

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*

BLAZING THE PRESERVATION TRAIL

King Ranch's Legacy of Wildlife Stewardship

By Charles E. Gilliland

There was trouble at the fabled King Ranch. White-tailed deer herds and wild turkey flocks were dwindling in the wake of expanding hunting. The trend threatened once limitless game populations.

It was 1912, and Caesar Kleberg was charged with managing the Norias Division of the ranch. There was no widespread leasing for recreational deer hunting at the time. Despite the absence of financial incentives, Kleberg acted to preserve King Ranch wildlife by instituting regulations designed to halt reckless exploitation of game on the land under his control.

Ultimately, Kleberg's efforts reached far beyond the ranch's boundaries as he served on the state's Wildlife, Fish and Oyster Commission. His actions laid the foundation for the ranch's commitment to a healthy natural environment. His was the first expression of a generation-spanning, ardent dedication to preservation and promotion of wildlife populations by King Ranch shareholders, all descendants of Alice King and Robert Kleberg.

Conservation Ethic Thrives

Through the years, a conservation-driven land management ethic has played an important role in decision-making on the ranch. Management plans have scrupulously weighed wildlife needs along with those of livestock and energy production.

King Ranch property includes some 825,000 acres spread across six South Texas counties. This comprises the original Santa Gertrudis, Laureles, Norias and Encino Divisions. The ranch presents a rich tapestry of diverse landscapes, from the undulating live oak forests of the picturesque Norias to mesquite-covered plains at Santa Gertrudis to stark, brushy rangeland on the coast of Baffin Bay in the Laureles. This expanse of land remains an unspoiled natural area that hosts thriving populations of wildlife including birds — some permanent residents and others migrants travelling to winter or summer homes.

The King Ranch's proficiency in producing livestock is the stuff of legend. Carving a thriving enterprise from the arid South Texas wilderness, developing a new breed of cattle suited to the range, breeding and racing Assault, the only Texas-born thoroughbred ever to win the Triple Crown, and countless other achievements have led historians to regard the ranch's managers as the inventors of modern ranching.

Each year King Ranch shareholders and their families participate in a summer camp on the ranch. They renew family ties and discuss ranch operations. They also reconnect with the land. This program symbolizes the current shareholders' fervent desire to pass down their vision of managing the ranch to sustain a thriving, healthy landscape for generations to come.

From Prairie to Woodland

In 1853, Captain Richard King found a sea of grass waving in the wind on the plains of his newly acquired Santa Gertrudis land. For centuries, frequent fire outbreaks had destroyed woody plants before they could achieve a foothold in the soil. But concentration on livestock production suppressed these periodic fires, causing the land to mutate from broad, mostly treeless expanses of grass to brush-dominated prairies.

The spread of brush brought more changes. Pronghorn antelope, once thriving on open prairies, found the brush an inhospitable habitat. They moved on, and so did prairie chickens. Neither species lives on the ranch today. However, white-tailed deer, turkey and quail flourished in the new woodland environment. Despite the spread of this woodland habitat, wildlife had become so scarce by 1900 that even sightings of white-tailed deer were rare.

Unfortunately, brush cover began to overrun the prairies and by the 1890s had become a management problem. In the 1940s and '50s, the widespread brush invasion reached critical levels.

Over the years, the ranch has supported brush control research and has developed and used a variety of brush management techniques. It spends nearly \$1.5 million yearly for brush control.

Restoring Depleted Populations

Caesar Kleberg's new ranch management plan emphasizing wildlife conservation was embraced by the entire King Ranch family and its South Texas neighbors. Together, their efforts have provided an abundant, thriving wildlife community.

Those efforts included reintroducing species that had been all but eliminated from South Texas pastures. Through public and private cooperation, game sanctuaries were created and a ten-year ban on turkey hunting restored depleted populations. The ranch hired its first wildlife biologist in 1945, long before hunting revenues justified such an expense.

Wild turkeys and pronghorn antelope were restocked on the ranch. Turkeys prospered; pronghorns did not. From the days of the deserted prairie, habitat has improved and today the King Ranch is home to 50,000 to 60,000 deer and 300,000 to 800,000 quail, depending on rainfall. Ranch pastures also support

10,000 nilgai antelope, about 3,000 turkeys and other wildlife, including rare ferruginous pygmy owls on the Norias Division. Guided nature tours highlight the more than 350 bird species as well as the plants and animals found there.

Through the years, ranch managers experimented to identify and implement effective conservation practices. They also supported scientific studies of wildlife habitat management conducted by academic institutions.

