

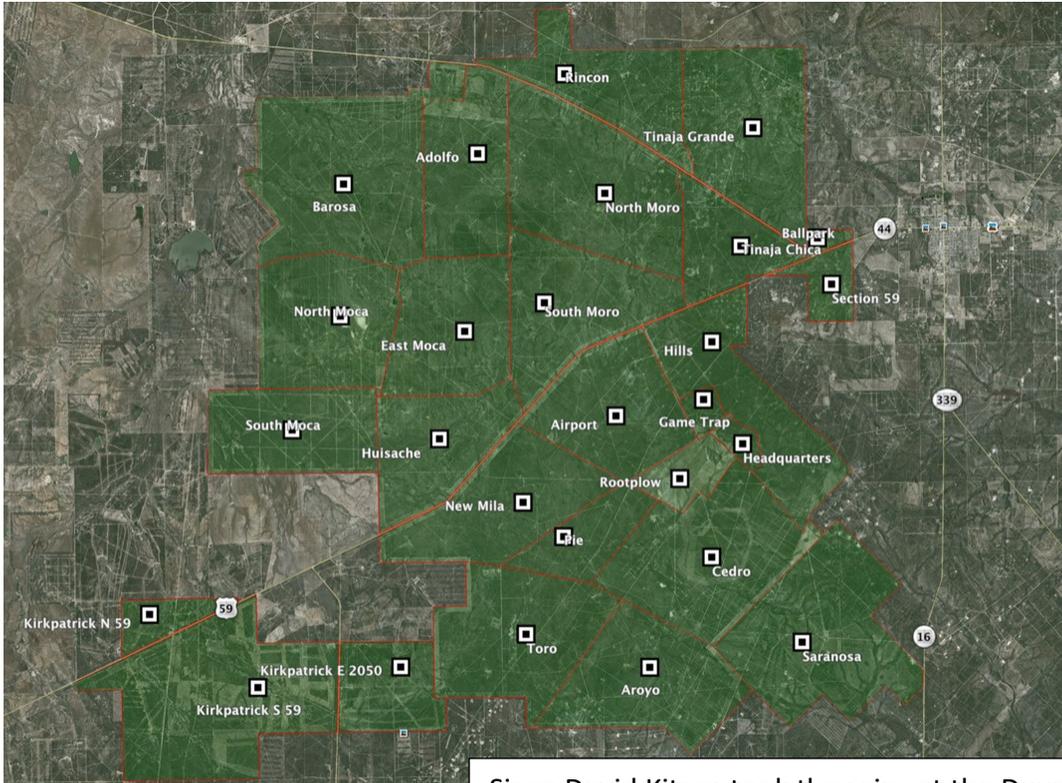
**Killam Properties Ltd Duval County Ranch**  
**Outstanding Rangeland Stewardship Award – 2018**  
**Texas Grazing Land Coalition**  
**Texas Section Society for Range Management**  
**Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association**

David Killam, owner and managing partner of Killam Properties and David Kitner, Ranch Manager for Killam Ranch Properties Ltd began a quest to heal the land and restore the productivity to the Duval County Ranch in 2001. The story of the Duval County Ranch is a story of challenges and overcoming those challenges. David Kitner knew it would be a challenge to get the land healed, but a challenge he welcomed and was grateful to have the full support of the landowner, David Killam and the Killam family.



Front gate of the Duval County Ranch, 7 miles west of Freer, Texas. In this May 2018 photo, the blooming agaves provide a spectacular and unusual backdrop in the harsh South Texas brush country. Few, if any years, see the agave bloom to this extent.





Since David Kitner took the reins at the Duval County Ranch, several smaller adjacent properties were added to the total, which is now over 125,000 contiguous acres.

### Challenges

If David Kitner was looking for an easy place to manage, he certainly would not have taken on the Duval County Ranch! While the remote location and sheer size of the ranch are challenges, they far from the only obstacles faced by the Duval County Ranch. Available labor is scarce and must be utilized efficiently. Mr. Kitner openly states that if a prospective employee is not comfortable having a thousand head of cattle in his care, then he has no place at the Duval County Ranch. Often David and his wife Diane are the only available labor! A good cow dog goes a long way at times to help out!

