





Journal of a Special Place

From Ranch Land to Public Preserve

Text by Jan Barstad ☞ Photographs by Jerry Sieve

January 14, 1989. The sign at the ranch road 46 miles southeast of Tucson bears the triangular logo of the Bureau of Land Management. "Empire/Cienega Resource Conservation Area," it announces. My husband, Ron, and I turn left off State Route 83, clatter over a cattle guard, and drive four dusty miles to the old headquarters buildings near Cienega Creek.

To drive onto this historic ranch in the Sonoita Basin is to enter a world of golden grass under a high dome of blue sky, of miles of dirt roads through mesquite and oak, of the whistle of a kingbird darting after an insect or the hunting cry of a hawk riding the wind. It is a world utterly removed from the rush and clack of urban congestion. Henry David Thoreau would have loved it.

The grassland vista is definitely to our taste, and we stop the van at a crest of the road to survey the scene. The Whetstone Mountains rise to the east; south are the Mustangs with the knob called Mount Bruce at their northeast end. Farther south and east are the Huachucas. Behind us, due west, lie the Santa Ritas, and to the north, the Empire Mountains. Through the rolling country of the Cienega Valley runs a ribbon of leafless cottonwoods and other streamside trees that mark the 10-mile stretch of the perennial stream called Cienega Creek.

This is what we've come to see: prime, high-desert grassland and its associated

plants and animals, saved from development by the Bureau of Land Management through a complex series of land exchanges completed in June, 1988.

In a trade with Seven West Properties of Scottsdale, BLM acquired nearly 55,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land in southeastern Arizona and in northern Arizona near Grand Canyon National Park. Part of the property includes the huge Empire and Cienega ranches and portions of the nearby Rose Tree Ranch.

Some of the finest native grasslands in Arizona have been preserved, as well as the riparian habitat along Cienega Creek. The creek is home to three native fish: the Gila topminnow, the Gila chub, both listed by the state as threatened, and the longfin dace. Among the 170 bird species on the property are three kinds of quail, the rare yellow-billed cuckoo, and a dozen raptors, including the rare gray hawk. A herd of pronghorn roams the ranches, and there are whitetail and mule deer, javelina, mountain lions, coatimundi, and, occasionally, black bears that wander down from the nearby mountains.

The abundant grama grasses, lovegrasses, and other native species show few signs of overgrazing. John Donaldson, the rancher who holds the grazing leases on this and surrounding State Trust properties, has worked since 1976 to restore the land after many years of overuse.

But though the grasslands have recovered, the ranch house continues to suffer

from age and neglect. Here we see sagging roofs, broken chimneys, spider webs, ivy tendrils that have sneaked into a back room and wrapped tightly around an electrical conduit. The house hasn't been occupied since the 1970s. It takes some imagination to picture it as a comfortable home with guests around the dinner table and smoke rising from the chimney. But it will be so again because BLM plans to restore the dwelling, whose original adobe wing was built in 1876.

