

# Buck Island Ranch—a Family Affair

Linda Campbell-Kissock

We often hear that ranching is not just a business but a way of life. Buck Island Ranch in south-central Florida—operated by Dan and Anita Childs, their son Tom, and his wife Sarah—is truly a family affair. It is an efficient, professionally run operation, a fine example of the potential in Florida ranching.

High calving percentages and weaning weights and productive grassland resources are the results of the Childs' management ability. By understanding the requirements of cattle and forage, they are able to meet the needs of both.

Cooperators with the Highlands County Soil and Water Conservation District since 1968, the Childs have been leaders in the ranching community. Dan is a member of the Animal Health Committee of the National Cattlemen's Association, Tom is president of the Highlands County Cattlemen's Association, and Sarah is past-president of the Florida Cowbelles. The Childs have hosted numerous tours and several training sessions for personnel of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS).

Born in Los Angeles, Dan managed ranches in California, Nevada, and Colorado before moving to Florida in 1968. He has seen a cross section of American ranching—from the annual grasses of the California foothills near Ventura (24 in/yr average annual precipitation), to the desert browse and ephemeral forbs near Fallon, Nev., (4 in/yr), to sheep and cattle on shortgrass range at 8,000 ft. elevation near Alamosa, Colo., (8 in/yr), and, finally, to the cabbage palm prairies of central Florida (54 in/yr).

**Before moving to Florida,** Dan consulted a former classmate at California Polytechnic, Dr. T.J. Cunha, who at that time was head of the Animal Science Department at the University of Florida. Dr. Cunha advised Dan to choose a ranch in the subtropical zone (south of an imaginary line extending across the state between Vero Beach and Tampa), attempt to get a mixture of soil types (some organic, some sandy), locate near a water control canal to permit efficient water management, and choose a ranch with a combination of planted grasses and rangeland. Dan took his advice.

The subtropical climate brought new opportunities and challenges to the Childs. High potential stocking rates, a long growing season with mild winters, and potential for rapid forage growth and range improvement are important advantages for Florida cattlemen. But the humid climate also brought a set of new problems for the Childs.

"We are faced with continuous maintenance of canals and ditches to keep them free of choking water weeds," explains



*Cabbage palm, (Sabal palmetto), is the state tree of Florida and is often used as ornamental plantings. The edible bud is cooked as a vegetable making delicious "swamp cabbage." Clumps of cabbage palms are a valuable source of shade and cover for livestock in open pastures and rangelands.*

Dan. "Deterioration of fences is more of a problem here, and we have to continuously fight encroachment of cabbage palms on some of our pastures. Providing necessary lime and fertilizers to planted pastures and meeting seasonal nutritional needs through supplemental feeding are critical challenges. We also had to adjust to the somewhat less gentle disposition of crossbred cattle as opposed to straightbred Herefords".

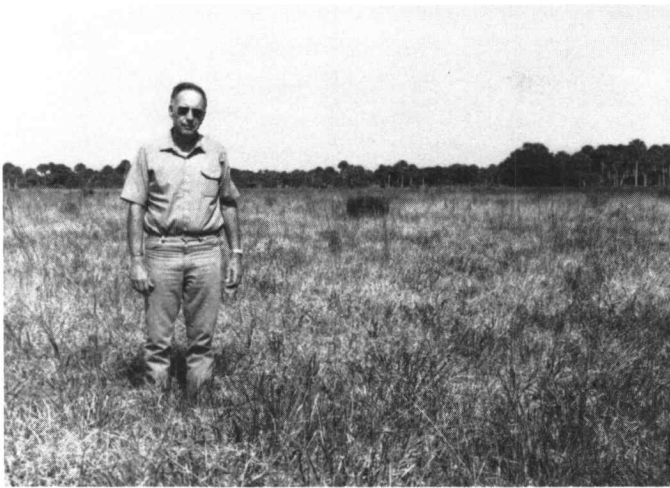
The Childs' 10,300 acre ranch, all privately owned, consists of 7,100 acres of planted pastures and 3,200 acres of



*Main water control ditch for irrigation of planted pasture.*

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**Editor's Note:** In central Florida cabbage palm-oak hammocks exist in various sizes and shapes and are interspersed throughout the open rangelands. They are somewhat higher in elevation and appear as "islands" in the surrounding open rangelands. These wooded hammocks are prime areas for deer—hence, the name "Buck Island" comes from an old map of the ranch and when Childs bought the ranch he adopted the name.