The South Texas climate is a challenge as well. With 21 inches of “average” annual precipitation and drought a frequent occurrence, it becomes of paramount importance to retain as much precipitation as possible as available moisture for plant growth. 21 inches

annually seems like a lot compared to some areas of the semi-arid west, but the growing season of the ranch is 297 days, with average date of first freeze being December 8 and last freeze date of February 13. While a long growing season may seem like an advantage, it also means the precipitation must serve the plant community needs much longer than in many areas. Summer temperatures average in the high nineties. Mr. Kitner is keenly aware of soil surface temperatures and the vast difference between bare ground and soils with plant cover.

The condition of the ranch in 2001 was not fit to be featured on the cover of any magazine nor considered “award worthy!” The ranch was overgrazed and over hunted as was typical of much of south Texas when David Kitner took over the management. The result was a robust South Texas style brush canopy. A brush canopy that prevented any herbaceous vegetation from growing and made a livestock operation particularly difficult to manage. His commitment to addressing these challenges and “healing the land” was a daunting challenge.



The ranch in 2001 when David Kitner took the reins of the management was characterized by extremely low forage production, lots of bare ground, and seemed like it was destined to be such. He told David Killam that if he was satisfied with these conditions, then he could not work for him. Together they committed to “healing the land.”

## Brush Management

The first step in the long process to heal the land was opening up the brush canopy to allow herbaceous vegetation to grow. The most efficient method was aerial spraying of herbicides.



One of the early aerially applied herbicide treatments.



The first signs of forage appear on a formerly totally brush dominated landscape.

With mixed species of brush, no single treatment is 100% effective at killing the brush, allowing some to remain for wildlife cover. It was the first step in getting some forage on the ground.

Brush management continues today and involves prescribed fire and mechanical treatments in addition to the aerial spraying. In South Texas, brush “management” is an ongoing and continual practice, not a one-time fix.

### Grazing Management



This drone photo shows a cattle move on the ranch. One man, a pickup with a supplemental feeder and a horn will bring the cattle out of the brush and take them to a new pasture.