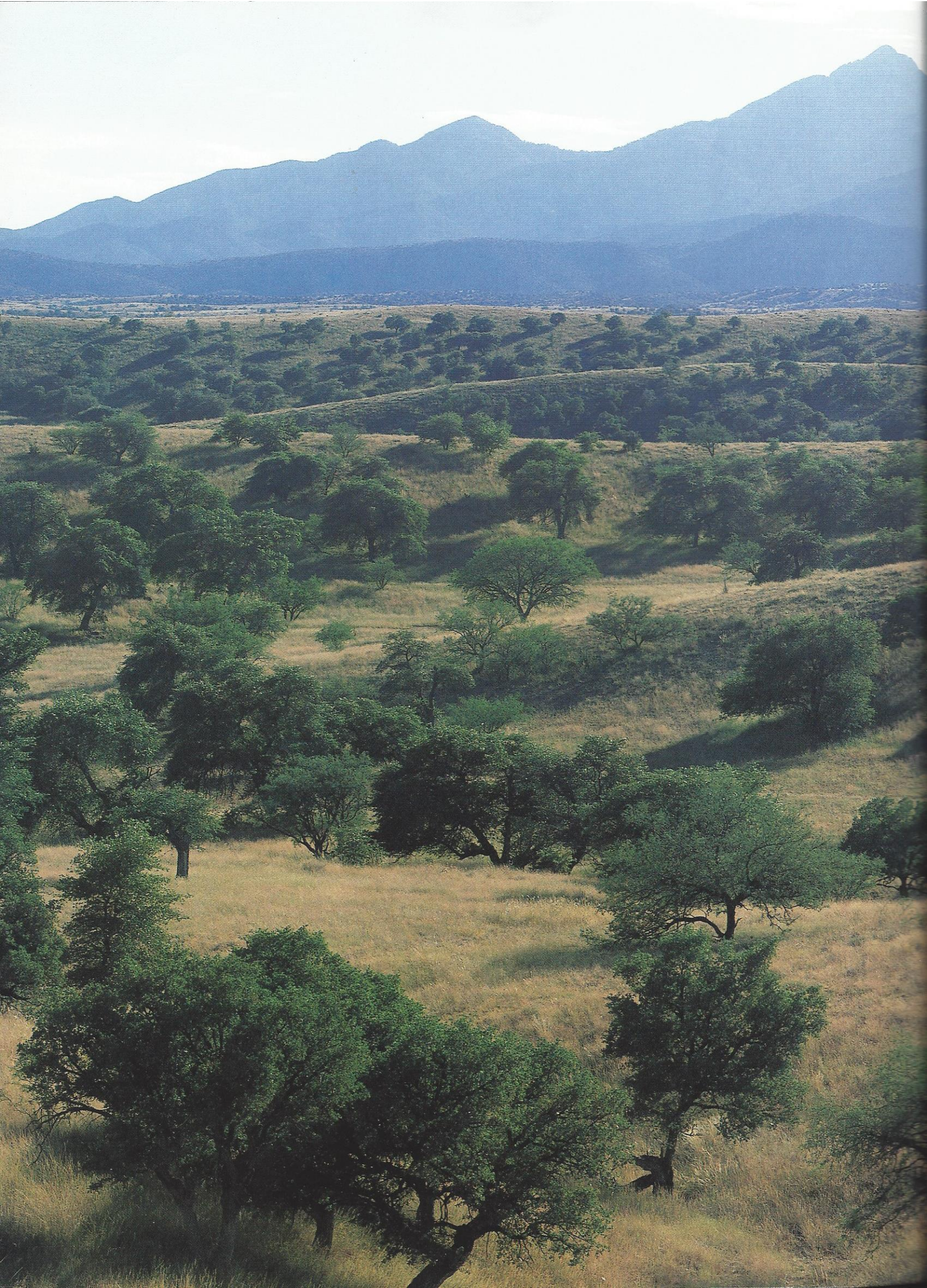
At 4,500 feet, the air at sunset is nippy. We drive east toward Cienega Ranch, looking for a campsite. Since the acquisition, the ranch has been open to most forms of outdoor recreation, including camping, although BLM has built no recreational facilities and plans none.

Just past the corrals, I spy a cat ambling between clumps of sacaton grass. I give Ron a gentle poke in the ribs.

