



Daric Knight (left)
enjoys guiding hunters.



Hunting a Good Time

*Daric and Patty Knight offer guided hunts
and the occasional photo tour on their
family's scenic Southwestern ranches.*

by Sara Gugelmeyer

➤ Daric Knight says one day the lightbulb came on, so to speak. His area near Springerville, Ariz., was a hot spot for elk hunters, and many asked his advice while staying at his family's hotel. In 1995 he officially jumped into the outfitting business by establishing Knight Guiding/Outfitting LLC. Knight offers guided hunts and photo tours in Arizona and New Mexico as a way to supplement his cattle operation.

Knight describes outfitting as a complement to his cattle business. His Hereford operation, White Mountain Herefords, was originally owned by his maternal grandparents, Rob and Mary Hooper of Hooper Herefords. Although Daric and his wife, Patty, didn't officially purchase the majority of the Hoopers' cow herd until 2003, Daric had been helping run the family ranch at Springerville his whole life.

On Knight's father's side is where the hotel business comes in. The



Daric took advantage of the opportunity to sell his knowledge to hunters.



Knight family has been operating Reed's Lodge in downtown Springerville for nearly 50 years. The lodge is a rustic, cozy gem of a hotel nestled in the White Mountains.

Valuable knowledge

Although the town of Springerville's population is less than 2,000, the White Mountains draw tourists for the scenery, the Native American ruins, skiing, hiking, fishing and hunting. Much of Knight's family's ranch utilizes public land grazing, so he is more than familiar with the area. Hunters staying at his family's hotel would quiz him about where and when he'd seen a big bull.

See, in Arizona, elk tags are distributed by a public draw system. The state is split into units, and one must draw a tag for the unit in which he wishes to hunt. Once the tag is

drawn, he can hunt on any public or private land (with permission, of course) in that unit.

Outfitting made good sense. Knight explains, "My family had hunters coming in to stay at the hotel and when they found out we had cattle and we are out on the ground through all these popular units in Arizona, they started asking us questions. After a while we realized we've got some valuable country and valuable knowledge of the country, and that we may be able to make a little money from that. So in 1995, I officially jumped into the business with insurance and outfitting licenses."

Now, because Knight's family mainly ranches on public land in Arizona, the only thing he could offer there was his knowledge. But his grandparents also owned a ranch in New Mexico, which his uncle now operates. In New Mexico the tag system works

differently. There is still a draw system for public land hunting, but landowners receive transferable tags, which can be purchased by hunters.

Knight says, "So we were able to sell those landowner tags and guided hunts to clients on our private property there."

By hiring guides and finding more ranchland to lease for hunting in New Mexico, in about five years Knight had a thriving outfitting business. Although most of his clients are pursuing elk, he also offers antelope and mule deer hunts. "At one point, I was leasing a little over 100,000 acres on several ranches in New Mexico specifically for guiding hunters."

Although the outfitting business has slowed somewhat because of the recession, from 2000 to 2009, Knight says he was booking 25 to 30 hunts a year. Outfitting is obviously seasonal, but he explains that during those years,

continued on page 52...



Knight's ranch is ideal for cattle and elk because of the good grass and good cover.

especially, outfitting was a full-time occupation in relation to cash flow. “I ranch on the side and helped at the family hotel, but outfitting took up the majority of my time.”

The cattle business

Because Mary passed away several years ago and Robert Hooper’s health declined, Daric and Patty bought out his grandfather’s Hereford cow herd in 2003. One of Knight’s brothers runs Angus cattle on part of the original family ranch near Springerville. Daric’s youngest brother runs commercial cattle near the Petrified Forest. His mother and father, in conjunction with the hotel, run commercial cattle on a ranch that borders his, and his uncle runs Hereford and Angus cattle on the ranch in New Mexico.

Knight explains that right now White Mountain Herefords consists of about 100 registered cows. Those numbers have fluctuated over the years because of drought and other factors, with Hooper running as many as 500 cows at one time.

They carefully select their best bulls to market, along with top quality Hereford heifers. The rest are sold as feeders. “We’ve started an AI (artificial insemination) program, and clean up all AI cows with Angus bulls. So we’ll have some really nice black baldie calves every year as well.”

The best of both worlds

Knight says his cattle operation and hunting operation knowledge often coincide and his ranching experience helps him get his foot in the door with landowners. “Being a rancher myself I am particular on how I hunt or let my guides hunt specific ranches as far as the natural resource damage. I am, of course, very sensitive about things like gates being closed and not driving on roads or limiting off road travel when it is extremely wet just for natural resource concerns.”

It’s no secret that ranchlands are an excellent habitat for wildlife in most situations. “They can complement each other quite well,” Knight says. “On our



Daric and Patty purchased Daric’s grandfather’s herd in 2003.

operations, we are able to manage the cattle so we don’t have a lot of cattle pressure right where I am trying to hunt. I’ve found as a cattleman and hunter and outfitter, all, that high cattle numbers tend to pressure wildlife over just a little bit. So any areas that I know are really good and really handy for me to hunt, we try to keep cattle in different parts of the ranches when we are ready to hunt.”

In fact, using that knowledge enhances his success as an outfitter. “As a cattleman myself on these Arizona public lands where I also guide hunters, I specifically move my cattle in the summer and early fall, because I’ve watched the wildlife follow the cattle during the growing season because the wildlife like to get that good, fresh growth. I can actually maneuver my wildlife based on the rotation of my cattle and help put wildlife in the areas that I want them.”

Although serving as a guide is a great way to supplement ranching, some landowners opt to just lease their land to an outfitter and let him worry with the details. Knight says it can be a mutually beneficial relationship. “I’ve had leases where I’ve paid \$60,000 to a landowner specifically for the right to hunt,” Knight says.

Landowner education

He cautions, however, that there are some important factors to consider. “Do your homework and get plenty of references. There are a lot of good outfitters out there, but there are also a lot of fly-by-night outfitters, or people that are just coming in to get the biggest bang for their buck for one year. In my operations, I always try to have term

leases with landowners and put some sort of a management program in place. Because that’s what keeps me in business, just like cattlemen aren’t going to go out and abuse their resource, as a hunter or outfitter you have to do the same thing. You can’t go out there and harvest every elk with horns on it, or pretty soon you will harvest yourself out of business. I try to put a quality management program in place

and get at least three to five years on my leases so I can control the quality and number of animals taken. But you cannot run a management program on a small acreage unless you have a high fence, which we don’t do in Arizona or New Mexico.”

Knight stresses that his landowners reap more rewards than just a paycheck. “I am there on the land, making sure there are no trespassers or vandals. I am out there scouting for elk, mule deer or antelope I can see if cattle are out of place or not where they were supposed to be. Waterers may be broken or a pipeline’s got a hole in it, things like that I can really help the landowner find. It’s a trusting relationship; that’s why you have to pick the right outfitter or hunter to lease your land to.”

One other unique option Knight gives his customers is photo tours. For \$45 an hour per person with a four-hour minimum, Knight gives the public a chance to see the country and wildlife up close and personal. For them it’s a great complement to their motel business for guests. “I’ve lived here my whole life and I know travel patterns and I know where the animals are likely to be,” Knight says. “We’ve taken people to video 200 to 300 head of elk in hay fields.”

It could be a lot bigger business than it is, Knight explains. He just doesn’t have enough time in the day. “We can stay fairly busy doing it through word of mouth. If we advertise a little bit it really picks up.”

Hunting and photo tours are just other ways to offer the public a peek into the lives that ranchers cherish and get paid for it. **HW**