*Dan Childs in one of his rangeland pastures.*

rangeland. Cattle graze the rangeland from December through March. Most of the calves are born during December and January, and Dan begins moving cow/calf pairs onto the planted pastures in March. By April cows and calves are grazing the lush, irrigated grasses and white dutch clover. Cow/calf pairs remain on planted pastures until mid-August, when calves are weaned and sold. Cows are put back on grass/clover pastures through November. The added nutrition of fertilized pastures enables the cows to begin winter in good condition. Fall grazing also further reduces grass accumulation so that the clover has adequate sunlight when warmth begins to return in February.

**The rangeland pastures consist of freshwater marsh and slough range sites interspersed with cabbage palm/oak hammocks.** Key grasses are maidencane and blue maidencane on marshes and sloughs, and beaked panicum, creeping bluestem, and chalky bluestem on somewhat drier sites. Rangeland pastures are in good and excellent condition and are stocked at 1 cow for each 2 acres during the December through March grazing period.

Introduced pasture grasses include pangola digitgrass; Argentine, Pensacola, and Paraguayan bahiagrasses; African stargrass; and Hemarthria grass. Many of the pastures have white dutch clover mixed with introduced grasses. Stocking rates on grass/clover pastures begin at 2 acres per cow-calf unit and increase to one acre per cow during summer.

Water management is a key to higher productivity on Buck Island Ranch. Four pumps pull water from a central canal to numerous irrigation and drainage ditches that crisscross the ranch. All planted pastures are irrigated by this open ditch seepage method. Water from the pumping locations flows by gravity through the ditch systems into the marshes and sloughs. Water control and discharge are through structures consisting of corrugated metal pipe and flashboard risers. Water management of this type is an advantage in south-central Florida, where rainfall is abundant but poorly distributed. Because the water holding capacity of sandy soils is poor, seepage irrigation maintains soil moisture within the root zone, thus increasing forage production.

Buck Island Ranch has a reputation for producing uni-



*Dan Childs looks at marsh site. The erect-growing grass in the foreground is maidencane.*

form, healthy crossbred calves. "We breed for a white-faced calf with 1/4 Brahman," says Dan. Crossbred cows are bred to performance-tested Hereford and Brangus bulls on a two-breed cross program. Brahman bulls are also used to maintain Zebu characteristics, necessary for performance under Florida conditions. Bulls are put with the herd from February 1 through June 1. Dan also manages a purebred Hereford herd, and many of his replacement bulls are ranch raised.

In 1981, weaning weights of steers from Hereford bulls averaged between 534 and 552 lb. Percentage calf crop averaged about 90. "Our goal has been to keep the calving percentage up. I believe it is better to give up some weight per calf than to have a poor calving percentage," explains Dan. "We like to have most of our calves born in early December. We find that early calving leads to higher calving percentages and weaning weights. Most of our calves are weaned at 7 1/2 months of age."

**High rainfall and humidity, low fertility soils,** and rapid leaching of nutrients all contribute to lower the quality of forages in Florida. "Providing proper nutrition is a key to achieving high animal performance on our ranch," says Dan. "We provide a 32% nonprotein nitrogen (urea) and molasses liquid supplement on rangeland pastures from December 1 through March, and a complete mineral mix free choice yearlong." Replacement heifers are bred to Hereford bulls at 2 years of age and are supplemented with preconditioning and liquid feeds.

The Childs' animal health program reflects a knowledgeable, thorough and practical approach. Cows are vaccinated against reproductive diseases before the breeding season, sprayed in June to control flies and wormed in spring and fall. They receive ownership and year brands. Calves are vaccinated, castrated, and dehorned, and heifers are earmarked for easy identification. The 2S ranch brand is put on all calves. "We get repeat customers for our calves, and the 2S ranch brand helps them know where to come", explains Dan.

Repeat customers and a good reputation for producing quality calves are worthwhile goals for any Florida rancher. Their achievements are a tribute to the management ability and progressive attitudes of the Childs family.