

# Utah rancher finds South Polls a perfect fit for his environment

*By Ralph Voss*

Southern Utah rancher Steve Westhoff has found that South Polls are a perfect fit for his environment. That's not much short of amazing considering South Polls were bred for the hot, humid weather of the South and Westhoff ranches in an extremely dry climate where most of his grazing land receives between 7 and 9 inches of rainfall per year.

But Westhoff has fallen in love with his South Polls and greatly enjoys talking about them. He also delights in showing photos of his cattle and the land he grazes – all of which he keeps stored on his trusty ipad.

Like so many people who have come to own South Poll cattle, Westhoff – who lives in the city of Escalante – learned of the breed from Clark, Mo., grazier Greg Judy, when Judy was speaking at a conference in Dallas in 2004. This was just one year after Judy purchased his first South Polls from Teddy Gentry's Bent Tree Farms in Fort Payne, Alabama.

Westhoff had always thought Longhorns were the only breed that could make it on his range. Prior to 2004 he had not sold his calves for beef, but rather as roping cattle. "That market dried up and I decided to do beef cattle but I could not afford a new herd of cows so I decided to look for the best bull I could find to put on my cows," Westhoff said. "I was impressed with the fact Greg Judy never fed his cattle hay. I thought if I could get a bull calf that was not spoiled by being fed hay in the winter, this might work for me."

The following year, as he was taking his son to a horse-training seminar in Minnesota, he stopped by Judy's Green Pastures Farm and was very impressed with both the grass and the cattle, so impressed that on the way back home to Utah, with room for a bull in his horse trailer, he stopped and bought what was to be his first South Poll bull.

From the beginning Westhoff liked the bulls. "They never had any trouble keeping up with the Longhorn cows, either going up or down the mountain." He also likes the fact the bulls are excellent breeders. "They make the rounds like nothing you've ever seen," he added. Making the rounds is no easy feat when you consider Westhoff's mountain pasture – where the bulls do their breeding – is a 16,000-acre, relatively-level tract, where it can easily be three miles between watering points.

A 16,000-acre paddock is not something most of us can fathom. Westhoff didn't always think in those terms. His wife Jenae is a native of Utah, but Westhoff hails from Paola, Kan., a small city southwest of Kansas City. Jenae is an artist and was working for Hallmark Cards in Kansas City when they met. They got married in 1980 and moved to Utah in 1984. At the age of 54, Westhoff has spent over half of his life in his adopted state.

Westhoff says his thinking about cattle has changed dramatically since he moved to Utah. "I had no idea how much cattle can think," he says, "because we used to do all of that for them. They remember where the water holes are. If a spring starts drying up, they begin looking for fresh water. They keep checking water holes. The idea of a cow outsmarting me never crossed my mind in Kansas, but they outsmart me all the time out west."

Westhoff still has a 100-head cowherd, the same number he had when he acquired his first South Poll bull in 2005. Out of those 100 cows, however, only 13 are registered Longhorns, with the other cows being half or three-quarter South Poll. Photos accompanying this story show how good South Poll bulls can create a herd of great cows. An extremely good-looking three-quarter calf is shown in one of the many photos presented. This spring Westhoff will have his first seven-eighths calves. In 2007 he added two more South Poll bulls, one each from Bent Tree and Voss Land and Cattle.

In addition to the mountain grazing land, Westhoff also has what he calls the desert pasture of some 23,000 acres, comprised basically of two large canyons of 15,000 and 7,500 acres. His cattle "winter" in the desert from Nov. 15 to May 15. The six months from May 15 to Nov. 15 are spent on the mountain. "Getting cattle up the mountain for the first time can be a challenge," he added, "but once they've been on the mountain, they're anxious to get back up there."

The elevation of the mountain tract – which is located on Fifty Mile Mountain – is 7,400 feet, while the desert land ranges from 3,700 to 6,000. Westhoff has noted that his cattle prefer to stay at about the 5,000-foot level while in the desert pasture. He doesn't know if the cattle do this because it is colder at 3,700 feet near the lake or if there is a band of good soil at 5,000 feet. The part of Fifty Mile Mountain that is usable is about 24 miles long and three miles wide. The Westhoff permit is for an area eight miles long or roughly one-third of the mountain top.