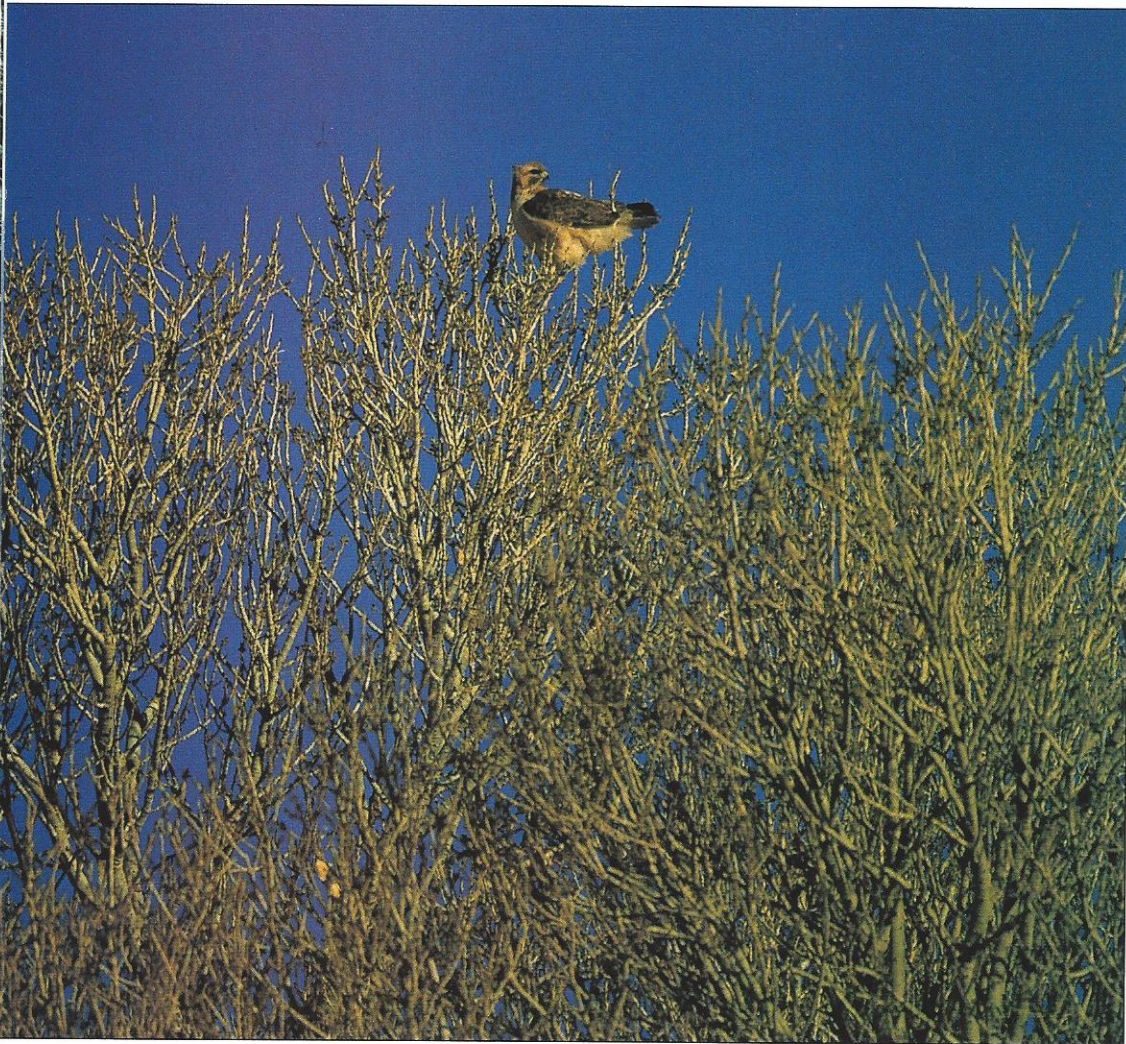
"That isn't the little brown cat we met at

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(OPPOSITE PAGE AND ABOVE) *Unoccupied since the 1970s, the forlorn Empire ranch house with its historic 1876 adobe wing suffers from age and neglect. Its new owner, the Bureau of Land Management, has plans to restore the structure. Since the purchase in 1988, the ranch has been open to many forms of outdoor recreation.*

