

Bridge Creek Estate — An Interview with Don Savjord

Amber Cowie, Education and Outreach Coordinator



Though Don Savjord has been employed on and off for nearly 30 years at Bridge Creek Estate, owned by the Cecil family in 100 Mile House, it was only in 1994 that he accepted a full-time position as ranch and property manager. Since then, Savjord's commitment to healthy and sustainable land use practices has caused the ranch to become a leader in the field of land, water and grassland stewardship initiatives.

In 2001, a wetlands preservation project undertaken in partnership with Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) was recognized by the BC Cattlemen's Association (BCCA) when Bridge Creek Estate was awarded the BCCA Environmental Stewardship Award.

For Savjord, the plaque was only part of the rewards the ranch gained from its partnership with DUC. "It was wonderful to receive that award from the Cattlemen, partly because it's a pure nominated award from your peers," said Savjord. "But it was even better to hear that the birders who went in there after we put up the fences counted 143 different species—our work helped the bird count to rebound."

Stewardship has long been the driving ethos of the Bridge Creek Estate ranch. Its 2,500 acres are directly situated on the banks of the Bridge Creek watershed and as Savjord has learned, with great geography comes great responsibility.

Shortly after Savjord became property manager, a series of factors—including the cattle causing serious damage to the creek beds and riparian areas in the watershed—threatened the ranch's reputation as good stewards. "We were faced with the possibility of assuming liability for a lot of environmental damage and there was so much talk going around about incidents like Walkerton," said Savjord. "As well, our cattle were not gaining as they should have been. It was time for us to do something. Luckily, it was one of those moments where some really positive things came out of a negative situation."

As Savjord worked to form partnerships with organizations

like DUC, Forest Renewal BC (FRBC), as well as local businesses, high school/environmental groups and various government agencies, he realized the importance of cooperation and education in the field of land stewardship.

"The more you speak to people—your neighbours, other ranchers, members of the Cattlemen's association—the more you learn," said Savjord. "There is a cross-fertilization of ideas that's so important."

Due to his willingness to learn and engage with other stewards, Savjord was successful in restoring the riparian zones and mitigating further damage to the water supply. In the process of doing so, Savjord realized the inherent flaw in land use planning in British Columbia. "There are so many penalties for doing things wrong," said Savjord. "But so few incentives for doing things right. Our actions were not just helping our cattle or our ranch; they were creating benefits downstream as well."

Being invited to attend a tour of Sheep Creek in the south Cariboo, organized by the GCC, was a "real eye-opener" for Savjord. He said the event once again underscored the importance of discussion among all stakeholders in grassland regions.

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The tour prompted Savjord to begin a new grazing routine with his cattle to protect the grasslands of the ranch and to increase the weight of his herd. His more intensive grazing practices have met with great success, effectively doubling the number of cows on his land. Of course, when working with cattle, there are always a few hurdles to jump through.

Though they eventually came around to the change in their routine, in the early stages of his field rotation, Savjord ran into problems when he tried to change his cow's ingrained grazing habits. "Cows are like kids sometimes," said Savjord. "You can't feed them ice cream all day long and then tell them to eat their vegetables at dinner. It just doesn't work so well." 🐮