

Maintaining wildlife populations on their 20,000-acre cattle ranch is a high-priority item for the Larsons of Hamil, S.D. "To us, the wildlife is as much a part of the land as the trees, the soil and the creeks are," says Darrell Larson. "As we see it, we were put here to be the Lord's caretakers. We feel we have an obligation to care for the wildlife and to leave the place a little better than when we got here."

Consider some of the practices that the family has carried on for more than two decades:

- Leaving grain and forage in fields after harvest as a food source for wildlife. As many as 200 of the 3,000 cropped acres may be left as fall/winter food and cover plots.
- Planting 2,000 tree seedlings each year, a practice that not only creates food and cover for wildlife but also helps control erosion.
- Occasionally purchasing supplemental forage and grain for wildlife during winter. In one recent rough winter, the Larsons spent \$15,000 on the extra feed.
- Constructing several ponds and stocking them with trout and bass. The ponds are also a source of irrigation water for the ranch, located a few miles west of the Missouri River and just south of the White River.

The results are an abundance of wildlife across the ranch. Conservatively, the deer herd numbers around 500. A few years back, the South Dakota Game Commission counted over 4,000 pheasants in a 20-acre parcel near ranch headquarters. The ranch is also home to thriving populations of grouse, turkeys, antelope and prairie chickens. "We do this because we enjoy wildlife. That enjoyment is part of our bottom line," Larson says. Adding to the enjoyment are the hunters who visit the ranch—up to 300 in some recent hunting seasons. "We've made a lot of friends from all over the country," says Larson. "I don't know how you put an economic value on something like that."

Realizing the importance of the contribution the Larsons were making to wildlife, local hunters stepped forward five years ago and offered money to fund wildlife projects on the ranch.

So the family formed a hunting club—White River Sportsman's Club, Inc.—to handle the money. Memberships cost \$1,000 each and must be bought in blocks of five or more. Because \$1,000 is more than many people could afford, the Larsons allow four or five



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

ALTHOUGH THE LARSONS CHARGE FOR HUNTING privileges, Darrell emphasizes that profit isn't the primary incentive. The family considers it a duty to leave the place a little better than before.

PLOW BACK THE RETURNS

By RICK MOONEY

people to go together and purchase a single membership.

Club members can bring a limited number of guests to the ranch on each visit for hunting, camping, fishing and horseback riding. Because all hunting and recreation are by appointment only, the Larsons can control the number of hunters on the ranch. In the club's first years, they sold 30 memberships. To protect wildlife populations in recent drought years, however, they've cut back to 18 memberships.

Larson points out that you have to be people-oriented in this sort of venture. "During some seasons, we have hunters here nearly every day," he says. "They seem to show up when we're busiest. They want to know where they should hunt or park a camper."

And time is definitely at a premium on this ranch. The operation includes a 500-head cow herd, two feedlots of up to 1,500 animals each, a hog operation and a quarter-horse operation. (The management team also includes Larson's wife Fran, daughter Vicki, sons

Audie and Monty, daughter-in-law Diane, brother Glenn, Glenn's wife Barb, and their son Dennis.)

Money from the hunting club pays for wildlife feed, trees and seed for winter food plots. "Most of it ends up going back into the wildlife," says Larson. "It's not a moneymaking deal."

To stress again that profit isn't the primary incentive, he talks about some of the guests at the ranch. There's the 14-year-old who turned down an easy shot at a trophy buck because he was happy just to look at the animal. Or the man who brought his granddaughter so she could see the wild turkeys and antelope run across the hills.

His favorite concerns a ranch guest from Minneapolis who was looking at a herd of deer and a large flock of pheasants. As Larson came closer, he saw the man was crying. "He told me he hadn't seen so many varieties of wildlife in one setting since he was a kid 50 years ago. That gives you an awfully good feeling."