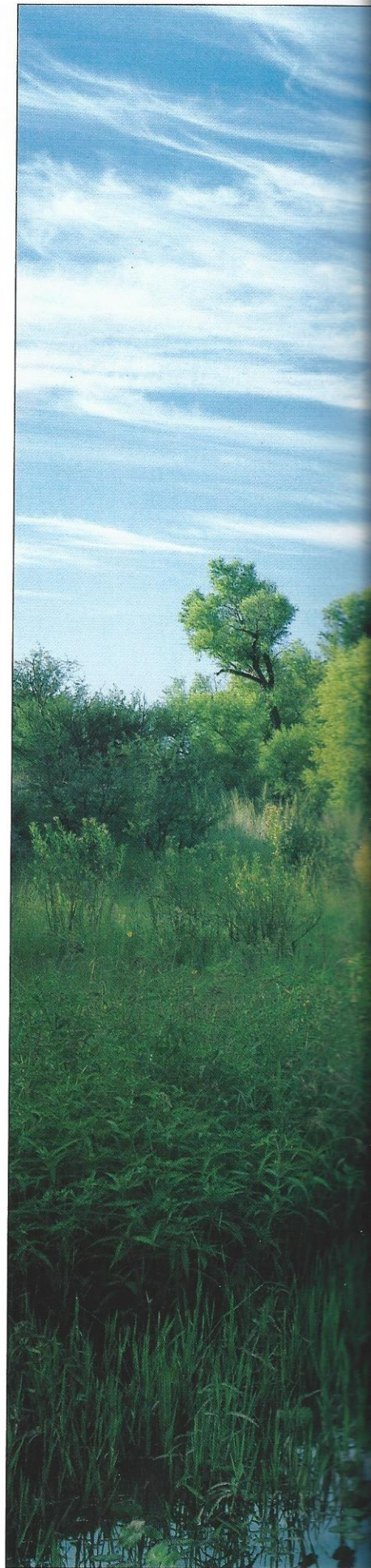


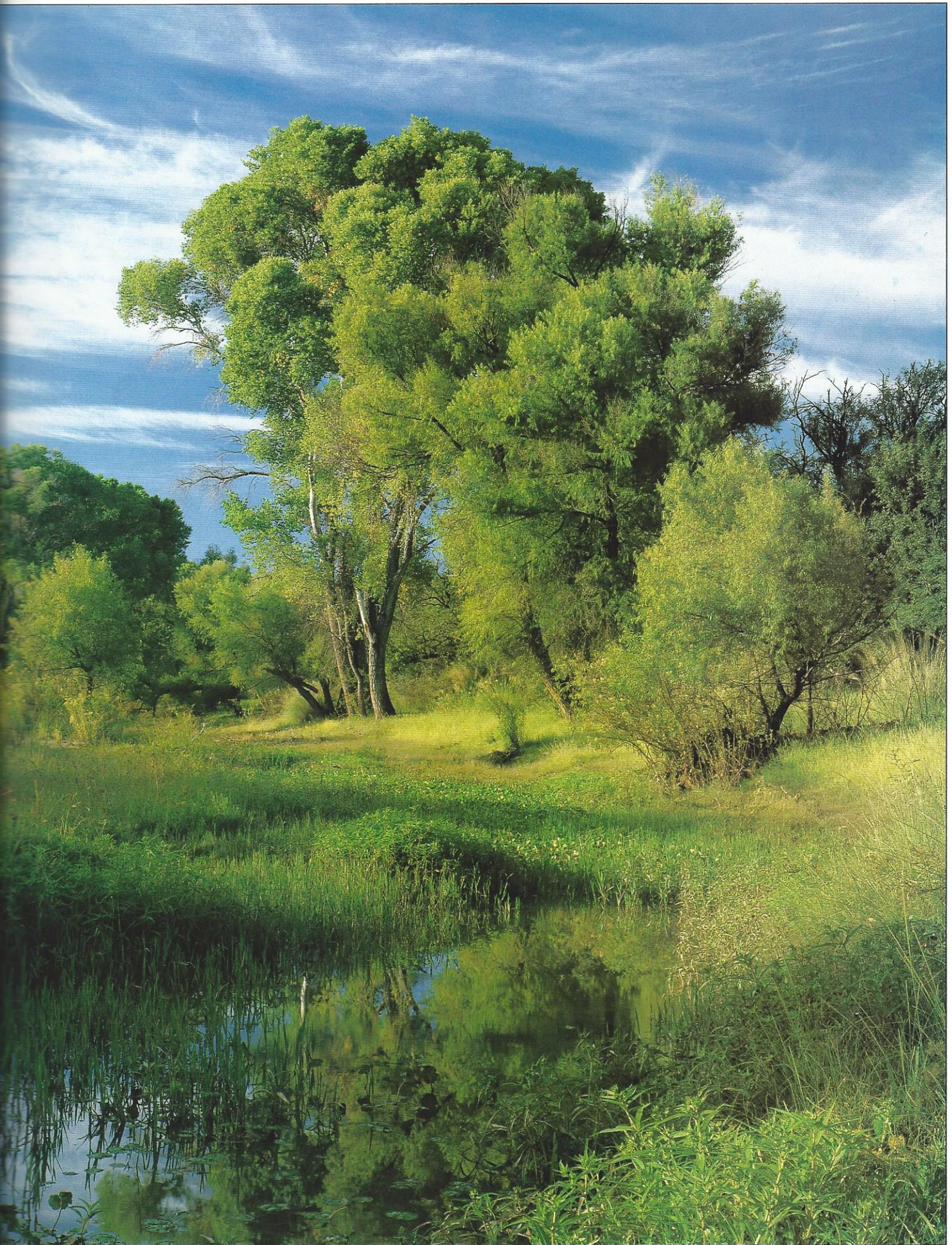




Lush high-desert grassland offers a rich habitat for 170 bird species, including this young raptor (ABOVE). RON BARSTAD
Other occupants of this land are the great horned owl (RIGHT) as well as pronghorn antelope, deer, javelina, mountain lion, and an occasional black bear. The riparian area along Cienega Creek (OPPOSITE PAGE) is home to such threatened native fish as the Gila topminnow, the Gila chub, and the longfin dace.

