

# Partnership

## Helps Young Ranchers Get a Start

## in the Sandhills

The Horse Creek Fen Ranch in Nebraska's Cherry County where the Daniels family will raise cows under the Beginning Rancher Program of the Sandhills Task Force and the Nature Conservancy.

Throughout Nebraska and the Great Plains, ranching and farming have seen a sharp decline as fewer and fewer young families make the leap into agriculture. Moreover, Nebraska's Sandhills have experienced a long-term trend of consolidation of ranches into fewer and larger operations, pushing aside the family-run operations that have defined the Plains for more than a century.

In an effort to stem this tide, the Sandhills Task Force and the Nature Conservancy established a Beginning Rancher Program, designed to give a young family an opportunity to live on the land and help rural communities remain strong. The partners developed the program - modeled after one run by the Nebraska Center for Rural Affairs - to play a role in sustaining prosperous ranching operations while supporting native plant and animal communities.

"Maintaining and encouraging ranching in the Sandhills is important to all of us who live and work here," says Sandhills Task Force projects coordinator Jim Van Winkle. "The Beginning Rancher Program offers a young family an opportunity. I can think of no better place for a young family to begin than Horse Creek Fen Ranch."

In July, Shane and Kristi Daniels of Mullen signed a five-year lease agreement to take over the ranch in Cherry County from the Nature Conservancy and begin a new life with their four daughters on a 3,480-acre property in the heart of the Sandhills.

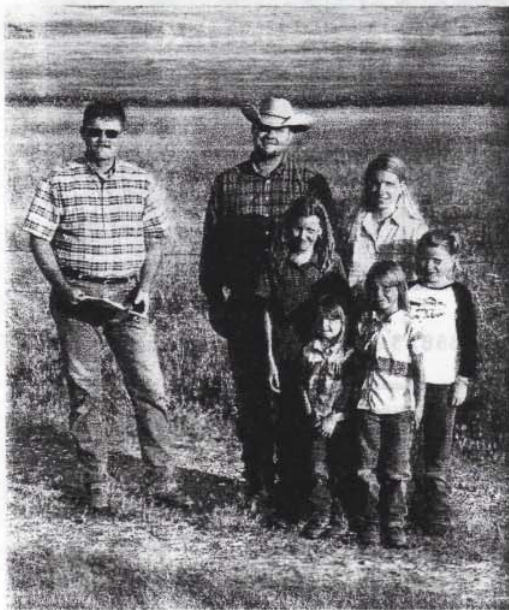
Says Shane: "My wife and I knew that under our previous circumstances, we could never afford to strike out on our own without the support of the Beginning Rancher program."

Native Nebraskans, Shane has experience working for several local ranches and as a carpenter. Kristi has been working at the Mullen golf course as well as running a part-time daycare facility. And their four girls, involved in 4-H, are excited about the ranch.

"We're thrilled," said Shane. "My wife and I and our four daughters love the ranching lifestyle - working with the livestock, being outside. Horse Creek Fen Ranch is a great spot. Our goal is to purchase the property."

Under the program, the Daniels have an option to buy the property from the Nature Conservancy at the end of the five-year lease. The conservancy would retain a conservation easement that keeps the land from development and guarantees grazing opportunities.

Rancher-members of the Sandhills Task Force have agreed to mentor Shane and Kristi, who will maintain a current business plan, live on the



Jim Luchsinger (sunglasses) of the Nature Conservancy accepts the signed Beginning Rancher agreement from the Daniels family (clockwise): Shane, Kristi, Rebekah, 8; Kortney, 6; Alysen, 4; Mikayla, 10.

ranch, and provide the day-to-day labor and management. The ranch, which consists of sub-irrigated meadows, rangeland and rich marshes, features a modular home, large barn, a shop building and 12 windmills.

Obtained by the Nature Conservancy in 1998 with support from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, Horse Creek Fen Ranch encompasses a portion of the Horse Creek Fen. The wide array of plants, wet meadows, spring seeps, marshes and fens attracted the conservancy to buy the property. A distinctive part of the landscape, fens contain peat soils and high water tables, supporting a rich diversity of plant life that adds to the special character of the Sandhills.

Very rare in Nebraska, fens support rare and threatened species of plants and animals. Four threatened species of small fish have been found in a fen stream in Cherry County: the blacknose shiner, northern redbelly dace, pearl dace and fine-scale dace. Blanding's turtles, rare throughout their range, are Horse Creek Fen residents as well.

"We look forward to working with Shane and Kristi as they settle in at Horse Creek Fen," said Jim Luchsinger, Middle Niobrara project director for the Nature Conservancy. "This is a great opportunity for the conservancy to strike a balance that meets the needs of the ranching family and the needs of the plants and animals."

Along its course, Horse Creek harbors an array of plant communities – wet meadows, spring seeps, fen and freshwater marsh – that are considered one of the best expressions of wetlands in the Sandhills. Wetlands interspersed in the dry expanse of the Sandhills provide habitat for a variety of birds including trumpeter swans, white pelicans, long-billed curlews and prairie chickens.

Since 1991, the Sandhills Task Force has recognized that

the greatest potential for wildlife habitat enhancement in the region is on private lands. Like the *Beginning Rancher Program*, this article (written expressly for Nebraska Cattleman) is a joint project of the Nature Conservancy and the Sandhills Task Force.

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