If you guessed this is government land, you would have been right. Westhoff operates under a grazing permit granted by the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The South Polls turn out to have a number of traits Westhoff likes. The bulls not only move to keep tabs on the cows, they move to find good grass. One year he put the bulls in a closed canyon and when he went back to get them, "I thought they might be skin and bones," he said, "but they were so fat I backtracked to see where they'd been eating. They had been way up this canyon and found grass that was growing in the shade. I didn't even know there was any grass in that area." Bulls will stay in a canyon like this for six months, but after three or four months, horses under the same conditions will lose weight and need to be moved out of the canyon and fed hay. Another reason for moving them out of the canyon is that by spring the locoweed is starting to come on and significant amounts of this can be harmful to horses and possibly even fatal.

The thing that makes economic sense for Westhoff is that he can buy the Longhorn cow at an attractive price. The key is to avoid a calf with a spotted hide. "All the Longhorns I still have are solid colored or Longhorns that have always given me a solid-colored calf," he said. I've found that horns are 90% gone in the first cross. I think it has worked out because the Longhorn cow can be bought for 50%, then if I can get a solid colored calf out of her, I usually get within 15% of what a Red Angus calf would bring at the auction. I saved 22 heifers this year and all of them are solid red, or red whiteface." A 3/4 South Poll that shows no Longhorn will bring what Red Angus bring, he observed.

The adaptability of South Polls is another thing Westhoff admires. "They were bred to convert grass to beef in the poor-grass country of the fescue belt and the South. I've got good grass but not much of it and they work in our environment also."

city of Escalante for the past century is 10.96 inches. Because there is so little rain, minerals have not been leached from the soil. In the desert pasture the cattle eat no mineral or salt, while on the mountain they eat no mineral, but do consume salt because they drink so much of the pure mountain water.

It is not only the large number of acres that sets Westhoff's operation apart from most other livestock producers in the country. It's also very dry there. Average annual rainfall for the

Due to the lack of moisture, things do not rot. A giant tree that stood alongside the trail leading down from the mountain pasture died more than 40 years ago and still continued to mark the trail until two years ago, when it finally fell. The dry weather also means there are no parasites. Westhoff does have dung beetles on his irrigated land and riparian areas. Most of these areas are in or near Escalante, a town of 792, where Westhoff makes his home, but there are some riparian areas on the mountain. While Escalante, which is located near Boulder Mountain, receives less than 11 inches of rain in an average year, that is still 2-4 more inches of rain than the grazing land, which is located some 50 miles southeast of the city.

Because of the huge distances involved, Westhoff does not check his cattle frequently – twice a month in the summer and every two months in the winter. Another reason for checking his herd infrequently is that it can be difficult to find the cattle because some may “hole up” in a spot where they cannot be found.

A good example occurred in November of 2010, as Westhoff was bringing his cattle off the mountain and could not find one of his favorite bulls – a large hunk of beef he refers to as “Tank.” The bull was nowhere to be found. Finally he had to give up, but was worried Tank might not survive the harsh winter on the mountain. In January of 2011 a friend flew him over the mountain and they found tracks, but did not see the bull. They concluded the bull was probably safe, at least at that time.

When April rolled around and it was possible to get up the mountain –they usually go by mule, rather than use a horse – they found old Tank and he was “sleek and his coat was shiny” and Westhoff was greatly relieved and gained even more respect for the breed.

If you want to talk to Westhoff about his cattle, he’s willing to do so. “I think what South Polls have done for my herd is nothing short of amazing and I will gladly tell people more about how great I think they are.” His home number is 435-826-4134 and his cell number is 435-632-1475. His e m a i l a d d r e s s i s H Y P E R L I N K “mailto:longhornhunts@msn.com” [longhornhunts@msn.com](mailto:longhornhunts@msn.com). If you want a tour of his 39,000 acre permit, you might also mention that, but only if you’re experienced at riding horses or mules or if you’ve got enough money to rent a helicopter.

