



## **From the Ground Up**

Ponteix Rancher  
Committed to Raising  
Environmental Awareness

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While his cattle graze on a large tract of native grass on the Continental Divide – Oran Balas of Ponteix, Sask. has been working to reduce the divide between the ranching community and those who are not familiar with the environmental benefits that he and his neighbors provide.

“As a group, ranchers usually are just more comfortable just being ignored - but that seems to have stopped. And so by telling the positive story of what ranching can contribute to the ecosystem – that is a positive for me,” said Balas.

As a voice for ranchers, Balas puts considerable time into sitting on various boards and committees, working with a variety of organizations in the interest of prairie conservation. His ranch has also been used a stop for educational tours.

“The reason I’m so involved is because for a lot of years, ranchers were maybe chastised and looked down upon - and yet they were probably the only ones that managed large chunks of native range in a manner that provided habitat for a lot of various species,” said Balas.

“I think that’s something that the public has to be made aware of,” he added, noting that historically, people living on the land were given incentives to plow the land and introduce new crops.

***“It seems that now, the ranchers that resisted partaking in those programs are the ones that now have species at risk left on their land and a lot of other wildlife species besides - like game species and others that the public wants to enjoy in one form or another. So I think the ranchers need to be given credit and recognition for their resilience to poorly designed programs and policies that came along in the past.”***

### Roots in Ranching

For Balas and other ranchers like him, land management decisions are deeply rooted in family tradition and values passed down through generations.

“I grew up on the ranch. I was born there and have been basically ranching all my life,” said Balas, who took over from his parents, raised his own family there and now shares his love of ranching with his young grandchildren.

The ranch is located midway between the towns of Val Marie, Mankota and Ponteix and is divided into two blocks: summer range and winter range.

“The summer range is all native grass and it’s right on the divide north of Val Marie, pretty well surrounded on all sides by other ranches that have all native grass – so that’s a huge block of native grass.”

The winter range is located about 10 miles northeast and includes farmland that was seeded back to grass.

“I run the ranch as a year-round grazing operation if I can get away with it and try to stockpile grass rather than bale it,” said Balas, adding that he has consulted with range specialists to help undertake numerous projects over the years.

To improve his management, he’s had to make decisions about herd movement, livestock watering development and fencing – all with consideration for the Sprague’s Pipit, a grassland songbird protected as a species at risk.

## Commitment to the Industry

As a longtime member of the Saskatchewan Stockgrowers Association, Balas held various positions on its executive and served as the land-use chair for a number of years. Through the organization, he was also appointed chair of the Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP) – a partnership of 30 agencies and organizations.

Through this role he has been able to share the positive story of ranching with more people – and even bring them out to his ranch.

For example, during the province's annual native prairie appreciation week in June, the Society for Range Management has often used his used place for tours. Years ago, his ranch was also one of the stops on a week-long agriculture tour for teachers.

"We've taken a bus load of educators out and showed them different (range) management styles and tried to educate them a little bit about what prairie is - and the diversity of plants and animals that it provides. I think that is what's lacking in most of the general public," said Balas.

But through the Prairie Conservation Action Plan, Balas is happy to see native prairie school programming that is part of the curriculum.

"I was the initial rancher for the 'Adopt a Rancher Program' when it was in its pilot. It's a group of Grade 10 students that take a unit in their science class in conjunction with a rancher. It all ends up with a ranch visit for the students. They get to spend a day on the prairie and actually test some of the stuff they've learned through the classroom. It has since expanded to numerous schools and we're getting inquiries from all over the province."

Through PCAP, Balas was also part of a committee that helped develop a range health assessment booklet for land managers and extension professionals. To pilot its use, training sessions that were held included a stop at his ranch. Along with participants from across the prairie provinces, Balas said he benefitted as well.

"We had soil scientists from the U.S. come up to the ranch and show how they evaluated range sites and assessed range health. For me that was very educational – because I've learned everything by making my own mistakes or listening to them," said Balas.

## Ranchers Research

In light of the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA), Balas also collaborated with other ranchers to become more knowledgeable about the role they could play as land managers.

“About seven or eight years ago, a group of us got wind of the South of the Divide Multi-Species at Risk Action Plan for southwest Saskatchewan, which focuses on the recovery of 13 species in the area, and the planning that was going on.

“We got together, had some discussions about it and decided to form a group called the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance Inc (RSAI) to deal with issues that would affect ranching and grasslands through the Species at Risk Act.,” said Balas, who serves as president of the new organization.

To be proactive, the ranchers pursued funding to do their own studies.

***“We looked at what other jurisdictions around the world have done about species at risk and the land managers that are creating habitat for them,”*** said Balas, noting they developed site level habitat targets that ranchers can work towards.

When the South of the Divide Conservation Action Program Inc. (SODCAP Inc.) was officially established in 2014 as a board-governed partnership, represented by industry, agriculture and environmental non-governmental organizations – Balas was also elected to the board as RSAI’s representative and co-chair.

SODCAP Inc. fosters engagement, extension and projects with land managers.

“This last fall we had a tour for more governmental staff. We took them around to a few ranches in the SOD area. We showed them some of the habitat attributes we are measuring for – for species at risk and some of the landscapes.”

While Balas seems to be wearing many hats when it comes to all the boards and committees he serves on, he said he finds “It’s pretty simple when you boil it down to one common denominator.”

“The one thing that makes it all feasible and possible is that the focus is always on healthy native prairie and it doesn’t matter who I’m representing – that is their main goal. Some of them have different avenues of addressing it – but the bottom line is still to have healthy native prairie that provides habitat for species at risk and a living for the people that manage it every day.”

Reward

In conclusion, Balas said that it’s easy to find the reward for all the time and effort he has dedicated to conservation.

***“For me, it’s the increased awareness there is for native prairie and the fact that ranchers are telling the story that ranchers are responsible for the native prairie that’s left - and the health of it.”***

“And just recognition that people are gaining more awareness of the connection between ranching and range. Ranchers’ management is what has kept the range healthy and the species – whether they’re endangered or not, are still out here for everybody to enjoy. That I think is my reward,” said Balas, adding that he thankful to be out on the land on a daily basis and to be able to enjoy the special connection he has with it.

“For me, I’ve managed to live my life out looking at native grass and learning something every day about it. I think that’s a reward in itself.”

In the meantime, for the Sprague’s Pipit that shares the Balas ranch – there seems to be a parallel that comes to symbolize Balas’s own philosophy.

While it is a grassland songbird that nests on the ground and is rarely seen – it can most easily be recognized by its song when it takes to the sky for lengthy aerobatics at lofty heights.

Likewise, the ranchers that characteristically liked to be left alone have also proven that amazing things can happen from the ground up.