

OUR INAUGURAL ISSUE!

*Land Stewardship
Farmstead Recipes
Wildlife Conservation
Gardening Tips*

Blue Ridge Farmer

Volume 1: 2020-2021



Spring Thunder rolls through the pasture



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Letter from the Farmers

How do you encapsulate the contents of an entire year - particularly one as crazy as 2020/2021 - into a few dozen pages? How do you fully describe the start of new adventures, the passing of an old life in exchange for the salutations of a new one? As with most things, the ending of one chapter and the beginning of another is never a smooth trip. The wild ride of the last year has been no exception, though, as with most dreams, it's always worth it.

We came into farming more than a decade ago, when we purchased a neglected bit of property in rural Southern Oregon. We spent that time working hard to shape the land into a dream, not fully realizing that instead we had shaped ourselves in preparation for a different dream. There was never a day when we woke up and said, "Oh! This is goal we want to achieve." Instead, it was a gradual formation of an idea that slowly grew over the years into a beacon of yearning. When we finally found what we had been searching for, the chapter change was quick. It's ironic to spend almost half your life wishing and working so hard for something, and then to be completely unprepared for when it actually happens.

Blue Ridge Farm is a culmination of years of hard work, a life passion, a desire to educate others and to leave the land better than we found it. As such, the tapestry of the farm is woven with the threads of two main tenets: sustainable farming and maintaining a balanced natural ecosystem. Our goals are to live off the land while allowing the native plants and wildlife to thrive. We want to show people that you can raise crops without destroying the health of the landscape, and hunt for your food without decimating the natural flora and fauna. This inaugural issue of *Blue Ridge Farmer* is our first step in sharing our knowledge, goals, and journey with others. We hope it delights you and provides inspiration to achieve your own dreams. Trust us, it's worth it.

- Ryan & Jillian Garrett





*This Page: Ryan Garrett, wearing a utilikilt, hunts for ruffed grouse in the western pasture
Opposite Page: Jillian Garrett models a Jillian Originals Millinery custom wild turkey fedora*

Blue Ridge Farm



Spread: Rustic barbed wire fencing from the days when cattle used to roam here
Inset: The old barn



Blue Ridge Farm is located just outside of Colville, Washington, on 81 rolling acres of farmland and timber. The farm is named for the beautiful mountain peak to the west. Formerly a cattle ranch, it now focuses on the sustainable production of heirloom and open-pollinated fruits, vegetables, and herbs. The owners, Ryan & Jillian Garrett, do not use pesticides or chemical fertilizers, instead utilizing good land stewardship practices to maintain the health of the soil and the wild flora and fauna of the landscape.



Our Philosophy of Land Stewardship



Land stewardship is a complex tapestry consisting of many interwoven threads. In our case, the concept comprises of two main foundations: practicing sustainable farming and maintaining a balanced ecosystem.

On our farmstead, we raise a multitude of different crops, as well as a small variety of livestock whose manure we compost and put back into the soil. We never use pesticides or chemical fertilizers, instead utilizing more traditional farming methods to maintain the health of our soil:

- Practicing a low-till method of farming to help prevent soil erosion
- Planting green cover crops that put nutrients back into the land and provide habitat for wildlife.
- Rotating our crops to help reduce garden pests.
- Companion planting to increase the health of our plants and encourage beneficial predatory insects and pollinators.
- Using poultry as natural pest control for our livestock; our chickens in particular act as miniature tractors, eating bugs and helping to spread the manure so that it doesn't burn the field grasses.

To further decrease our impact on the land and help eliminate our carbon footprint, we will be exploring conversion to solar power over the coming years.

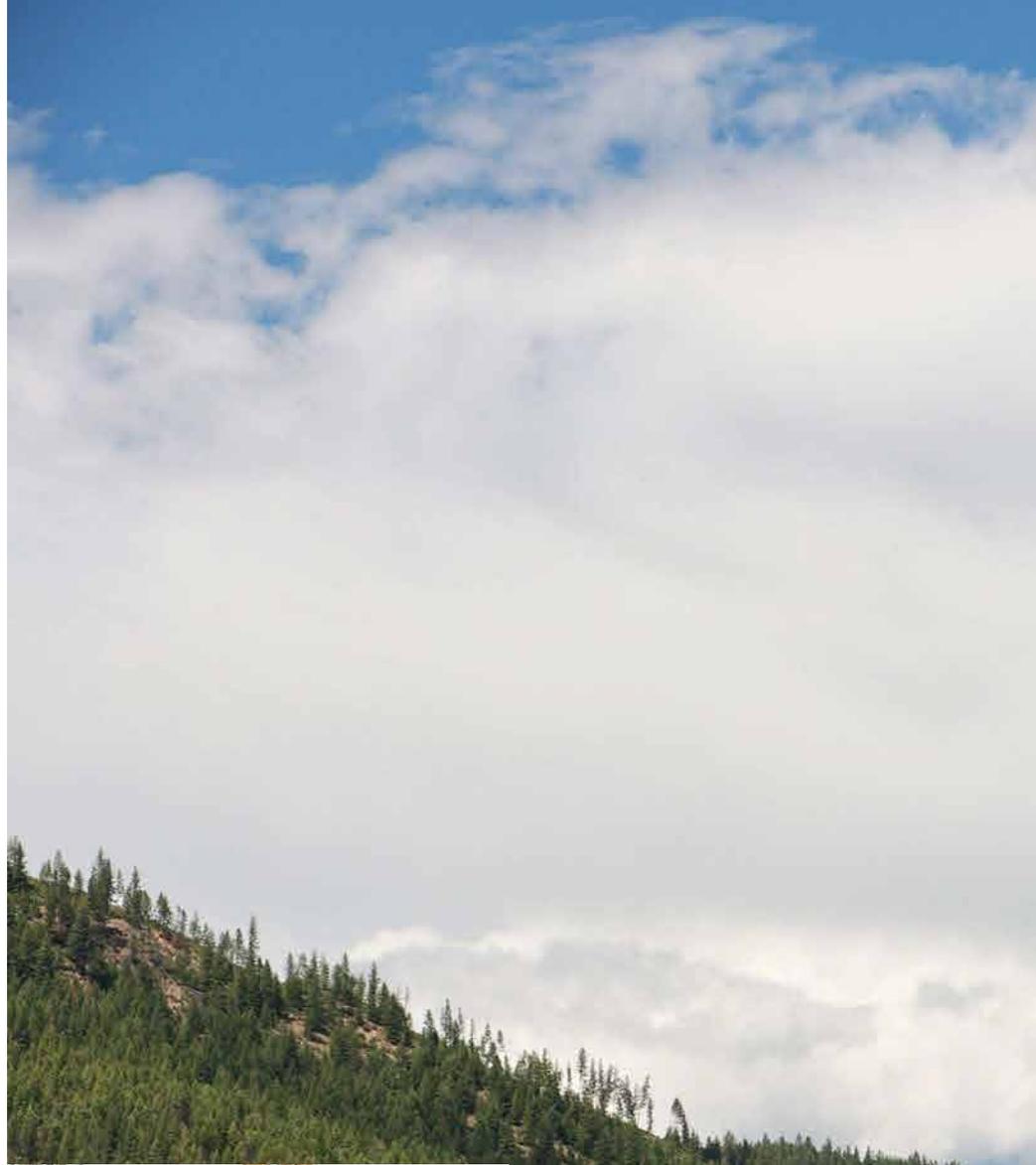
In order to prosper, a balanced farmstead also requires a balanced ecosystem. To this end, we encourage the presence of natural predators to help reduce garden pests: for example, working to create good owl habitat to help control gophers. We preserve and maintain the numerous riparian areas running through our property and have set aside roughly one third of our land as a wildlife sanctuary – essentially, a minimally-maintained area where the wild things can continue to live freely. In some of these areas we have planted food plots that are beneficial fodder for deer, turkeys, and other small game. We want to not only encourage the health of the natural landscape, but to act as a safe haven for game animals to live and raise their young.

Farming is a balance, and maintaining that balance is a lifelong pursuit.

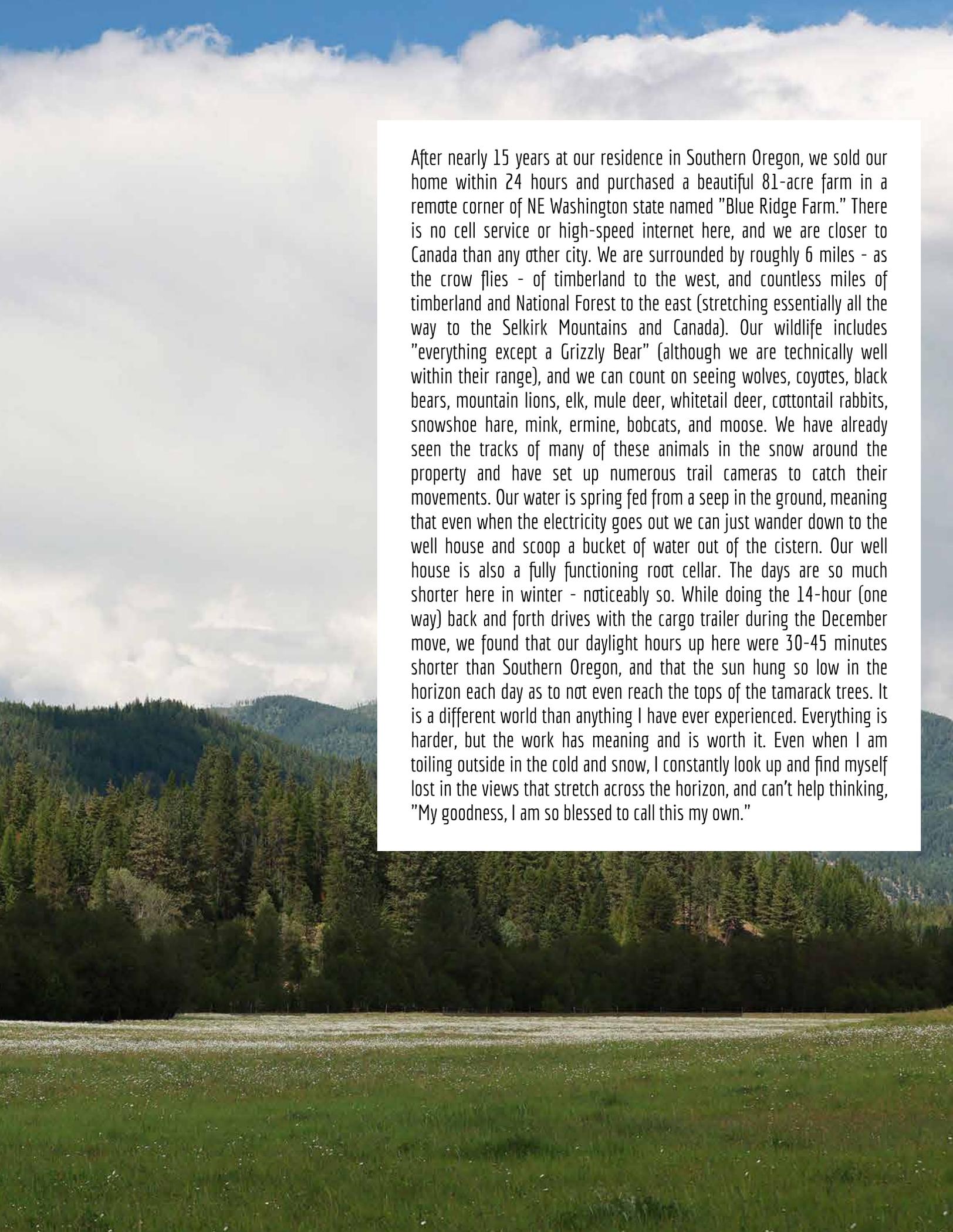
Chronicles of Moving:

