

Sheep/

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Wakeling and other researchers are still trying to identify other solutions, like livestock protection dogs — which the Helles use — habitat improvements, and even mineral supplements to deter close proxim-ity between domestic and bighorn sheep.

The Helles helped FWP with bighorn reintroduc-tion in 2004, when officials transplanted a wild herd to the Greenhorn Mountains in the northern Gravelles. The family has continued to work with government and conservation groups to keep the domestic and wild herds separate.

“Some conservationists have a view of what they think the landscape, what they think wildlife habitat should look like,” Evan said. “But they don’t understand that agriculture is a part of it.”

The Forest Service said its role is to manage public land for multiple use, which includes grazing, wildlife, recreation, and mining.

“Grazing is a part of mul-tiple use and (managing it) is an important part of what we do,” said Dale Olson, the Forest Service’s Madison District Ranger. “We try to find a balance to allow the opportunity for all the great uses of Forest Service land.”

But sometimes there is competition between differ-ent uses, and people have to compromise.

Nagel said the Gallatin Wildlife Association had a mixed stance about grazing on public lands because it depends on where.

“Ranchers have the right to graze public lands, but that doesn’t mean every wilderness area should have cattle or sheep grazing on it,” Nagel said. “Some loca-tions are more favorable for grazing than others.”

Determining what those locations are should be taken up by the Forest Service, along with collabo-



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A band of sheep work their way up a hillside while on the return trip to the Helle Ranch in Dillon on Monday, Oct. 3, 2022.

ration between ranchers, environmental groups and policymakers, Nagel said. “There’s a possibility of compromise,” Nagel said. “There are coexistence programs that work.”

One of those programs could be the Ruby Valley Strategic Alliance, a group that brings together area ranchers, local politicians, and conservation groups to talk about shared goals through land management.

A rancher started the Ruby Valley Strategic Al-liance in 2016 when he realized people in agricul-ture cared about a lot of the same things as conserva-tionists, like healthy water and soil, preserving open space, and wildlife connec-tivity.

“We have a shared vi-sion — preserving the open space of the Ruby Valley, this area that we really love, and protecting its legacy of farming and ranching,” said John, who is an active member in the group.

Darcie Warden, a conservation coordinator who represents the Greater Yellowstone Coalition in the

alliance, said there are real merits of working together.

“You get stronger, robust solutions that are resilient and consider more perspec-tives,” Warden said.

She noted how the group worked to add a new range rider in the national forest to help decrease predator contact with livestock — something important to both ranchers and wildlife advocates.

“It’s not one or the other — they’re both out there,” Warden said of grazing and wildlife. “You can’t judge either because they’re both there, and ranching isn’t going away.”

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Bumping along the dirt road in his pickup, Evan pointed out the patchwork of grazing patterns on the summer range.

The pastureland that stands out is what hasn’t been grazed by sheep or cattle in years. It’s overtaken with wyethia, a yellow-flow-ered weed that outcompetes the other plant species.

Animals munching down the weed’s head keep it tame enough to coexist with

other grasses, but without grazing, the landscape is slowly creeping toward a weed-laced monoculture.

“There’s a lot to be said about ruminant animals and healthy rangelands,” John said. “They evolved together. . . the open prairie landscape is this great carbon sink, and it evolved being grazed by wildlife.”

Sheep and cattle some-times graze symbiotically. For example, sheep will eat a pasture’s larkspur — a plant poisonous to cows — so that cattle can graze on the same land afterward.

Olson said that grazing often has a positive ben-efit to rangeland — if left ungrazed, some grasses go dormant.

Grazing can maintain “the plant vigor, vitality, and biodiversity” of a landscape, Olson said.

Between the Helle’s pri-vate ranch, leased land, and Forest Service allotments, their patchwork of grazing land encompasses nearly 100,000 acres.

A shared sentiment among the Helles is that often people fail to un-



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Dionisio Taype, a shepherd from Peru, poses for a portrait while moving his band of sheep into the Snowcrest Range on Monday, Oct. 3, 2022.

derstand that their graz-ing serves an ecological purpose. But healthy grass is the bottom line of their operation.

“The last thing we want to do with our operation is degrade the land. That’s what we live on,” John said. “I like to say that all ranch-ers are really grass farmers. At the end of the day, we all rely on the grass.”

Up high at nearly 9,000 feet, Evan — sporting a well-worn Duckworth fleece — pulled the pickup over to his final stop: the cell phone booth.

The cell phone booth, at the edge of a rocky cliff, is the only place in the sum-mer range with decent cell service. Evan needed to call one of Duckworth’s produc-tion workers to make sure that a fabric order ships on time.

Out here, Duckworth’s factories seemed lightyears away. But the company is always at the front of Evan’s

mind. It’s a big reason why the sheep are still here when so many other operations are disappearing, he said.

To John, the Duckworth brand is a reassurance that future generations will still have a market for Helle sheep, and that the land will stay in agriculture.

“It’s a real rewarding experience to have a multi-generational operation, to work with your family and transfer knowledge from generation to generation that comes from living on the land for close to 100 years,” John said.

“To be connected to the landscape you need to be working it,” John continued. “That’s how you really sus-tain productive open space, and all the things we think of when we say Montana.”

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