Possibly one of the most interesting challenges of ranching in this terrain is some of the critters that have to be dealt with. We’re not talking about mountain lions or prairie dogs, but mean and ferocious wild bulls that have

roamed these mountains for many years. When Westhoff took over the first of his leases in 2000, the government mandated that he kill or capture at least 25 wild cows or bulls. The year before BLM had killed 65 head because “they were out of control and overrunning the land so bad.”

Many of the animals Westhoff killed were bulls. That first year, when he was required to remove 25, he was able to get photos of only 23 kills or captures, but convinced BLM personnel that he had shot some animals which ran off and later died and they allowed him to start grazing. There were a lot of bulls in that herd and these guys were dangerous. “Once they figured out you were killing them, they came after you,” he said.

Westhoff does not see many wild cows anymore. He hasn’t seen a wild bull in five years. Last winter he flew over the mountain and spotted 11 wild cows and calves and he and several others fought through the snow and ice to make it up the mountain and captured three cows and two calves. That was “cowboying at its best,” he said.

Cattle ranching in southern Utah has a number of advantages. When 11 inches of rain falls in a year, the grass is good and the cattle thrive. The cattle do not need to be checked frequently, simply because there is no practical way to do so. There is no fertilizer bill to pay. There is no hay to put up or buy – the cattle have to fend for themselves, both in the winter and summer. The scenery is breathtaking, as can be seen from the photos with this story.

There can, however, be one little problem. In some years 11 inches of rain do not materialize. Such was the case in 2012. As a result Westhoff may have to sell some of his 100 cows. Of all the incredible things about Westhoff’s operation, is there anything more inconceivable than the fact he might have to reduce the number of cows below 100 when he has access to 39,000 acres?

The answer to the previous question is “yes.” Because conditions in that area can be so problematic, the government has what it calls a “reserve” for the use of area ranchers who run short on grass due to drought, fire or other reasons. On Nov. 1 Westhoff started using the reserve available to him as the rancher “most in need” in that area.

The reserve is known as Horse Canyon and consists of 12,000 acres with three pastures, one of which has no water and is a so-called “snow-only” pasture. Horse Canyon is a three-day cattle drive north of Fifty Mile Mountain. As this story is written in late January, Westhoff has his cattle in the snow-only pasture and “they are doing well.” He checked them Jan. 23

and took them to a watering hole where they showed little interest in drinking. At the time the herd had been in that pasture for three weeks and no available moisture other than snow.

The only thing more inconceivable than the fact 39,000 acres might not provide enough grass for 100 cows is that 51,000 acres could be insufficient.

The low-rainfall environment of southern Utah has had a big impact on the palatability of everything Westhoff produces. Unlike parts of the Midwest and South – where 40 to 80 inches of annual rainfall has greatly depleted the minerals in the soil – users of Utah land still have access to most of the minerals that country was blessed with eons ago. Westhoff says a steak from an animal grazing the powerful grass of the West has a fabulous flavor.

“Even my garden stuff has wonderful flavor,” Westhoff added. When he goes back to Kansas to visit relatives he’ll frequently take vegetables from his garden and one of his cousins is amazed. “How do you get your vegetables to have so much flavor?” she asks.

Westhoff sells grass-fed beef in his home area, but is attempting to capitalize on the unique flavor of his beef by expanding sales into other regions. He is trying to market what he refers to as “Escalante Beef,” and is currently in discussions with Trent Hendricks of Hendricks Farms and Dairy in Telford, Penn., a suburb of Philadelphia. A check of Hendricks Farms and Dairy on Google will give readers an idea as to why Hendricks’ farm store has been so successful. Interestingly, Hendricks lives near Koshkonong, in south-central Missouri not far from the Arkansas border and has a herd of 400 Longhorn cows on which he is currently using six South Poll bulls that he recently purchased.

Hendricks, like Westhoff, is big on flavor. With their emphasis on flavor, these two – without even trying – are telling us something. If we live with more than 25 inches of rainfall per year, we have seen our soil experience leaching of minerals. A number of knowledgeable grass people say that while our topsoil in high-rainfall environments has suffered from leaching, there is still an adequate supply of minerals deep in our soil. The challenge facing us is to develop deep-rooted grasses, legumes and forbs that can access the same minerals Westhoff’s cattle enjoy.