The Adventure Begins

By Jillian Garrett



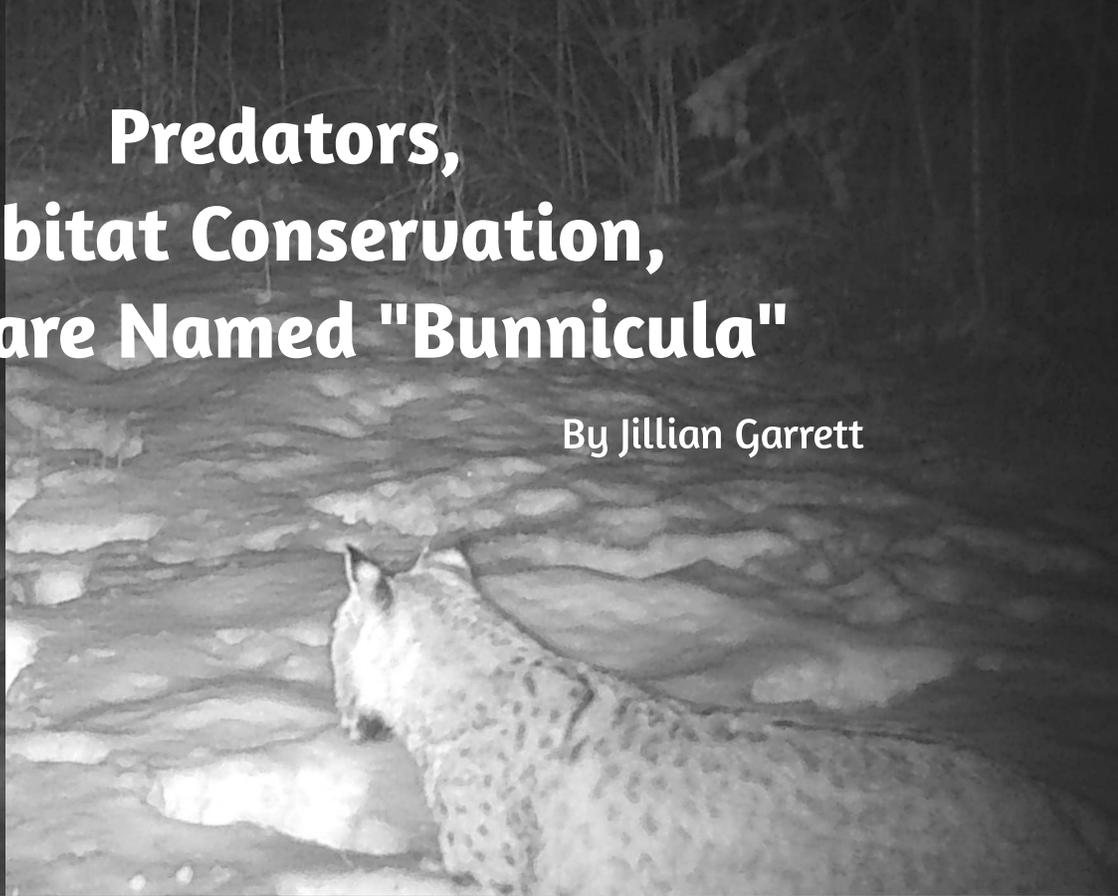
Spread: Storm clouds over
the northern pastures
Inset: Realtor Lea Ryan
hands over the new house
keys during COVID
precautions
Photo courtesy Lea Ryan



After nearly 15 years at our residence in Southern Oregon, we sold our home within 24 hours and purchased a beautiful 81-acre farm in a remote corner of NE Washington state named "Blue Ridge Farm." There is no cell service or high-speed internet here, and we are closer to Canada than any other city. We are surrounded by roughly 6 miles - as the crow flies - of timberland to the west, and countless miles of timberland and National Forest to the east (stretching essentially all the way to the Selkirk Mountains and Canada). Our wildlife includes "everything except a Grizzly Bear" (although we are technically well within their range), and we can count on seeing wolves, coyotes, black bears, mountain lions, elk, mule deer, whitetail deer, cottontail rabbits, snowshoe hare, mink, ermine, bobcats, and moose. We have already seen the tracks of many of these animals in the snow around the property and have set up numerous trail cameras to catch their movements. Our water is spring fed from a seep in the ground, meaning that even when the electricity goes out we can just wander down to the well house and scoop a bucket of water out of the cistern. Our well house is also a fully functioning root cellar. The days are so much shorter here in winter - noticeably so. While doing the 14-hour (one way) back and forth drives with the cargo trailer during the December move, we found that our daylight hours up here were 30-45 minutes shorter than Southern Oregon, and that the sun hung so low in the horizon each day as to not even reach the tops of the tamarack trees. It is a different world than anything I have ever experienced. Everything is harder, but the work has meaning and is worth it. Even when I am toiling outside in the cold and snow, I constantly look up and find myself lost in the views that stretch across the horizon, and can't help thinking, "My goodness, I am so blessed to call this my own."

Predators, Habitat Conservation, & a Hare Named "Bunnicula"

By Jillian Garrett



*This Page, Top Images: A snowshoe hare and bobcat caught on the trail camera, Bottom Image: Wild mallard feathers
Opposite Page, Top Image: Bobcat in the grass, Bottom Left Image: Black bear sow and cub (not shown), Bottom Right Image: Mountain Lion*



I will be the first to admit that I am happiest in the outdoors.

My idea of heaven is a wooded mountainside in the middle of nowhere and a deer trail that runs on forever (maybe a few turkeys gobbling over the ridgeline). My husband and I have been avid backpackers for years, hiking long miles in the hopes of getting away from the world and seeing what nature really has to offer. We eventually combined our passion for the outdoors with our desire to live off the land, and our quest for self-sufficiency led us to many a rugged landscape far away from the comforts of civilization. Instead of hiking manicured trails, we opted for following game trails (knowing that the animals always chose the path of least resistance). We used our eyes and ears to observe the world around us, learning to identify sign and track wildlife. One of our favorite backcountry hiking areas was a large section of BLM land not too far away from our house, though in terms of ruggedness and isolation it may as well have been a world apart. It supported an enormous variety of wildlife contained within a multitude of ecosystems, from hot and dry manzanita hellholes to steeply timbered mountainsides to verdant meadows frequented by elk. It was a paradise. The best section of all was an abandoned logging road we nicknamed "Predator Alley" due to its high population of mountain lions and black bears.

It was not uncommon to be followed by a large cat or walk right past a 350+ lb. black bear drinking from the creek. Walking this stretch of old logging road was always a mixed emotional bag for me: on the one hand, I was completely on edge and terrified, and on the other hand, I was absolutely exhilarated. What I came to appreciate about Predator Alley was that it made me engage in the natural world on a level I had never previously been able to achieve. My senses became alive, and I was alert in a manner that I had not experienced before. Each time I walked that road, I learned to coexist in a place where I was no longer the top predator. Suddenly, "bear" was not a theoretical concept. Bear - BEARS- were a fact of life, and pretty much a given in any morning or evening ambles. Hiking there made me realize that I loved being in a land with a healthy predator population. I specifically remember one incident in that area: in the late afternoon on an overcast day, my husband and I were sitting on the tailgate of our truck, legs dangling, drinking a beer and listening to the bears come ambling up the creek bed past the vehicle. Due to the ravine, you couldn't see them, but there was no doubting their presence. It was experiences such as this that made me vow to always live in a place where the wild things roamed freely.



Moving forward (or in our case, northward), one of the aspects that most impressed us about Northeastern Washington was the abundance of wild game, particularly on this property. There is a robust and varied ecosystem here, healthy enough to support a large population of predators. While moving in the middle of winter may have presented a logistical nightmare, it was a hidden gift from the standpoint of recording the activity of the local wildlife in the snow. It allowed us to accurately catalog the types of animals present (at least in winter), as well as hone our tracking skills. Trail cameras also helped us track the movements of animals throughout our 81 acres (including one snowshoe hare I jokingly nicknamed “Bunnacula” after the beloved children’s book regarding a vampire rabbit). Though the absence of bear tracks could easily be explained by their annual winter hibernation, the lack of mountain lion tracks could be attributed to the presence of wolves. Wolves and mountain lions have an antagonistic relationship, and the big cats will often try to avoid areas where wolves are frequently present. Meanwhile, the plethora of large bobcat tracks indicated a healthy cottontail and snowshoe hare population (excellent news for us small game hunters). The frequent visits of coyotes (including one 60 lb. monster) showed that the area does not lack for prey of all sizes.

Image Below: Whitetail does and their fawns caught on our trail camera. The eastern side of our property provides an important nursery habitat where does often leave their fawns while they graze during the day.

Here at Blue Ridge Farm, we try and take a holistic approach to predators. Though sadly no stranger to livestock loss, we understand that predators come part and parcel with the landscape, and their presence helps maintain a healthy ecosystem (provided they are intelligently managed along with the other game animals). Amongst other things, predators keep the “garden pests” at bay, and while we encourage their presence here, we do so in a prudent and cautionary way - doing whatever possible to mitigate the potential for livestock-predator conflict. For us, that means secure fencing and liberal use of hot wire for our livestock (as well as bringing them inside predator-proof shelters at night), and never having livestock pastures be adjacent to areas of heavy cover (thus avoiding the ability of predators to ambush).

Our goal is to encourage wildlife on the periphery of the property, and to that end we have created wildlife corridors in the hopes that a healthy population of prey animals on the outskirts of the property will keep predators occupied there and not straying into the heart of the farm. Food plots planted along the property boundary create both travel corridors and fodder for deer, turkey, and small game, as well as a place to raise their young. Brush piles create habitat for cottontail rabbits, which in turn become food for everything from bald eagles to coyotes. The presence of these predators also helps control the rodent pests that would otherwise plague the garden. Our goal on the farm is to uphold the delicate balance between preservation of natural habitat and sustainable agriculture.