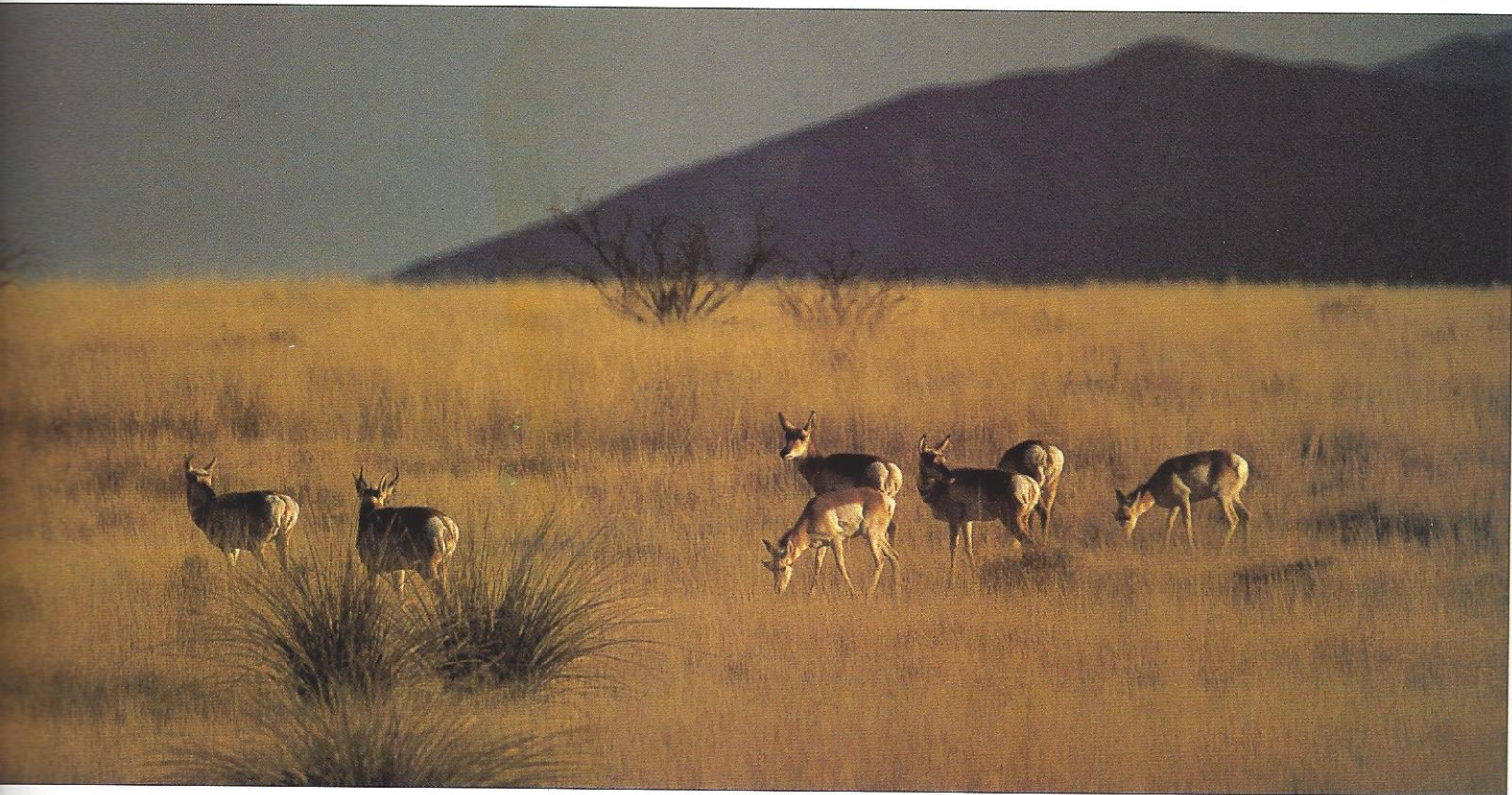
(PREVIOUS PANEL, PAGES 6 AND 7)
Carpeting the rolling hills of the Cienega Valley, the abundant grama, lovegrass, and other native species show little sign of overgrazing. The Santa Rita Mountains, seen in the background, flank the ranch on the southwest.











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the house; it must be at least twice as big. What is it?"

"Bobcat?"

"Tail's too long. And it doesn't have any spots."

"A mountain lion?"

"The color's right, but it's too small. And look at those short legs." The cat disappears into the brush, and we drive on without identifying it.

January 15. The mystery of the unknown cat is solved. Jerry Sanders, manager of the Rose Tree Ranch, tells us we've seen a jaguarundi. Peterson's *Field Guide to the Mammals* tells us the cat is extremely rare in these parts — its primary range is to the south in Mexico.

Already the Empire/Cienega Resource Conservation Area has proven its worth, providing habitat not only for a rare cat but also for the pronghorn grazing near State Route 82. The Arizona Game and Fish Department released the pronghorns in 1981. The herd has grown to 90 animals.

February 4. Considering the abundance of oak trees in southeastern Arizona, it may seem odd that we should make a special trip to the ranch to view one. But this is no ordinary tree. It is the largest Emory oak in the United States and is certified by the American Forestry Association in Washington, D.C., which maintains a National Registry of Big Trees. Located in a canyon north of the Empire Ranch buildings, the oak is 43 feet tall, 20½ feet in circumference, and 68 feet at

its crown. There are many massive oaks in the canyon, however, and without a measuring tape we cannot identify the registered big-tree specimen.

