

# HOWDY, PARTNER!

*Despite Their Differences, Cyclists and Ranchers Are Natural Allies*

BY GARY SPRUNG

A decade ago, I had never spoken to a rancher. But then I moved to Crested Butte, a small town on Colorado's western slope, and such communication became inevitable. I quickly discovered that ranchers don't look at the world as I do.

A rancher once told me the only *real* work is that done with your hands, creating products directly from the earth—agriculture and mining. Ranchers have always opposed designating land as wilderness. And it hasn't pleased them that so many recreation-minded people like me have settled in their midst.

Nevertheless, the longer I live in Colorado, the more I appreciate the importance of ranchers to the future of the rural West, and the more I see our common goals. Ranchers want people to coexist peacefully in the backcountry. So do we. They don't want to see the resort industry consume all open space in our valleys. Neither do we. And they'll fight the efforts of cities to indiscriminately take water from the high mountains—a goal everyone interested in alpine preservation should support.

These days, the biggest obstacle to coexistence with ranchers isn't politics, it's mountain bikes. Too many of us have trespassed, left gates open, and allowed cattle to escape.

## *The Price of Trespassing*

Range rider Barbara East spends her summers moving cattle in the moun-



Here's a Crested Butte solution to the open-gate problem. Cyclists can easily climb these foot bridges, but cattle can't.

tains near Crested Butte. She recalls a day last fall when she told some mountain bikers they were trespassing. The cyclists rode away, and East returned to sorting cows. A few hours later, the cyclists again appeared on the private land. This time they disturbed the cattle, who ran and remixed, ruining hours of East's labor. She gave the trespassers a stern lecture and threatened to press charges, but this couldn't compensate for lost work.

"It cost us a day of labor and a day

of grazing for 440 head of yearlings," East says. "At an average gain of 2 pounds a day, at 85 cents a pound, that's \$748."

Many Colorado ranchers are already in a perilous financial position. Mountain bikers shouldn't be the ones to push them into bankruptcy.

Another day, something or someone caused cattle to run from one ranch to another, mixing two herds. No one was caught or took responsibility. But the knobby tracks that crossed the land put the blame—rightly or wrongly—on mountain bikers. As a result, the trail was closed to all users.

"You've got to realize that livestock people are out there working," East says. "Ranchers are always on a tight time frame. These guys don't even have time for their families."

East remembers another encounter when she was moving 150 head down a trail. "Here comes this bicyclist who was holding his bike up in front of him, wading into the cattle and shouting, 'Yah! Yah!' He scattered them off the trail, out into the creek and down through the timber. Had he simply stepped off the trail, the cattle would have gone right by him. When this individual and I had a little visit, I learned he was a city person, was somewhat afraid, and was simply ignorant of proper procedures when encountering livestock."

Inspired by this incident, East decided to educate people how to deal with cattle. Ranchers and bike shops

shared the cost of printing a brochure called *Crested Butte's High Country: To Share and Enjoy*. It explains the value of ranching to our culture, then describes proper ways to open and close barbed-wire gates and approach animals. Its information is useful to backpackers as well as motorists who encounter cattle on the road. Some of the important rules include:

- Obey signs on gates. If there's no sign, leave the gate as you found it.
- Respect private property.
- If you encounter livestock on a singletrack trail, step off its downhill side. Remain quiet and still. The herd will pass quickly.
- Make your presence known to animals, particularly horses.
- Keep dogs leashed or by your side when near livestock.

East says one of her goals is building goodwill among all land users. "You can either make or ruin someone's day," she says. "I'll give directions to tell bicyclists about beautiful spots or trail conditions. Personally, I think conscientious bicyclists are some of the nicest users of our national forest. And I really appreciate it when someone asks, 'Where can we go to best be out of your way?'"

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## Ranchers post "No Trespassing" signs to manage their livestock and grass.

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### *Building Respect*

Most ranchers won't mind you on their land if you ask first. But without permission, watch out! You're not only trespassing, you can be held liable if animals are injured after fleeing through a gate you left open. If livestock strays beyond the allocated public grazing area, the U.S. Forest Service can fine the rancher.

A ranch is a place of business. Ranchers don't post "No Trespassing" signs to be selfish, but to manage their livestock and protect their most basic resource, grass. Gates and fences exist to separate livestock for different breeding

programs, to prevent spread of disease, to keep animals away from poisonous plants, and to avoid overgrazing.

Ranchers and cyclists may not always see eye to eye but should be able to build mutual respect. East says, "Though ranchers look at the land very differently, you can't tell me there is a rancher alive who doesn't appreciate the outdoors. And when they see a biker riding to the top of the mountain, they know you're not very damn lazy. They like perseverance."

We can learn from them, too. I recently participated in a range ride with a large group on horseback. The first rider to reach a gate would always get off his or her horse and open it. Instead of immediately remounting and riding through, that person would wait until everyone passed, then shut the gate and bring up the rear. I saw this repeated a dozen times that day.

Is there any reason why mountain bikers couldn't adopt this practice? It might save us a lot of collective grief from ranchers and other trail users. And the rewards of such behavior might eventually be more public routes through private ranches—land that often includes some of the most beautiful terrain in a valley. ■