Wild turkey hen with a clutch of poults

The most important lesson we ever learned from this property was taught to us by a duck. More specifically, a flock of four wild mallards who came to call one small creek bed home. The main water source for our property comes from a spring, which fills a cistern in the wellhouse and then overflows outside to become a small creek that runs past our old barn and out into the far pasture. It's a trickle of a flow, just enough to grow a bit of water cress and assorted greens. However, the most important part about this little creek is the fact that it continues to flow even on the coldest winter days. When everything else is frozen, there is food and water here, and the local waterfowl have learned it. It is humorously surprising to walk outside the house and see duck heads bobbing up and down in this little trickle of a water source, or to be walking past it and flush the resident snipe into a broad-winged aerial display of displeasure. This small section of habitat has taught us how vital it is to preserve the land, and not diminish it through development or overgrazing. We provide winter habitat for the ducks, and the ducks in turn provide us with a bit of sustainably-harvested meat. Farming is always a balance, and maintaining that balance is a lifelong pursuit.





Ryan Garrett harvests wild mallards near the spring-fed creek

Farmstead Energy Bars

"Hanger" (a combination of hunger and hunger-related anger) is always a very real possibility on the farm, where the work is hard and the hours are long. We are always searching for high-energy foods that keep well and are easy to grab as you go from one task to the next. I have been experimenting with different energy bar recipes over the last few months, and have finally come up with a version that works beautifully and tastes great. It is an adaption from a recipe out of one of my beloved vintage cookbooks, and utilizes dried fruits and nuts from the orchard. I encourage you to experiment and try different types and combinations of fruits and nuts to see what you like best.

INGREDIENTS

1/2 tsp baking powder
1 & 1/2 cups flour
1 cup brown sugar
1 cup white sugar
1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips
1 cup chopped walnuts
1 cup flaked coconut (unsweetened)
1 cup seedless red raisins
4 eggs, beaten

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F.
Combine the dry ingredients in a large mixing bowl. Whip in the eggs, and mix thoroughly. Line a baking sheet with an equally-sized silicon baking mat. Pour the batter over the silicon mat and spread evenly. Bake in the oven for 30-40 minutes, or until golden brown and cooked through. Remove the tray from the oven, and allow it to cool enough to safely handle. While still warm, overturn onto a large cutting board and remove the baking tray and silicon baking mat. Cut the mixture into bars and allow to cool thoroughly before storing in a sealed container. These energy bars will keep for about a week.



Salsa Verde with Green Tomatoes

The end of the growing season often brings with it a bountiful supply of green tomatoes. Over the years, I have come up with many different recipes to help preserve this surplus, everything from mock mince meat pie filling to pickles. This year, I created a version of salsa verde that utilizes green tomatoes in place of the usual tomatillos, as well as unripe green peppers. The addition of vinegar allows you to preserve this for enjoyment all winter long and creates a flavor that is a delicious marriage between a relish and a classic salsa. Charring the tomatoes and peppers beforehand adds a pleasing depth of flavor into the mix.

INGREDIENTS

5 lbs. green tomatoes

2 lbs. green peppers (I used a mix of unripe paprika and chimayo peppers)

1 lb. onions

1 cup vinegar

3 tsp salt

DIRECTIONS

Slice the tomatoes in half and cut the stem tops off of the peppers. Place the peppers and tomato halves (cut side down) on a baking tray and use the oven broiler to slightly blacken them. Remove the trays from the oven and allow to cool. Coarsely chop all of the vegetables, and place them in a large stockpot with the salt and vinegar. Bring everything to a gentle simmer and cook for about 15 minutes. Pack into sanitized quart jars, leaving roughly $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of headspace. Process in a boiling water bath for 20 minutes.

"Waste-Not" Dumplings with Wild Turkey



This recipe is a riff on the classic chicken and dumplings dish that graces nearly every vintage cookbook. I traditionally make this with squirrel meat, but it also lends itself very well to wild turkey. In our house, we believe in utilizing as much of every animal as possible, and this recipe is a great way to use up a large portion of meat that otherwise tends to be wasted. Each time we harvest a wild turkey, we use the carcass (by that I mean the back, neck, and pelvis) to make stock. After draining off the liquid, there is a ton of usable meat leftover on the carcass that can easily be picked free from the bones and shredded. We make this recipe very vegetable-heavy with whatever happens to be in season. One of the best parts about this dish is the level of variation, allowing you to utilize whatever vegetables may be on hand at the time. The important part is to make sure that you have aromatics (such as the celery), but otherwise you can adjust the vegetables, herbs, and acidity to suit your taste. If you can't find Chinese celery, you can substitute true celery, but the flavor won't be quite as complex.



INGREDIENTS

For the Stew

4 quarts blonde game stock (preferably wild turkey)
1 cup wild turkey meat, cooked & shredded
2 large onions, thinly sliced
2 shallots, thinly sliced
4 fresh sage leaves, minced
3 or 4 fresh sprigs of thyme, minced
2 or 3 fresh sprigs of oregano, minced
1 cup carrots, cubed
1 cup fresh or frozen peas
3 chimayo peppers, minced
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 cup pink chinese celery, diced
1 cup kale, sliced into thin ribbons
1/2 cup parsley, minced
A splash of red wine vinegar or lime juice
A healthy pinch of dried chili negro & cayenne powder
High-quality unsalted butter

For the Dumplings

1/4 cup fresh chives, minced
2 cups flour, plus some for tossing the meat
8 tsp baking powder
1 cup whole milk
3 tbsps unsalted butter

DIRECTIONS

I recommend prepping all of your ingredients ahead of time, as there is a fair amount of knife work that goes into this recipe and once you get started it can be a real headache to stop. You can combine several of your ingredients into bowls that you can then dump into the pot at the designated time. I combine my onions, shallots, sage, thyme, and oregano into one bowl; my garlic and chili peppers into another; the carrots, peas, and celery into a third bowl; with the kale and parsley rounding out the last bowl. **DO NOT** mix the milk into your dumplings until they are ready to go into the pot or they won't turn out fluffy. However, you can pre-mix the butter and the dry goods if you want.

Start by tossing the shredded turkey with a bit of flour and frying it in butter inside of a hot, heavy-lidded pot or Dutch oven. When the meat gets a bit of a crisp, remove it from the pot and set it aside for later. Lower the stovetop temperature to medium and add more butter (roughly a few tablespoons-worth), as well as the onions, shallots, sage, thyme, and oregano. Cook this until the onions turn translucent (about 8 minutes). Add the garlic & peppers and sauté for another minute. Stir in the carrots, peas, and celery, and cook for another two minutes. Finally, add the parsley, kale, and a small splash of stock. When the kale just begins to wilt, go ahead and add the rest of the stock liquid.

While this comes up to a simmer, you can work on the dough for the dumplings: Mix the chives, flour, and baking powder well and cut in the butter with a fork or pastry knife (it helps if the butter is cold when you do this). You want the butter to be the size of small pebbles. When the stew has come to a simmer, it's time to add the milk to the dumpling batter. Be sparing - the trick is to only add enough milk to just barely get the dough to combine. Don't over mix; lumpy is better.

Add the crisped turkey meat into the simmering stew, as well as a splash of red wine vinegar. Carefully set egg-sized dollops of the dumpling dough into the stew. Cover the pot and allow it to gently simmer for 15 minutes. Remove from heat and serve warm for a delicious comfort meal.

A scenic view of a forest with a wooden cabin in the background. The foreground is a lush green field with small white flowers. The middle ground is filled with tall, thin evergreen trees. In the background, a wooden cabin with a white roof is visible through the trees.

Spring is Here & So Are the Moose!

By Jillian Garrett



It has been a treasure to watch the land wake up with spring.

Though a mere 21 miles away, in the small town of Colville winter is already a vague memory and the farmers have begun tilling their fields in preparation for planting. Here in the “frozen north” (as we jokingly refer to it), the snow still holds the earth in its grasp, though it loses a little more ground each day.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the northern portion of our property is the first to reappear from winter’s white cover. You can actually watch the line advance ever so slowly southward, as each day melts a little more snow to reveal the brown grass of last year’s harvested hay crop underneath. The house and garden plot will be the last areas to thaw, and each day I stare longingly out the window and yearn for spring planting time.

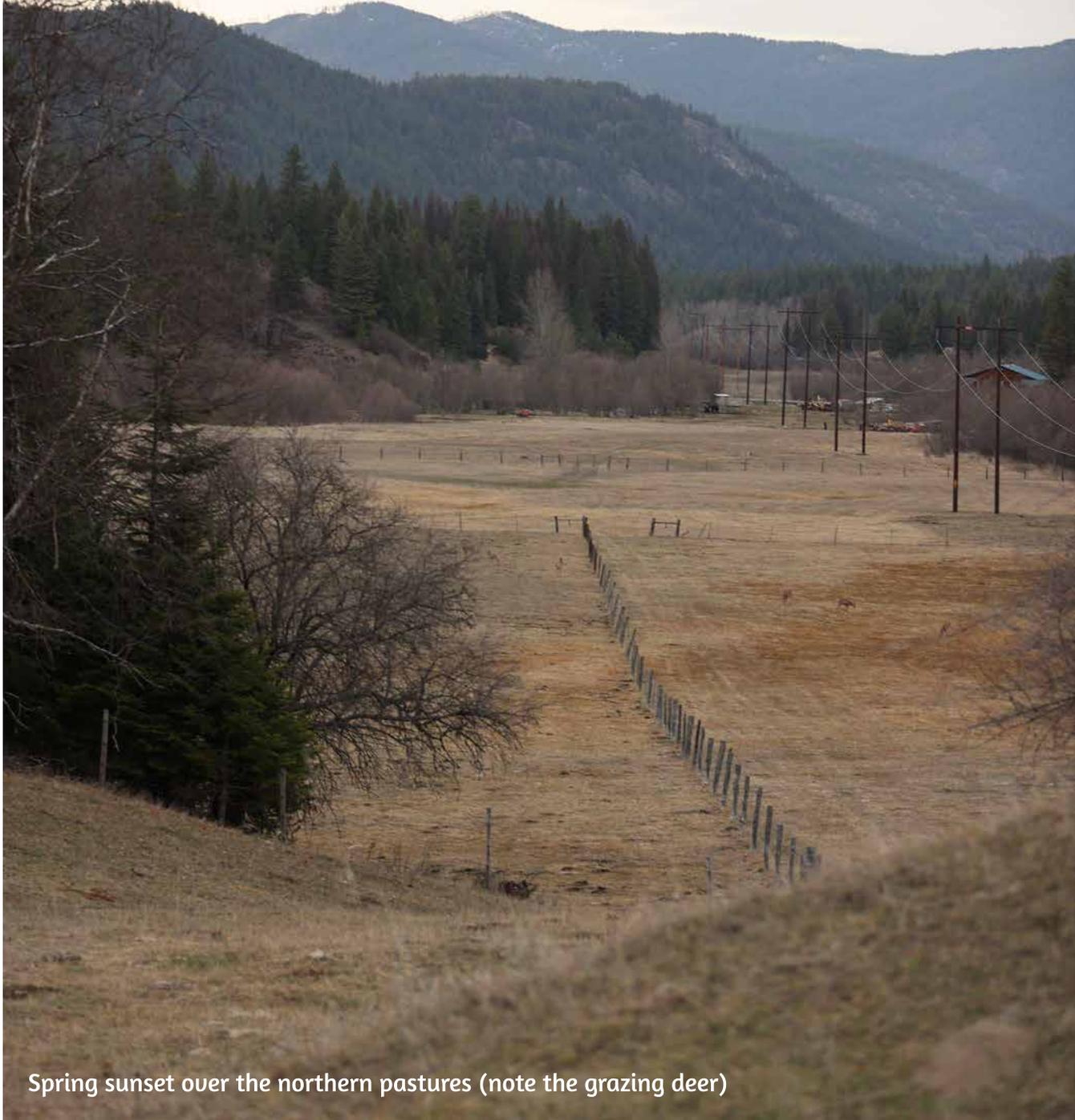
As the landscape wakes up, so too do the animals. The deer are congregating in ever greater numbers (as I write this a line of whitetail does is prancing past my mailbox), and we are seeing new animals coming to visit. This past week, we discovered our first set of nocturnal moose visitors – huge tracks in the snow with dew claws proudly showing and an impressively elongated gate. Walking on the southwest corner of our property, we found the signs of their midnight feasting: Seven-foot-tall shrub tops grazed as though they had been attacked by a dull set of pruning shears. It really puts into perspective just what enormous animals moose are...