March 8. Back in Tucson, Arizona Historical Society archives give me an overview of Walter Lennox Vail, who came from Nova Scotia to purchase the ranch's original acreage in 1876 when he was just 24 years old.

Vail and his partner, Herbert R. Hislop, a young Englishman, paid \$1,174 for 160 acres, 612 head of cattle, and a few buildings, including an adobe house that was under construction.

Hislop became embittered about "life abroad" and returned to London in 1878. Vail stayed on, using the proceeds of his Total Wreck silver mine near Pantano to build the Empire from its original 160 acres to nearly 1,000 square miles and 40,000 cattle. He was a founder and first president of the Livestock Ranchman's Association, a territorial legislator, and a member of the Pima County Board of Supervisors. In 1879 he helped draft the legislation that created Apache County.

A shrewd businessman, Vail shipped cattle to his ranches and feedlots in California, Texas, Colorado, and Kansas. When drought struck Arizona in 1890, and the Southern Pacific Railroad took advantage of the cattlemen's plight by increasing freight rates, Vail refused to pay. Instead he drove his cattle to California "on the hoof" (an operation that took three months) and urged other ranchers in the

vicinity to follow his lead. By year-end, railroad officials realized that the ranchers would do so and rescinded the rate hike.

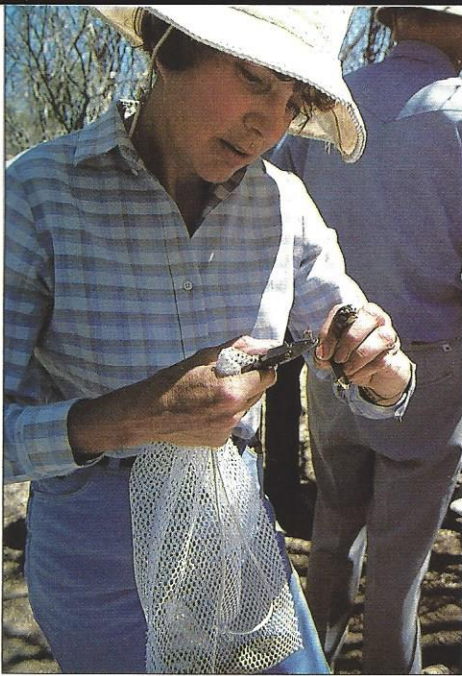
After Vail died in 1906 at the age of 54, his family operated the ranch until 1928, when the property was sold for \$15 an acre to Chiricahua Ranches, a family company headed by Frank Boice.

April 4. A black-shouldered kite hovers over a pasture looking for a meal. It is a warm spring day, a good day to tour the Empire/Cienega with the man who made the land trade, BLM's former state director Dean Bibles.

He and Don Ducote, Tucson field office supervisor, take us to a section of Cienega Creek where we can view the three native fish species that depend for their survival on the creek and its pools. Even from the bank we can see that all three are gray-brown and tiny, ranging in size from one to eight inches. But so few native fish remain in the state's waters that Bibles is as pleased about their rescue as he is about the pair of rare gray hawks nesting in the cottonwoods behind the ranch buildings.

We tour abandoned fields near the Cienega Ranch where alfalfa and other crops once grew. The road is raised on a dike next to a flood control ditch that Bibles and Ducote call the "Panama Canal." Bibles says BLM is trying to determine whether to breach the dike and return a portion of the fields to marsh habitat (*cienega* means "marsh" in Spanish).

Across the fields, a team of Tucson



(OPPOSITE PAGE) Herds of pronghorn antelope, introduced in the early 1980s, graze the far outback of the Empire Ranch. RON BARSTAD

(LEFT) To determine the natural values of BLM's acquisition, Barbara Hill of the Tucson Audubon Society and a team of volunteers band, weigh, and measure birds captured in mist nets, while Jeff and Karen Sims (BELOW) take measurements of stream flow along Cienega Creek.