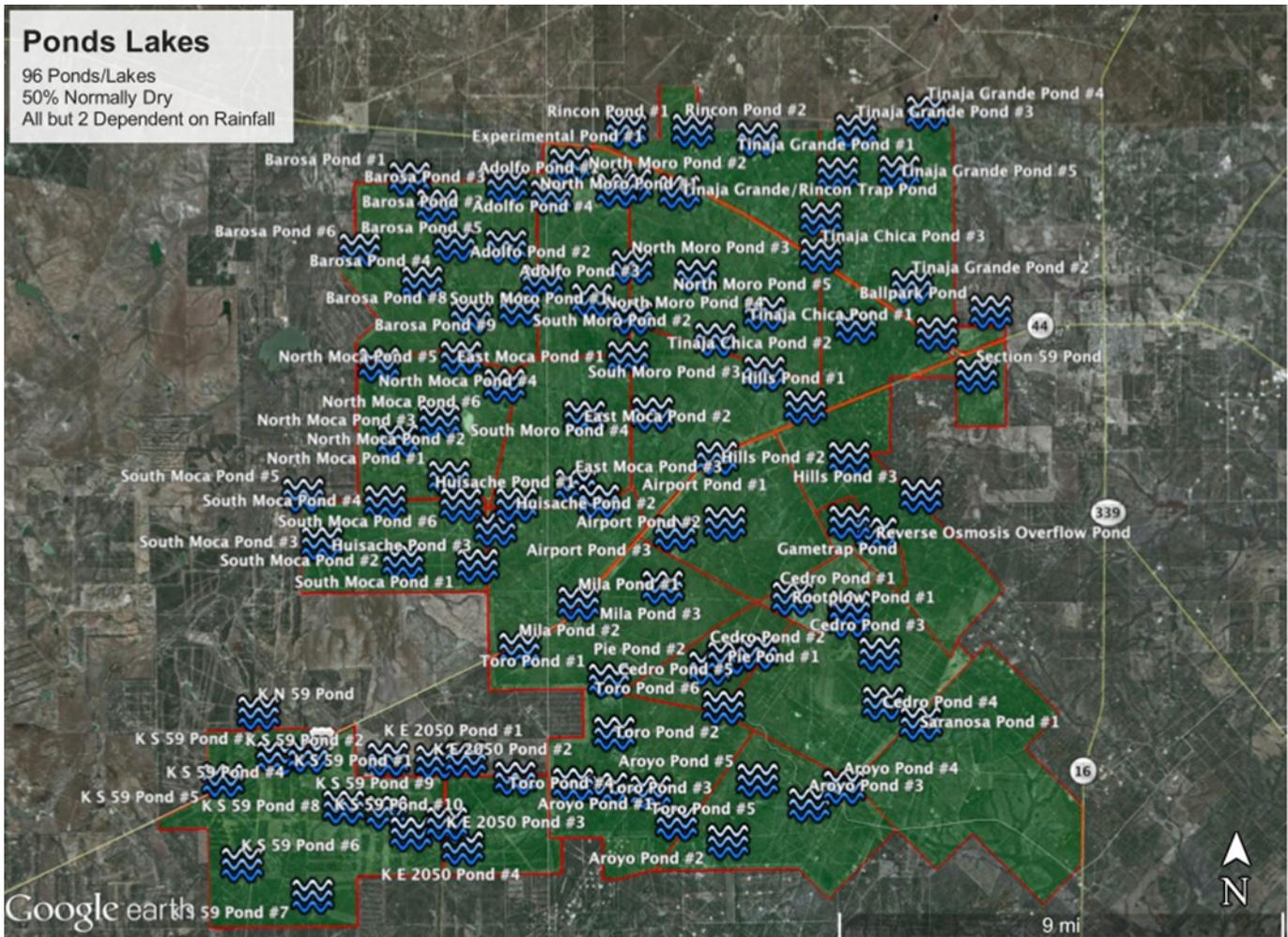
Perhaps most surprising to many people is the rotational grazing that Mr. Kitner has utilized to improve the rangeland. The two most common arguments offered in opposition to rotational grazing are the following: “My pastures are too large” and “My ranch does not receive enough precipitation for that to work.” Both of which have been soundly disproven on the Duval

County Ranch. Pastures are mostly 6-8,000 acres. The cattle are 'trained' to come to the feed truck and one man can move the herd, even in the dense brushy areas alone.