Ever since the arrival of the spring chinook wind a couple of weeks ago, we have been avidly watching for signs of bear. As the weather warms and the grasses begin to green up, the bears slowly start waking up. First the smaller ones (who didn’t get as fat the previous fall), and finally the true giants of the forest awaken. In the beginning, they mostly subsist on grubs – shredding trees and old stumps in search of a tasty morsel – as well as carrion and grasses. The first inkling that something was awake came last week, when we took an off-trail detour on the wilder eastern section of our property. A large rock had been overturned by an early riser looking for grubs. It was just a little indication, easily overlooked by others less observant, but it caught our attention like a neon sign in the forest. About a week later, we were walking the western property line and a *very*-recently torn-up tree trunk caught our attention. Nothing but a bear could inflict that kind of damage! Further walking revealed melted-out bear tracks in the snow, and newly formed bear-sized tunnels of vegetation through the understory of trees. Peering more closely at the barbed wire fencing revealed tufts of bear fur caught in the barbs. The landscape tells a story if you are willing to listen...

Bottom Image: Wildflowers in the field

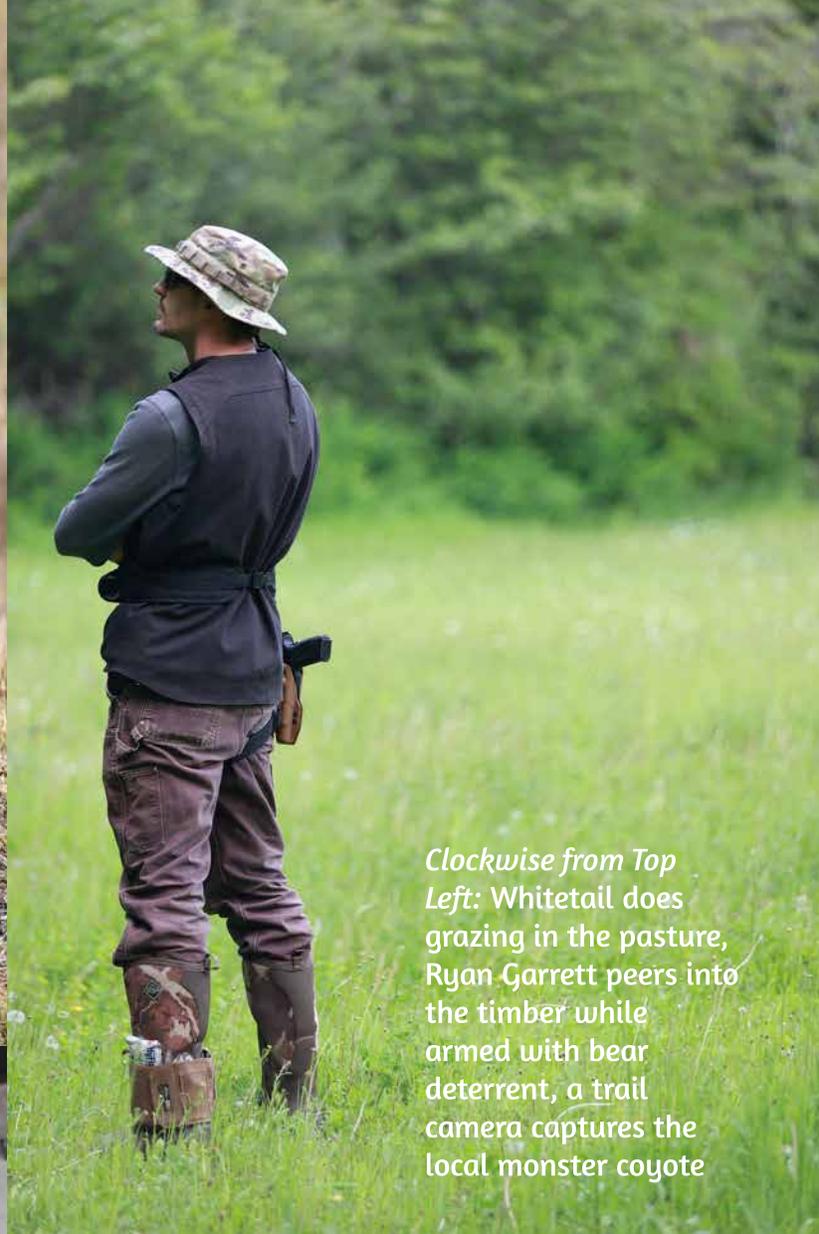
Opposite Page: The barn overlooks the southwestern pasture, Inset: Moose droppings in the field (muck boot for scale)





Spring sunset over the northern pastures (note the grazing deer)

The walk back to the house exposed the local 60-lb. monster coyote and his much smaller mate loping across the northern pasture, perfectly camouflaged except for the attention of their movement. Jumping over the small creek (a tributary to the trout-bearing Deep Creek that runs along the northern border of our land), I looked down to see that the snowmelt had exposed old bear scat from the previous fall, when the little bruin had feasted on ripe berries along the creek bed. A few steps further flushed a grouse from the water's edge, where it had been sheltering next to an old stump. One of the many reasons we fell in love with this property was its plentiful amounts of wildlife – its wildness in general. I love living in a landscape that makes me feel like I am a part of the ecosystem, and where I am not always the top predator on the food chain. I look forward to learning this property in all of its moods and seasons, of discovering who visits here and when and why. A life lived here on this landscape is rich with the memories of experience, regardless of whether those memories were documented for posterity or merely intimately enjoyed by the individual living them.



Clockwise from Top Left: Whitetail does grazing in the pasture, Ryan Garrett peers into the timber while armed with bear deterrent, a trail camera captures the local monster coyote







Learning to Shoot: *The Fine Art of Photography*

By Jillian Garrett

I have been taking photographs for as long as I can remember. My first camera was my mother's Canon Rebel, in the old days of 35 mm film. Growing up in the time before digital, I spent a good portion of my allowance paying for film development. As a freshman in college, I bought my first digital camera, and the picture quality was so grainy that it still makes me laugh to look back on some of the images. Years later, with the launch of several businesses, I invested in another Canon Rebel - only this time it didn't require 35 mm film. I spent more than a decade with that camera, using it to photograph food & raw ingredients, as well as fashionable portraits. I learned a great many lessons during that time, often through simple trial and error, and realized how much I loved showcasing the beauty and texture of a meal from garden to table. The culmination of my photography came with the publication of our first farm-to-table recipe collection, *Apothecary Farm Cookbook: Expanded Edition* (available for purchase through [Blurb.com](https://blurb.com)). As my husband and I became more interested in self-sufficient living, particularly hunting, I began photographing our adventures. I found that I enjoyed the challenge of taking tasteful photographs not only of the animal harvested but candid shots of the hunter too. There is so much more to hunting photography than the classic - and classically maligned - "grip and grin." It made me want to redefine how hunters represented themselves and their kills on the hunt.





*This Page, Clockwise from Top Left: Whitetail deer, Jillian Garrett ready to photograph wildlife, Spring thunder rolls across the north pasture
Opposite Page, Top Image: Wild turkey hen at sunset, Bottom Image: Ryan Garrett hunts grouse along the tributary creek*



Right about the time we moved to Washington, I began to get frustrated with my current equipment setup because I had finally outgrown the ability of that camera. After much research, as well as some shock and awe over how much the technology had advanced over the last ten years, I made the leap into a truly professional-level camera and lens. I also added a special telephoto lens for photographing wildlife, an opportunity that was readily available on our new property.

With the launch of my millinery business, I found myself in the interesting position of being both model and director of every photograph. With my husband behind the camera, I would direct the shot set up I wanted (both my pose and the technical aspects), he would find the perfect angle and take the picture. We worked well together, and with this system, we made a very effective team, getting the exact flavor of the images I wanted for my hats. Some of my all-time favorite pictures have come out of these team photoshoots, and he is also my backup photographer for larger group sessions and events.

My main desire is to offer customers the sort of candid portraits that best represent the person being photographed. I loathe doing staged shots, which people often find awkward and uncomfortable anyway. I would much rather spend time putting someone at ease, to better to capture their true smile or genuine laugh. We oftentimes show more of ourselves in that single unguarded moment than in an entire album of photographs.

I also want to offer outdoorsmen the ability to have their entire hunt documented in a tasteful manner, not just the end result. As a hunting community, we need to move away from taking only vulgar and gory trophy shots. The experience of hunting is about so much more than that, and it is time we began showing that aspect in a more creative light. I look forward to the opportunity to do just that.

For further details and rates, please visit www.blueridgefarmer.com/photography-services or email info@blueridgefarmer.com

The Ethics of Filling the Freezer

By Ryan Garrett





Night fell on the last second of my 2021 archery deer season, bringing it to a rather anticlimactic close. Walking back to my house emptyhanded, with no tangible goods to show for the weeks of intense effort, forced me to take a long, hard look at why I hunt. Meat is certainly a large part of my motivation, but given the fair-chase style of hunting, it isn't the sole reward for the activity. If that were true, a trip to the grocery store would be a lot cheaper and easier.

It both helped and hurt to think back on the beginning of the season...