Legacy Continues

After his death in 1946, Caesar Kleberg's commitment to the King Ranch's conservation ethic continued through the Caesar

Kleberg Foundation for Wildlife Conservation. The foundation has sponsored conservation research for decades and in 1981 contributed funds to establish the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&I University, now Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMU-Kingsville).

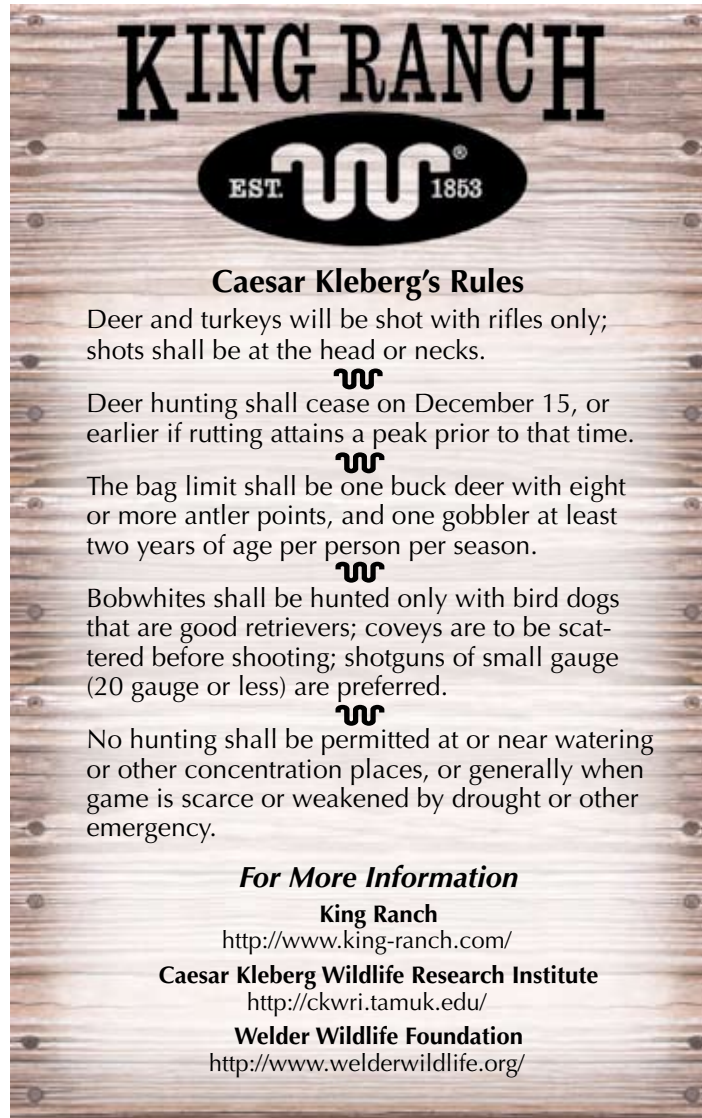
During its 27-year history, the institute has forged an alliance with South Texas landowners. Through these partnerships, the institute has amassed a body of knowledge reflecting its mission.

Serving in various advisory roles, individuals associated with the institute promote the welfare of both game and nongame wildlife species through a program of research and education. The institute currently houses 17 faculty members and an active graduate program in TAMU-Kingsville's College of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Human Sciences. Its wide-ranging research concentrates on "science-based information for enhancing conservation and management of wildlife in South Texas and related environments."

The institute highlights the role private landowners play

in wildlife conservation and recognizes their part in the restoration of wildlife in the region south of a line from Victoria through San Antonio to Del Rio. A modest-sized region at the southern tip of this area encompasses more biological diversity than either the Everglades or Yellowstone National Park, prompting observers to call it "Texas' Last Great Habitat."

More recently, the King Ranch created the King Ranch Institute of Ranch Management at TAMU-Kingsville. In celebration of its sesquicentennial, the ranch created a \$10 million



endowment to support that institute. The institute's mission is to educate land managers in the multitude of disciplines needed to effectively manage large acreages, including wildlife management.

Ultimately, Caesar Kleberg's legacy — a model of stewardship that can be adopted by landowners with small acreages as well as those who own vast tracts of land — has expanded and enhanced the ranch's already legendary reputation. 📌

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THE TAKEAWAY

King Ranch shareholders have been well ahead of the curve in their commitment to a conservation-driven land management ethic. As early as 1912, the ranch's business decisions were made only after considering their effects on the diverse wildlife populations and natural habitats of this legendary South Texas landholding.



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