(PREVIOUS PANEL, PAGES 10 AND 11) Sunset shadows creep across the grasslands of the Empire ranch. Original owner Walter Lennox Vail expanded the ranch to nearly 1,000 square miles.



Audubon Society volunteers is working near the creek. Mabel Bendixen, Ross and Bette Chapin, Barbara Hill, and Jim Logan have spent the weekend setting mist nets, banding, weighing, and measuring captured birds. Bibbes says the work is invaluable to the BLM because the agency lacks the funds to finance such projects. Most of the team's catch is sparrows, but they stop at midmorning because the birds are getting too hot while awaiting release.

We stop for lunch under the cottonwoods near the Cienega Ranch road ford. BLM's fire crew, in residence from April to October, is doing the same, and in a crotch of one tree, not far above the ground, a great horned owl sits on a nest. She seems unperturbed by the fire truck, our van, and the mountain bike riders who later pause for a breather under the trees.

August 23. The growing season is the loveliest time of year in southeastern Arizona. The grassland turns so incredibly

green you'd think you were in Pennsylvania. Seedheads on the grasses sway in the wind, sunflowers bloom along the roadsides, and the beans ripen on mesquite trees. The pronghorn and cattle graze contentedly, but the BLM fire crew has worked hard because rainfall has been low, allowing more grass fires than usual.

The valley on the east side of the ranch broadens between rounded hillsides. We stop near a dirt tank to watch a pair of roadrunners. The birds see us, and one charges in our direction.

We're under attack by an angry roadrunner! He runs alongside the van, hurling foul bird curses at it. The extreme difference in size between him and the intruder seems lost on the bird. We decide it is a male, protecting its territory and its mate. Who are we to intrude? We exit.

September 13. The grass is turning golden-brown again. As I drive to headquarters, three cowboys are finishing work

with some cattle in the corrals. At the house, I can hear the gray hawks calling to each other as they fly over the tops of the cottonwoods. Karen Simms, BLM's wildlife biologist at the Empire, says the birds fledged two young this year. They're noisy because they're getting ready to fly south for the winter. Sensible birds.

January 20, 1990. It's more than a year since our first adventure at the Empire/Cienega. The cottonwoods along Cienega Creek are leafless again. The gray hawks won't return until April, although the kite and other raptors soar year-round over the hills and valleys.

I think of the people who have seen and used this country over the years. Many prehistoric people lived here. Bill Gibson, BLM's area archeologist, says one site from the Archaic Culture has been found in Mattie Canyon that dates from about 500 B.C. And between A.D. 1200 and 1450, at the height of their culture (what we call the Classical Period), Hohokam Indians had agricultural fields here. In the 1600s, when Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, a missionary and explorer, passed through on his journeys north from Mexico, he met Piman-speaking people in these valleys. Later, 19th-century ranchers and their families fought with Apaches, themselves relatively recent immigrants into the region.

Laura (Dusty) Vail Ingram, Walter Vail's granddaughter, lived on the ranch until 1928. She left when she was 12 years old. She played under the cottonwoods and rode with the Empire cowboys, and she remembers the large orchard that grew east of the house.

"I'm thrilled with the outcome of the trade," she says over the phone from her home in Rockville, Maryland. "The ranch means so much to me. It's wonderful to know that BLM plans to maintain it as it was when I knew it."

Our year-long odyssey on the Empire has left us with the same feeling, knowing that the future of the ranch as open space is secure. We will return often seeking the answer to *one* last question:

Will we see that jaguarundi again? ■

Suggested reading:

An Englishman's Arizona: The Ranching Letters of Herbert R. Hislop, 1876 to 1878, by Herbert R. Hislop. Introduction by Bernard L. Fontana. Overland Press, 1965.

Jan Barstad is a free-lance writer and frequent contributor to Arizona Highways. She specializes in ecology and range management.

Free-lance photographer Jerry Sieve's new book of landscape and scenic pictures, Ohio Images of Nature, will be released this month by Westcliffe Publishers.