Opening morning, you would have found me strapped eighteen feet up in a tree, praying for the thawing effects of the sun. After shivering for a few hours in the dark and realizing that I would be shaded well past noon, I abandoned my post in search of a warmer, sunnier location. In less than fifteen minutes, I was staring at the largest buck I had ever seen in my life - a four-by-four whitetail, enormously wide antlers dripping with freshly-scraped velvet well in advance of all his less mature counterparts. He ran straight towards me and stopped at fifty-two yards, just twelve yards beyond the limit of what I allowed myself to shoot. I was stuck there, waiting, standing still with only the camouflage of the brush behind me to betray his keen eyes. His less mature companion certainly did not simplify my issue. One poorly-timed movement and they would sense me for certain. I waited, and they eventually hopped over the fence and into my neighbor's more thickly wooded property. I reasoned that the bucks would move southward, as I had already observed them doing earlier that morning, and chose a tree to sit against roughly eighty yards south from their exit point. Within 30 minutes, my prediction proved correct, and I was six yards away from the giant buck, who was standing gloriously broadside and busting me completely. I never even thought to draw my bow. In retrospect, I actually had two separate chances to draw during that morning and I missed them both.



This Page, Top Image: Jillian Garrett with her color-phase turkey tom, ***Bottom Image:*** Jillian Garrett harvests her first deer

Opposite Page: Ryan Garrett after a successful spring turkey hunt



I came close to filling my tag several more times that season. Despite the lack of meat in the freezer at the end of it, I would not change a thing. Failing to fill my tag forced me to spend more time in the woods than I otherwise would have and allowed me to observe and appreciate the beauty I saw there. I watched the patterns of ruffed grouse change from huge, easily-harvested family units to more dispersed and harder to hunt individuals in the two weeks prior to the grouse season opener. This lent much credence to WDFW's recent rule change, which moved the season opener date from the 1st of September to the 15th, to better foster survival rates. I realized that one of the small, unnamed tributary creeks, which I crossed daily in my hunting activities, was a spawning ground for brook trout, and that we as landowners have a responsibility to maintain these riparian areas in order to preserve the cold, clean water that they need to live. I observed higher-than-average wild turkey poult survival rates, based on our delayed haying this year. Allowing the grass to stay uncut for longer in the season gave the young birds the vital cover they needed to protect them from predators. Later on, the cut hay fields provided good habitat for grasshoppers, which in turn provided an abundant food source for mature and young birds alike. I may never have noticed these things had I not spent so much time outside. These types of observations help us to implement better management decisions as both private and public landowners. Successful land stewardship is quite literally a boots-on-the-ground operation. As a result, time spent in the woods is never a waste if the hunter takes the opportunity to add something to their knowledge, even if they can't manage to add a darn thing to their freezer.

I did eventually get some tangible rewards for my efforts: By the end of the season, I had three of those delicious wild turkeys in my freezer. The hunts were by no means classic call & fool hunts, but they were memorable stalks and much-needed drams from the fountain of success. I worked hard for those birds and was deeply grateful for the sustenance they provided. The act of hunting has taught me such a profound sense of appreciation for the food I do manage to obtain. In our house, we have a goal to utilize as much of every animal as possible, which is our way of both honoring the life we have taken and eliminating unnecessary waste. Every edible part is consumed (and believe me, there is a lot more edible stuff on an animal than you might think), and the non-edible parts are also utilized. For example, we use the crop on mature turkey toms, as well as the feet on all birds, to add a delicious layer of fatty gelatin to soup stocks. You can then freeze containers of stock for use all winter long, and they make a great base addition to most meals. My wife is a milliner, and a few years ago she began using the turkey spurs, beards, and feathers to make hats for us both. I gifted her with jewelry made out of spurs set in sterling silver. We even try to save the wing bones to make turkey callers. The more we utilize from each animal, the fewer lives we have to take in order to sustain our own.

This Page: Signs of a successful hunt coat a bit of grass on a frosty fall morning
Opposite Page: Jillian Garrett's first deer, as well as the first big game animal harvested on the property



At the end of the day, this is what hunting is all about for me - it's a way to nurture my body and soul and the land that I live on in the most beneficial method I can. I am a better land steward *because* I hunt. My property is now managed to promote beneficial habitat for wildlife to live on and raise their young. I may occasionally kill a buck to feed my family, grace my walls with his memories, and warm my bed with his hide, yet for that buck harvested, there will be several fawns that are given cover to hide from predators, forage to eat, and cool crisp water to drink. It's possible to give more than you take, and to leave the land better than you found it. Even with an empty freezer, that hunting ethic is pretty difficult to define as a failure.

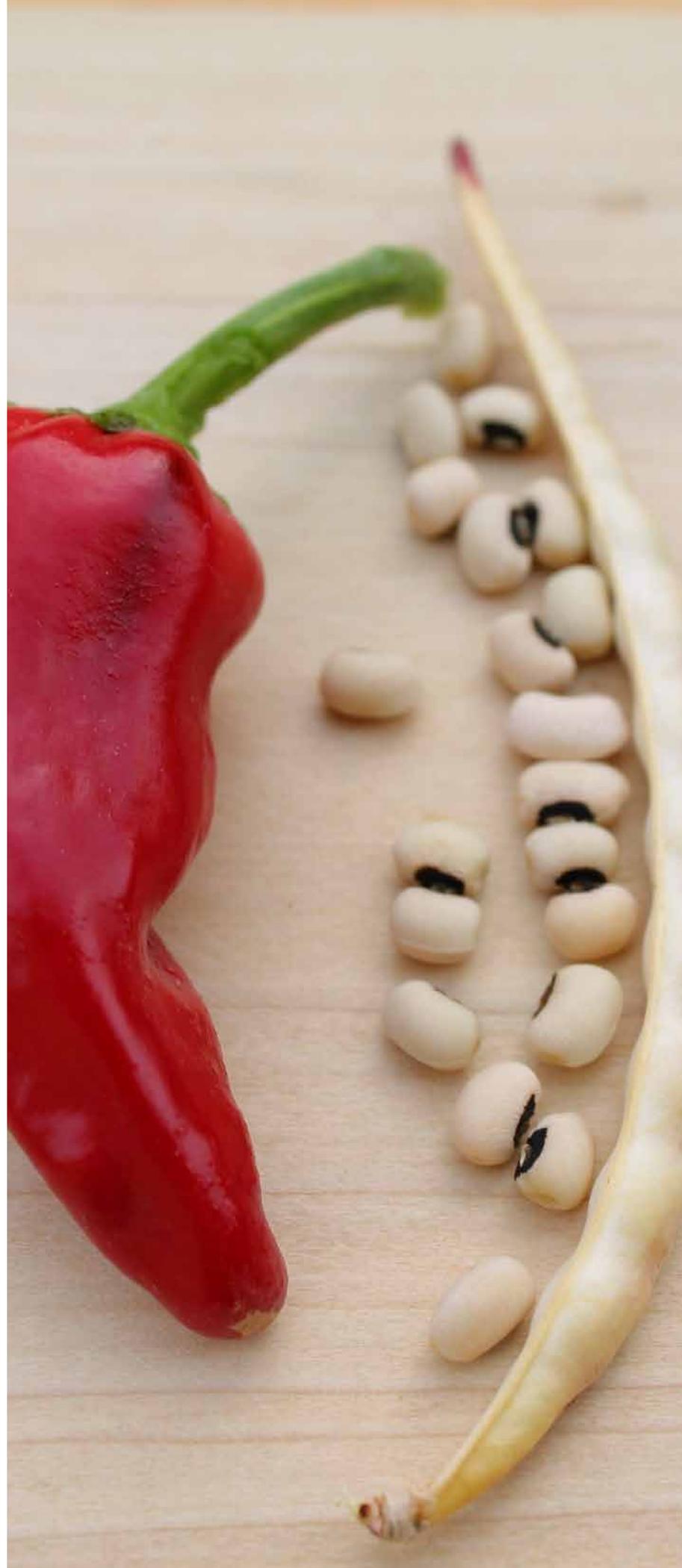
A Guide to Companion Planting

By Jillian Garrett

“I hope you like snow,” was the almost universal response of every person after we told them we were moving to northeastern Washington. It took all my effort not to retort that Southern Oregon used to get a fair amount of snow too up until the last decade. Like everywhere else, that area was rapidly warming up and drying out. I suppose sometimes humanity collectively suffers from short term memory loss.

I admit that moving several hundred miles – and two growing zones – northward was an enormous change and challenge for us. At our old property, we could begin gardening outside as early as March and not expect a frost until as late as mid-October. Here in northern Washington, we have the same growing zone as coastal Maine. You cannot put sensitive plants outside until June, and even then it is not fully out of the question to get frosts in August. This is a hard place to garden.

This Page: Chimayo pepper and dried cowpeas, ***Opposite Page:*** Beans growing in the garden





I have been a self-sufficient gardener for nearly 15 years, so I had some experience to fall back on. Knowing the timeline for when I would germinate seeds in Oregon, I estimated when I would need to germinate them here in Washington. For the most part, I was fairly accurate in my guesses. I knew that I would not be able to grow the heat-loving plants that I had previously enjoyed, so I looked for different varieties of hardy open-pollinated vegetables to grow. For tomatoes, I trialed several different early season varieties, having the greatest success with a 60-day type that hailed from Siberia, and another bred to ripen in Oregon's cool and moist Willamette Valley. For my dry beans, I looked for heirloom varieties hailing from the New England area, which I assumed would work well here. Though two out of the three dry bean varieties I trialed were middling producers, I had one rockstar that matured well before the end of August and produced meaty, flageolet-style beans that were perfect for winter meals. I was also excited to try growing some cooler season vegetables such as cabbage, collard greens, celery, and brussel sprouts - plants that never worked well for me in the warmer Oregon climate.

I spent most of January planning out my kitchen garden, a patch of land on the north side of the house measuring roughly 50'x70' in dimension. The construction of the garden infrastructure - never mind the vegetables - was a feat in and of itself. We started by building a perimeter of fencing to prevent hungry deer from wandering in. We also dug a three-foot-deep trench inside the perimeter and buried mesh hardware cloth to keep gophers out. Before planting outside in May, we added a generous four-inch layer of compost. After the plants were somewhat established, we installed an extensive system of drip irrigation, which was a more effective way to deep water the plants than normal sprinklers. Finally, we built two large cold frames covered with greenhouse plastic on the outermost rows of the garden. Inside of these we planted our most heat-loving vegetables (tomatoes, peppers, beans, cowpeas, etc.), and the cold frames had the added benefit of helping to retain heat during the colder evenings, preventing frost damage at the end of the season.



I have been a large proponent of companion planting during my years as a gardener, and this year I expanded the concept, researching to discover new-to-me plant pairings. I began by planting a series of aromatic perennial herbs around the perimeter of the garden to deter any gophers that may have made it past the underground mesh barrier. These herbs predominantly included lavender, mint, and sage, as well as some annuals such as calendula and marigold. Gophers do not like strongly aromatic plants, as they have a very keen sense of smell. I can testify that these plantings did indeed work: I had a couple of rogue gophers come into the garden, hit the perennial herb perimeter, and deter away from it. If anything will give you a sense of pride and accomplishment as a gardener, that surely tops the list.