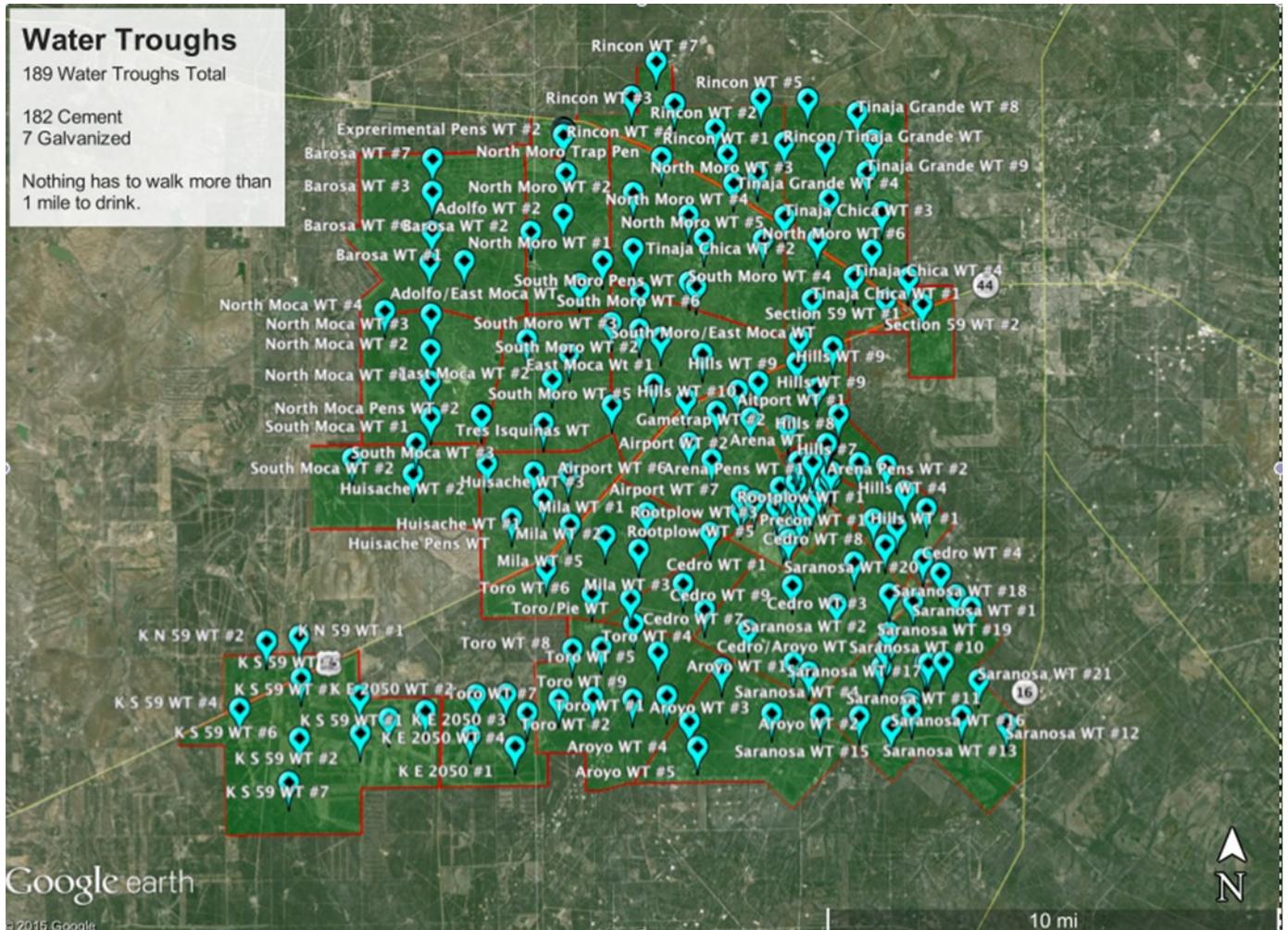
Rotational grazing, providing adequate rest to pastures, has been the foundation of Mr. Kitner's plans to improve the quality of the rangeland. And it has worked. Where there was virtually no herbaceous forage on the soil surface beneath the brush, there is adequate, thriving vegetation. Use of stocker cattle allows flexibility.....when it gets dry, David Kitner is among the first to "put wheels under the cattle" and get them off the rangeland.

Rotational grazing requires infrastructure improvements including water, stout fences and a thoughtful plan. Kitner's plan had yet another challenge to overcome: three highways divide the ranch.....making cattle rotation difficult.

Adequate water development was necessary to facilitate Kitner's plans for rotational grazing. When he began at the Duval County Ranch, the ranch depended largely upon surface water, a notoriously unreliable water source in most years. The ranch had 96 ponds and lakes. All but two depended upon rainfall for their water supply. Most years saw 50% or more of them completely dry.



The ranch embarked on an ambitious program of pipelines to provide reliable water sources, both for wildlife and livestock. Miles of poly pipe were laid and water tanks (recycled from oil field use) were positioned on high ground to gravity feed nearly 200 troughs. Amazingly, on a ranch of this size, livestock do not have to travel more than a mile to reach water.



