being managed to meet the needs of grassland birds.”

### **Benefits for ranchers**

Several ranches are developing direct table-ready beef sales to customers, Wilson said. One ranch near Springfield is marketing farm-raised bison through ACR. Audubon is working to expand consumer food demand for the ACR brand to develop profitability that makes the program both economically and environmentally sustainable. Evergreen Ranching is an active cattle buyer, processor, and wholesale outlet for ACR beef. Also, Prairiebird Pastures of Columbia is selling ACR-certified beef online and at a retail store in Columbia.

Round Rock Ranch and Brush Creek Ranch in Henry County became two of the earliest Missouri cattle producers in the program. MDC and Audubon staff helped connect the ranchers with expertise and financial assistance for habitat improvements, and a premium-price market for cattle raised on bird-friendly land.

Beef cattle show good weight gains while grazing on native warm-season grasses in summer, producers say. Climate-adapted grasses like big bluestem and Eastern gamagrass continue to grow and are nutritious for cattle in the hot months, unlike cool-season grasses that slow in summer.

Profits in the ACR program prompted Brush Creek Ranch to begin a transition to year-round forage grazing, said Kevin Riutcel, ranch manager.

“It’s taking us from a marginally profitable operation to a profitable operation,” Riutcel said. “Our stocking rates are going up, and it’s increasing the value of the product we’re selling.”

He moves cattle frequently into grazing paddocks defined by portable electric fencing. This mimics the grazing, soil disturbance, and rest for plants that wandering bison and elk originally provided on grasslands. Wildlife such as deer and turkey are up along with grassland birds, he said. But for a ranch’s bottom line in the cattle business, “our conception rates have gone up quite a bit, and the cattle are holding finish better in the winter.”

Round Rock Ranch is using winter cover crops to benefit soil fertility and to provide additional cattle forage, said owner Dave Haubein. For example, he may follow grain harvest in a field with an aerial seeding of legumes, grasses, forbs, and even deep-root vegetables like radishes. Cattle can graze on the mix of plant growth, while roots protect and nurture the soil. Then when summer arrives, he moves the cattle to native warm season grass pastures. He believes ACR practices can add value to a farm operation.

The ranch has good populations of white-tailed deer and wild turkeys, Haubein said, “but I can see that the grassland birds are the main beneficiaries. We are seeing increases in our prairie bird species.”

For more information about MDC’s assistance to private landowners, visit <https://mdc.mo.gov/property>. To learn about more about Audubon’s Conservation Ranching program, visit, <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/ranching>.