My main garden area was planted in rows in the following orientation:

Row 1 (Cold Frame): Asparagus/Tomatoes/Peppers, interplanted with Coriander/Basil/Marigold/Calendula/Garlic

Row 2: Lettuce/Carrots & Radishes/Onions

Row 3: Beets/Kale

Row 4: Early Peas/Fava Beans/Potatoes

Row 5: Cabbage/Celery/Collards/Brussel Sprouts

Row 6 (Cold Frame): Horseradish/Potatoes/Beans/Cowpeas, interplanted with Coriander/Marigold

Row 7: Strawberries/Spinach/Berries

The first and sixth rows were planted within the cold frames, as these plants needed the most heat during summer. Planting within these cold frames also had a bonus during the unusually hot and smoky summer: we were able to install fans and full spectrum grow lights. The fans helped circulate air to prevent mold issues and keep the temperatures more moderate inside (tomatoes will not put out fruit when temperatures get above 90 degrees), and the full spectrum grow lights allowed the vegetables to keep ripening even when smoky conditions blocked out the sunlight.

In the first row, tomatoes made an excellent companion plant for asparagus because they deterred asparagus beetles. The trick is to give yourself enough space between the plants - as well as adequate trellising - so that the tomato vines don't overrun the asparagus. Coriander planted throughout this row (and the rest of the garden) protected the surrounding plants from aphids. Marigold and Garlic were the superheroes of the garden, acting as general pest control (including deterring root nematodes).

In Row 4, I planted early peas and fava beans, which matured before the last frost date in June and added valuable nitrogen back into the soil. As the plants were ready to be harvested, I pulled them up and planted short season potatoes as a summer crop. The potatoes appreciated the extra soil nutrients provided by the peas and favas, and it showed in a bountiful harvest later that season!





Row 5 needed to be planted earlier in the spring, as these cold weather greens don't do well in the heat. I set the seedlings in the ground in May and protected them with a temporary tunnel made up of heavy-duty agricultural fabric. Cabbages are heavy feeders, so they appreciated the generous layer of compost we put down before planting, which resulted in almost 10-lb. plants at harvest time. The cabbage was also aided by the aromatic perimeter of sage plants, which helped to deter cabbage moths.

In the second industrial cold frame, I planted potatoes, cowpeas, and dry beans, with horseradish at either end. Gophers really loathe horseradish, and horseradish promotes the good health of potato plants. Potatoes and beans make great companions because each deters the beetle that preys upon the other one. Think of them as best friends in the garden.

My final garden row consisted of the classic planting of strawberries and spinach, along with a few other berry plants tucked in for good measure.

All things considered, it was a pretty small garden space, even for just feeding two people. However, with smart succession planting and a knowledge of companion varieties, the yield from this first year was immense! We filled an entire commercial freezer with processed vegetables, as well as a root cellar packed to the brim with canned goods and hundreds of pounds of potatoes. It gave us both such a sense of pride to have accomplished all of this in such a short growing season, and I look forward to seeing how much will be produced in the coming years as we continue to adapt and learn in this harshly beautiful landscape.



This Page, Top Image: Ripe Raspberries, Bottom Image: Jars of pickled radishes and beets - a kitchen staple in the Garrett household
Opposite Page, Top Image: Dried cowpeas, Bottom Image: Chimayo pepper and aromatic annual herbs

A Year in Review

By Jillian Garrett

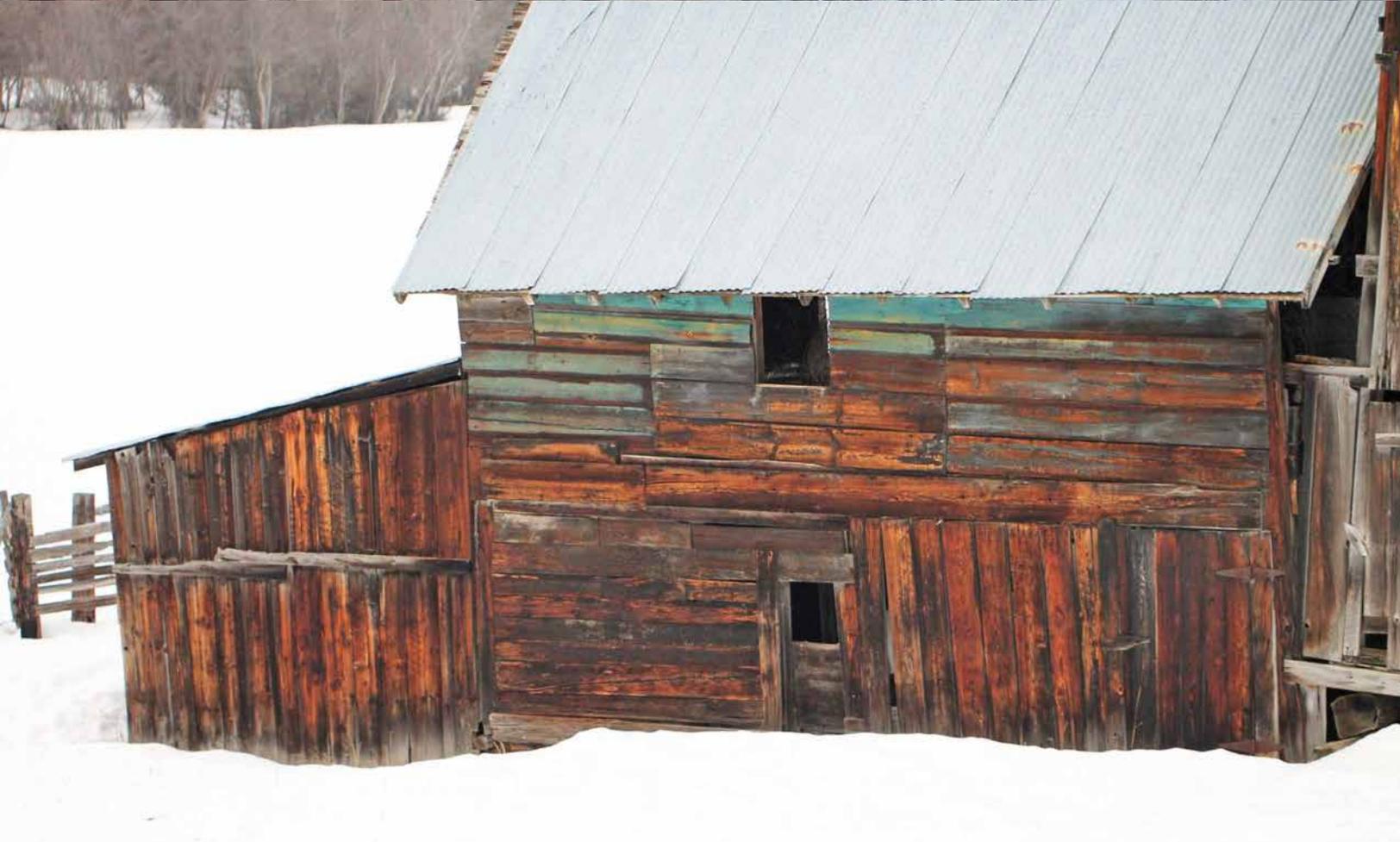
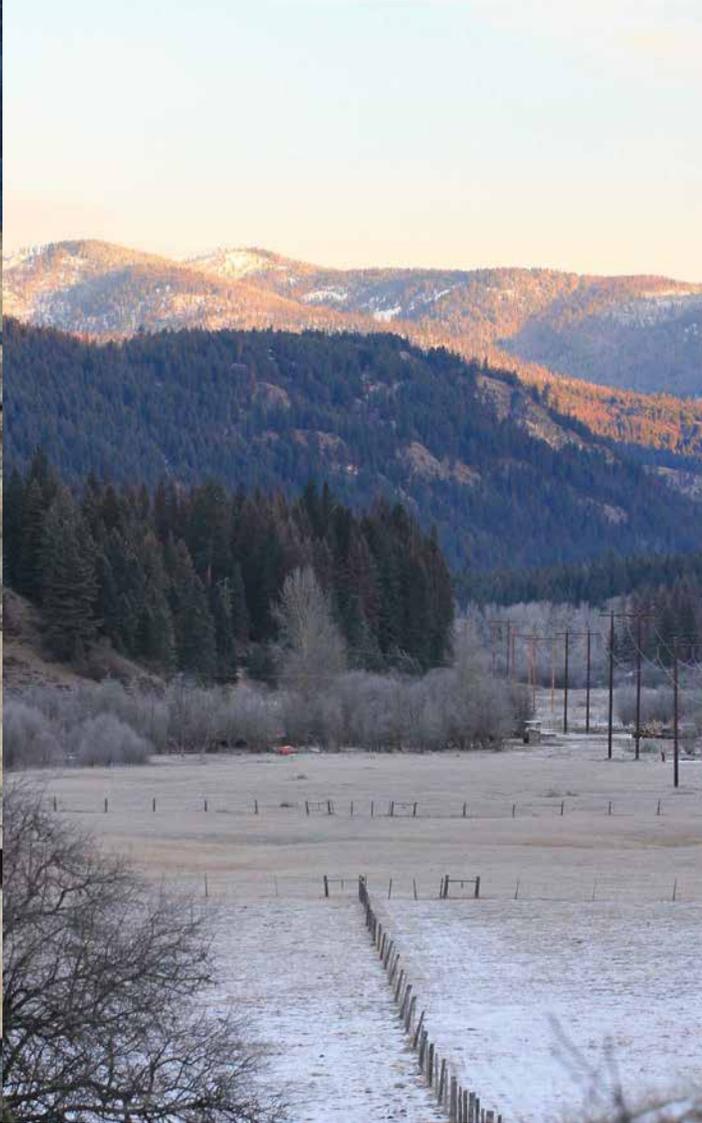
My husband and I were standing in the kitchen one October morning when I looked over at him and said, “Can you believe that it has been exactly one year since we first stepped foot on this property?” My mind reeled over everything that had occurred since that time – buying and selling a house; moving two households, a farm, pets and livestock, plus two businesses’-worth of equipment and inventory; the passing of a family member; planting an apple orchard; more large-scale fencing projects than I care to remember; building the infrastructure for an enormous northern garden; planting acres of cover crops; remodeling a kitchen; building a workshop; starting not one but three separate businesses. Thinking back on it all, I suddenly felt much more justified in my general level of exhaustion. It’s incredible to reflect on everything that occurred over the past year...

We moved into our new home in December of 2020, when the snow already lay thick on the ground, and spent much of the time simply enjoying the wintery landscape. Snowshoeing around the property became our new cold season activity and was rewarded by cozy evenings spent cuddled together in front of the woodstove. Sometimes we checked trail cameras, but mostly we wandered and observed the beauty of the land. Each journey brought a new discovery – an old cougar tree scratch, a lone black hawthorn tree, watercress in the creek, and bobcat tracks in the snow. We had moved here at the start of winter and were able to watch the landscape at its most brutal, yet we still managed to see the beauty in that brutality. I suppose it is all a matter of perspective. Nothing will make you appreciate spring’s verdant optimism like winter’s ruthless shades of blue.