How to supply water to this many troughs? Nearly 650,000 gallons of storage tanks positioned on high ground at 19 locations on the ranch feed the troughs. The water system boasts hydrants utilized for filling large tanks utilized for wildfires or prescribed fires, nurse tanks and emergency needs and a system of valves throughout to facilitate movement of the water.

## Stockmanship

Perhaps David Kitner's most valuable talent is his stockmanship. Without his phenomenal understanding of the grazing livestock, the Duval County Ranch might have never have approached its potential and healed from years of misuse, even with the brush control, grazing rotation and incredible water system. Mr. Kitner is a true stockman at heart and expects the same from everyone who handles cattle at the ranch. He is keenly aware of keeping stress levels as low as possible and "trains" the cattle to respond to the feed truck.

It begins when the cattle arrive at the ranch. A set of smaller pens, or traps if you will, 276 acres total, are situated in a central area, complete with doctoring facilities. It is here the cattle begin to learn that the pickup with the cake feeder means good things are coming, and they will be led to better, fresh grazing.



The traps where the "cake breaking" begins. The cattle quickly learn to come to the truck.



Patient, low stress, frequent interactions with newly arrived cattle are the daily practices at the Duval County Ranch.



A cattle move from one large pasture to the next.

The stockmanship practices result in more productivity with less labor, reduced costs and facilitate the grazing rotation with relative ease. Expensive helicopters and cowboys with ropes simply are not necessary and do not fit the Duval County Ranch way of doing things.

### **Wildlife Management/Hunting**

David Killam and David Kitner are as passionate about the wildlife as they are the livestock. The Duval County Ranch is a premier destination for trophy whitetail hunters. Yet, Mr. Kitner strives to keep costs to the hunters reasonable and actively encourages families to hunt, hoping to spark that conservation interest even in the youngest of hunters. He loves to see youngsters hunting. He has strict management guidelines and maintains correct buck to doe ratios, age structure, and densities of whitetail deer. This management program is designed to produce mature outstanding whitetail trophies. Though white tail deer are the main attraction at the DCR, an abundance of wildlife also includes quail, hog, dove, and javelina.



One of many trophy bucks that call the Duval County Ranch home.

### **Beyond Livestock and Wildlife.....**

The Duval County Ranch has hosted several workshops on habitat and water improvements, cooperated in research, and hosted field days for college students. The ranch has provided hunting opportunities for youth through the Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD) and Texas Wildlife Association and also hosted hunts for the Wounded Warriors program. The ranch has also hosted the German Shorthair Pointer Club Region 7 championships as well as the San Antonio GSPC and the Houston or Gulf Coast GSPC field trials. In 2012, the ranch received the Lone Star Land Steward award for the South Texas Eco-region, from TPWD. The ranch, through the cooperation of County Commissioner Gilbert Uribe, has also been able to donate thousands of pounds of deer meat to the needy and elderly of Duval County each year.

David Kitner welcomes the TXGLC NRCS training annually. He mentors college students, new NRCS employees, and anyone with an interest in South Texas ranching, conservation, rotational grazing, etc. He is active on the Texas Grazing Land Coalition state board and chairs the South Texas GLC regional coalition. He has a work ethic next to no other and is honest and forthright, sometimes to a fault. He is key to Killam Properties ranching operations, overseeing ranches in several states, including Kansas, Nebraska and Montana in addition to several properties in Texas. He has spoken on ranch operations to the 6<sup>th</sup> National Grazing Conference and plans to do so again at the 7<sup>th</sup> National Grazing Conference in December 2018. He is inspirational, personable and loves sharing his experiences and his love of fishing, too! He embodies the “art and science” of range management like few others!

David Kitner embraced the challenges of the Duval County Ranch and overcame many of them, but he says it wouldn't have been possible without the cooperation and support of the owners, David Killam and the Killam Family. “It is a real pleasure working for a family that is very conservation minded and who supports and appreciates the ranching heritage of South Texas.”



South Texas can be very productive rangeland with proper management!