The month of February brought some of the coldest temperatures yet, with lows reaching -12 degrees F (not including a vicious windchill). I observed to my husband that late winter here would probably be the most brutal time of year as far as the weather was concerned, and I was most assuredly correct. The spring chinook wind arrived that month, quickly melting large patches of snow and revealing ground that hadn’t been seen since November. Shortly thereafter, we were hit with an intense blizzard that dropped over six inches of snow in just a few hours and had such a swirling vortex of winds that at one point I observed snow falling at a 45-degree angle simultaneously from two different directions! Two days later we were looking forward to a warming trend that would have us sunny and in the 50’s. This place is a land of extremes.

February was the month we first began exploring the eastern edge of our property, which is located across the road and in an entirely different hunting unit. These twenty heavily forested acres abut a section of private timberland before becoming National Forest pretty much all the way to Idaho in the east and Canada to the north. With enough motivation and power bars, I could conceivably hike all the way to a new state or a new country without leaving public land (except for a brief escapade of trespassing on that timberland). This is the wilder section of our property – the land of steep topography and dark forests. It is a place where you would not be altogether surprised to run into a grizzly bear. It is a place that speaks to the wildness of my soul. Even now, almost a year later, there are still sections of it that we have yet to explore...

Opposite Page, Clockwise from Top Left: A stack of firewood, Looking north over the frozen pastures, Our rustic barn in the snow





The month of March began slowly warming the landscape, allowing us to start the first few fencing projects, as well as planting the new 30-tree heirloom apple orchard. The root ball of every tree had to be carefully wrapped in chickenwire to protect it from the numerous gophers that inhabit our property. We have very high-quality soil in the orchard, and, unfortunately, good soil means a high density of gophers. Most folks view gophers as vile garden-eating beasts, and while I do agree, they also represent a gauge of the health of the soil as well as providing food for important predators such as owls and coyotes. A stable ecosystem requires both predators and prey, even if those prey animals sometimes wreak havoc on unprotected fruit trees. Here on the farm, we do our best to strike the balance between protecting our livelihood and allowing the wildlife to exist freely. That being said, I wouldn't mind a few more owls.

In April, the hot tub shack (my temporary greenhouse) began filling up with plant starts that I had germinated from seed, and my mind filled with thoughts of the bounty of a summer garden. Here in the "frozen north" (as we jokingly call it), planting season begins as late as June 1st, and in our own Aladdin Valley you can still get frosts any day of the year - even in July! Gardening here is a war against the elements, and greenhouses are a requirement for most vegetables. We spent much of this first year building the sort of infrastructure that would allow us to successfully garden on a commercial scale.

Spring turkey season arrived, and we were lucky enough to fill our freezer with the meat of three magnificent birds. With my beloved shotgun, I was able to harvest a beautiful color-phase tom with the most striking plumage I had ever seen! My joy at successfully harvesting him was tempered with the regret of removing such a treasure from the landscape, but I knew he had effectively bred with most of the hens in the area and that the future would still contain more beautiful turkeys like himself. It's difficult to describe to a non-hunter the complex set of emotions that you experience after a successful hunt. I know that my biggest emotions are gratitude and sadness: sadness for the taking of a life and removing something beautiful from the landscape; gratitude for the food that will help feed my family and for the self-sufficient ability to live off of the land. Each time I harvest an animal, I always feel a sense of awe at the incredible beauty of Mother Nature's creatures, and a desire to fully honor the life I have taken. As such, both Ryan and I make it a point to try and utilize every part - the carcass and feet for stock, the wing bones for turkey calls, and even the plumage, spurs, and beard for jewelry and hats. The hunters who simply remove the breast meat from the bird and dispose of the rest commit a sin against the land. It would have been better to not have killed a turkey at all.

***This Page: Whitetail does in the pasture
Opposite Page, Left Image: The northern pastures
(note the deer); Right Image: The rustic barn***



Springtime brought the return of the elk and deer, as they followed the arrival of warmer temperatures and verdant new grass growth. With them came the predators. Cougar sightings became common, and we even had a wolf pack run past our driveway one evening. Towards the end of April, a cougar killed a deer right next to our house early in the morning and dragged it all the way into the private timberland on the other side of our property boundary. We tracked the entire blood trail, following the drag marks and fur from the relative kill site to where it pulled the deer through the fence and off the property. Though this experience would have terrified many people, I love living in a dynamic environment with a healthy predator population. There is something to be said for existing outside of your comfort zone and knowing that you are not at the top of the food chain.

Taking time to appreciate the beauty surrounding you is a requirement here. In the warmer spring evenings, we often sat on the deck in the twilight, watching the moon rise and admiring the incredible multitude of stars while listening to an owl hoot on the mountainside across from us...It still boggles my mind that there is so little light pollution here that I can look up into the sky at night and see the Milky Way in all its splendor. Life really doesn't get much better than that.

The month of May brought more intense temperature swings as well as the construction of more garden infrastructure. We built two heavy duty cold frames for the main garden area and had an industrial-scale high tunnel greenhouse kit delivered to us. I launched a professional photography business as well as re-launched my beloved millinery business (having been on hiatus for the last few years) with a new look and a new website.

June was the time of baby animals, and we watched whitetail fawns, elk calves, and turkey poults move across the pastures. We had selectively managed our hay fields to promote maximum habitat for wild turkeys to rear their young: delaying haying until the poults were old enough to no longer need the cover of tall grass. Once the hay was cut, the grasshoppers provided an important food source for both the young and mature birds. We noticed that our wild turkey poult clutches had a higher survival rate than in other areas, largely in part to our habitat management practices.

The entirety of our property is blanketed in a carpet of wild strawberries, and towards the end of June they finally began to ripen. Though tiny, the flavor is a surprising burst of intense taste, and they are delightful to snack on. We spent a good amount of time crouched on the ground, filling our hands (and mouths) with the fruit. Though we had every intention of saving some to preserve for winter, we never could seem to stop immediately eating what we picked.

This Page, Top Image: The vintage sign on the storage shed, Bottom Image: A handmade hat by Jillian Originals Millinery





July brought with it the cabbage harvest, of which we had quite the bounty this year. On average, one cabbage yielded a gallon of sauerkraut, several cups of coleslaw, and two freezer bags of flash-boiled leaves (for winter soups and stews). We ended up harvesting upwards of 60 lbs. of cabbage, so Ryan wisely invested in some stainless-steel fermenters in order to make an enormous batch of sauerkraut. I could not adequately express my joy at harvesting from the garden after a long, cold winter.

The wildfires of July brought continued smoky conditions into August, as well as the start of fall bear hunting season. We explored the high-country landscape of huckleberries and spruce trees, but always seemed to be a few weeks behind the bear activity. With the extreme drought conditions of summer (it was the driest year here in recorded history), the berry crops were almost nonexistent, and animals were widely dispersed in their movements of trying to find food. We began work on building the new workshop, demolishing the old structure that leaked terribly and had turned into a skating rink all winter. The weather began to change, becoming more stormy and unstable. We knew that the snows of winter were not far behind. One of the many lessons that northern living will teach you is that, even in the height of summer, winter is just around the corner. Warm weather is fleeting, so plan accordingly!



The end of August meant the garden harvest was in full swing, and we found ourselves digging up and cellaring close to 200 lbs. of potatoes. I felt a surge of pride each time I thought about how much I had coaxed out of my first garden here, and how successful my companion plantings had been both for the bounty of the harvest as well as the pest control it provided. Even the placement of the cold frames within the garden created an inadvertent heating effect that protected the inner rows from frost earlier in the season. Sometimes the best discoveries are made by accident.

This Page, Top Image: The rustic wood siding on the old storage shed, ***Bottom Image:*** Jillian Garrett harvests her first Washington turkey

As August phased into September, the native berries began to ripen, and our creek bed filled with the colors of ready-to-be-picked hawthorne berries, chokecherries, and serviceberries. The grouse began congregating in large numbers around the small tributary creek, eagerly partaking of this late summer bounty. With their migration came the coyote as well, eagerly seeking a meal. He patrolled the creek line every morning and evening, a silent wanderer amidst the foliage.

The whitetail bucks were a common sight now at dawn and dusk, grazing in the pastures and beginning to think a bit more heavily about the does. The deer spent most of their time in what we had nicknamed “deer acres,” which was the 3-acre patch of pasture and timbered parkland on the far western boundary of our property. We had planted cover crops in this area specifically tailored to not only promote the health of the soil but to provide nutrient-rich forage for the wildlife. Clover, field peas, and oats made up a portion of the mix, along with the native grasses. As a result, most of the animals spent their time in this small area of our property, migrating between the edges of the timberland and the open pasture.

The promise of autumn grew stronger, and archery season opened. Ryan spent much of his days quietly tethered to the side of a tree, blending in like some sort of ancient forest spirit. He would sneak out before the dawn, in the blackest of night, and silently walk into the forest. After setting up in a tree, he would wait for the sun to rise while listening to the sounds of the landscape waking up. A family of grouse flew under him on their way to a breakfast of berries in the creek. A series of strange chittery calls heralded the presence of the black bear sow and cub. A mother elk chirped to her calf, while a bull whistled in the distance. Though he saw many deer, and had several close encounters, Ryan ultimately ended up not filling his tag. It was a difficult blow for him, as this was the first year he had hunted deer without success...The hard truth is that hunting isn't like a trip to the grocery store - there is no foregone conclusion of bringing food home. Instead, it's a complex test of skills combined with persistence and sprinkled with a bit of luck. Sometimes, the luck manages to evade you, despite your best efforts.





This Page, Left Image: A tiny spider eats its freshly-caught prey, Bottom Right Image: Construction on the new workshop

Opposite Page, Top Image: Wild strawberries ripen in June, Bottom Image: Cabbage ready for harvest

The two maple trees in front of our house turned vivid colors before the arrival of the first real cold of autumn. In a sea of evergreen, the tamarack trees provided a gauge of the season, their color changing from a rich, deep green to a lighter moss and finally to a yellow hue as the month of October progressed. The torch of their color grew as autumn itself faded.

We neared completion of the new workshop, which would ultimately become the future home of Ryan's custom manufacturing business. In a fortuitous bit of timing, and after months of waiting and paperwork, he finally received his business license. The days shortened, the fiery blaze of leaves dropped to the earth, and the stack of firewood grew...

Each morning became a little colder, the temperature falling by a degree or two every day...19 degrees, 18 degrees, 16, 15...the days grew shorter too - we lost an hour and a half of daylight during the month of October. The sun sank lower behind the southern forest, and it would be months before we saw it high in the sky again. Northern living is a different world, though in many ways I think it is a better one. Our growing season may be shorter, but so is our smoky summer wildfire season. The rains come earlier and more frequently here, and the seasons are more pronounced and enjoyable. To truly love a land, you must love it in all seasons - most especially winter - and I often found myself yearning, for the first time in my life, for winter's blanket of snow. The relaxing days of snowshoeing and woodstove fires are a reward for the hectic work of spring, summer, and fall.





Opening morning of general deer season in mid-October dawned foggy and relatively warm, with temperatures hovering around 42 degrees. The mist settled over the mountains and obscured all but the nearest trees, giving the landscape a slightly eerie appearance. In the grey pre-dawn light, I watched a herd of four whitetail does – close enough for me to realize that one of them had an unusual nubbin of a tail – graze in front of my blind, only to be chased off by the mated pair of coyotes who then stopped to eat their meal of warm ground squirrel. I yearned for my camera as opposed to my rifle. As the coyotes moved off, I heard the clacking chatter of a family of grouse along the creek. How could you not love a landscape as beautiful as this?

That evening found me comfortably seated in a different blind on the northwestern edge of our property, cheerfully doling out chocolate chip cookies to myself as a pre-reward for what I knew would be a long and potentially unrewarding sit (I was correct on both counts). The only deer to show up were a group of three does, two of which were very familiar to me as “Mama” and “Dennis the Menace.” Mama is always easy to identify due to her unusually light coat color, and her fawn of the year, Dennis (for short), is so nicknamed due to her propensity to charge full force at any object in her path – deer, turkeys, people. Ryan and I have been mischievously charged by her while hiking in this area of our property, and I have watched her head-butt turkeys in her childhood play antics. The most common deer-related phrase in our house tends to jokingly be, “That fawn is a *menace!*”





This Page, Left Image: Deer fur caught on barbed wire where a mountain lion dragged its kill through the fence of the western pasture, Right Image: A squirrel stores its mushroom for drying on top of the fence post

Opposite Page, Top Image: Blood trail from Jillian Garrett's deer in the frosty field, Bottom Image: Ryan Garrett hunts grouse



The next morning found me back in the old barn, looking out at clear skies and a landscape coated white with frost. As the scenery began to lighten with the coming of pre-dawn, I listened to a male ruffed grouse drumming in the western timber adjacent to our property. It was my first time hearing it, and I was enraptured. One of the conservation goals at Blue Ridge Farm is to create and manage corridors of grouse habitat. Unlike wild turkeys, which require more of a parkland setting, grouse need evergreen forests and brushy understory. We have good habitat for them on the eastern half of our land, but the western area could be improved upon. Now that cattle are no longer allowed to run the property, we are hoping that some of the brush will begin to fill back in along the southwestern corner, between their favored timberland habitat and daytime foraging area along our creek. Once the sun finally began hitting the very tops of the western mountains, I heard a single, distinct rifle shot from somewhere south of here. At least someone was having some luck this weekend, though I sorely wished it was me.



"We took comfort in the knowledge that our coffers were overflowing with bounty both tangible and spiritual."



The fourth day of the season found me back in my usual morning roost – the upper story of our rustic old barn. Before it was even light enough to see clearly, I saw a dark shape coasting across the pasture, which I could just barely identify as a solitary whitetail doe. She walked quickly past and vanished into the snowberry bushes along the creek bed. Dejected, I watched the landscape slowly lighten around me, figuring that my odds of seeing any more deer – let alone a legal buck – were essentially slim to none. Dawn had not yet reached the mountain tops when I saw him step out from the creek bed in the northwestern pasture. The buck was so regal – so much more beautiful in color and pose than I ever imagined possible, standing in a misty field that was white from frost. He was the quintessential whitetail. He was the deer that I had been waiting and working three long years for. He was 63 yards outside of my shooting distance and beautifully broadside against the neighbor’s front yard. Now it was definitely feeling like a classic season of mine. I watched him continue to graze slowly across the pasture, moving eastward and completely outside of my safe shooting lane. I had pretty much given up all hope and was simply enjoying watching him feed when something caught his attention further east. Whatever startled him was out of my field of vision, but instead of sprinting back west in the direction he had come from, he decided to trot south and into my shooting lane. Wearing what I am sure was a completely bemused expression, I quickly got set up for a shot I never expected to be able to take. Right as the buck came within 159 yards, he stopped to look back at whatever had originally grabbed his attention. That was my moment, and I pulled the trigger. It only took a second for him to hit the ground. He was dead almost instantly. My bullet had hit double lung as well as some major arteries, and the death was the quickest and most humane kill any hunter could ask for. I stared for a moment in disbelief, watching closely through my binoculars to make sure that I didn’t need a follow-up shot. After a few moments of continued stillness, I climbed down out of the barn, with my hand over my mouth, and the tears began to form in my eyes. I was never sure what my reaction would be to my first deer – first big game animal – but I was still surprised that I cried not for the life that I had taken but for the joy that it had been over so quickly for the deer. There had been no suffering, and that had been what I had hoped for most fervently during my entire hunt. Next was gratitude for the meat that would help fill my freezer and feed myself and my husband through the long, cold winter. Last was a bit of disbelief that, after so many years of unsuccessfully trying, it had finally happened. In a way, I felt as though I had passed a final test of my abilities. It was a coming home type of feeling.



This Page, Top Image: Fava beans from the garden, Bottom Left Image: Salsa Verde made with green tomatoes, Bottom Right Image: Wild Turkey Ramen Opposite Page, Top Image: Whitetail buck, Bottom Image: Spring strutters in front of the barn,

Butchering the buck without any sort of proper facility proved to be a very difficult task, but, like everything else this year, we managed, and it made us eagerly look forward to the construction of our commercial kitchen next year. We have so many plans for this place, and it is so exciting to not only think about the future, but to look back with pride at how far we have already come: farm infrastructure, an established garden, animal pastures, several full freezers, and a fully-stocked root cellar. As the weather turned colder and the snows began to accumulate, we enjoyed the flavors of our success in each delicious homecooked meal made with the products of our hard work. We took comfort in the knowledge that our coffers were overflowing with bounty both tangible and spiritual. We could sit back and take the time to not only plan for the future but to quietly reflect back on the events of the past year and of a dream realized and a time together very well spent.





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Looking Forward

By Ryan Garrett

“So, what do you plan to do with the place?”

My wife and I have been asked this loaded question countless times since purchasing our land. I refer to it as a loaded question because it is often posed by the person asking it with an aim of offering their opinion as to the “right” way of managing the property. I will fully admit to having previously struggled with how to answer it succinctly, but on reflection, I think I should lead with, “We are managing for overall biodiversity.” While this is a bit of a blanket statement, I think it sets the correct tone for a more in-depth conversation on just what we are attempting to accomplish here.

When we first came to this land, we noticed that game was more plentiful here than in other areas, though perhaps not nearly as abundant as it could be. The soil was deeply abused from years of extractive haying and over-grazing practices, only seeming to be able to grow thousands of invasive (though beautiful) wild daisies. Songbird diversity was severely lacking, with only robins and starlings in plentitude. We certainly had our work cut out for us.

To increase avian biodiversity, we aim to create nesting boxes for birds big and small, while also running an extensive starling trapping campaign. Starlings are an invasive species here and are aggressive enough to outcompete the local songbird populations, quickly taking over vital food sources and habitat. By inviting the native bird populations back – including predatory birds such as barn owls, who help control gopher numbers – we intend to create a very beneficial pest control environment. At our last farm, we restored native bird populations in this manner and saw a definite decrease in both insect and rodent garden pests. I see no reason why this same philosophy would not work well here. We will also continue to manage our pastures with an eye for creating premium wild turkey habitat, haying the fields later than normal to give the young birds cover from predators at a time when they need it most and a veritable smorgasbord of grasshoppers afterwards. With the later haying this year, we noticed that the wild turkey hens on our land had a higher level of success raising their poults than in the surrounding areas.





In our efforts to create better habitat for the local whitetail population, we have been frequently advised to simply, “plant more alfalfa.” Unfortunately, deer do not receive a tremendous amount of nutritional benefit from that crop. They are browsers – not grazers such as cattle – that need a diverse food source to sustain them throughout the year. They also need vegetative cover to protect them from predators, and clean water to drink. With this in mind, we want to combine our cover crop planting and timber management plan to create a system that will help the deer meet their various food and habitat needs. We hope that better hunting and more mature bucks will also be a byproduct of good habitat.

Some folks would look at this and say that we are managing solely for wildlife, and I would not altogether blame them for thinking that. It is a high priority for us that wild animals flourish here. However, it is also a reality that the land needs to generate something of an income for the stewards living on it. Farming alone simply does not work out anymore unless you are performing it on a massive scale, though there are some models in the regenerative agriculture scene that appear to be turning that axiom on its head (more on that later). To this end, we have identified a handful of vegetable crops that grow quite well here, and we intend to increase the scale of our plantings while also building a proper commercial kitchen. This bit of infrastructure will allow us to make value-added products from our produce, teach classes on self-sufficient living, and offer a commercial kitchen for rent to the community.

This Page, Top Image: Beautiful but invasive field daisy, Bottom Image: Red clover is an important cover crop, fixing nitrogen into the soil and providing food for deer and wild turkeys
Opposite Page, Top Image: Wild native hazelnut trees provide a vital mast crop for local wildlife and are found primarily in the shrubby forest understory of the eastern section of the property, Bottom Image: Ripe wild hazelnuts are an enjoyable food source for people and animals alike



Earlier, I mentioned regenerative agriculture – it’s become a bit of a buzzword in the farming community. Conventional agriculture, with its myriad of soil-destroying tools, synthetic fertilizers, and industrial dependencies for the farmer, has created a system where only the biggest operations can afford to farm (and making a decent living is almost out of the question). It is also creating a temporary time of plenty that is heavily dependent on fossil fuels, whether you buy organic or not. Regenerative agriculture seeks to find a better way of farming by tending to the part of the equation that everyone seems to forget is so important: the land itself. The soil under our feet is a priceless resource that took millennia to generate but only decades to squander. We need to tend to it for ourselves and for the future.

This year, we conducted a small test on our land, where one field was lightly disked and planted with a cover crop while the other fields were not disked. We found that the disked field dried out the soil immensely, and the plants within it were noticeably less healthy. Conventional agriculture would simply input fertilizers into the system and keep on plowing – and eroding – the soil. Instead, we are not going to disk again, using no-till techniques for our cover crops and intelligent animal rotation practices to generate an income and build the health of the soil. Breaking the dependence on chemical fertilizers takes time and is difficult in the beginning, but I think it is the best method to continue generating food for our communities in a way that is much more fair to the land and the farmer in the long run.

I can’t write this article without leaving out a massive portion of our future plans here. There are simply too many wild animals, microhabitats, and crops to spell out the entire thing in full detail – but that is rather the point. We are managing this place so that more creatures (including us) can make a good living here. Every new-to-us species of native bird, every new microbiota in the soil, successful clutch of turkey poults, or more mature buck, is going to be celebrated with an equal level of enthusiasm to our sales of sauerkraut, pickled relish, jam, and hay. It’s a complex thing, and the goal is to make it more so.



*Top Image: Ripe raspberries in the garden,
Bottom Image: Heirloom apples from the orchard*



Wild turkey hen at sunset



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