

Riding the Range at Wilson Ranches Retreat

By Liz Crain

Summer days in Central Oregon are sweet and piney from sun-baked juniper and sage. The nights are crisp and clear with starry skies. In early summer the hills are blanketed by wildflowers, everything from lupine to larkspur, while year-round the high desert hills and bunch grass valleys are ribboned by cattle trails and healthy cows seeking green pastures.

Out here, ranchers rule. Among them are fifth-generation ranchers Phil and Nancy Wilson, who own the 9,000-acre Wilson Ranches Retreat Bed & Breakfast in Fossil,

OR, where my boyfriend Tyler and I spent an amazing weekend last summer.

The drive to WRR takes about four hours from Portland, five from Seattle. At dusk, as we made our way down the ranch's gravel road, we had one thing in mind—steak. Not an unusual desire in cattle country.

So when check-in proved to be little more than walking up the steps to the old ranch house and reading a hand-written welcome note next to our key on the entry-way table, we smiled at our luck.

We decided to take a quick walk around the ranch before dinner and as we set out, Tyler noted that we were in rattler country. Scanning the outlying bunch grasses, he said, "The next person to see a snake gets a steak!" Meaning—the winner gets treated to dinner.

No sooner had the word "steak" left his mouth than my flip-flopped foot hovered mid-stride, inches away from squashing a foot-and-a-half-long rattler zipping across the road. Dinner time!

Fossil's population is not much over 400,

Nearby Attractions

JOHN DAY FOSSIL BEDS

541-987-2333, www.nps.gov/joda

The monument's "Clarno Unit" is 18 miles west of Fossil. With nearly 2,000 acres to explore, this is a great spot for day trips into fossilized history.

FOSSIL BEDS AT WHEELER HIGH SCHOOL IN FOSSIL

541-763-4384

Adjacent to the school's football field is an ancient lake bed filled with fossils. From March through October, visitors can pay \$3 admission to explore the lake bed; they may take no more than three fossils.

OREGON PALEO LANDS INSTITUTE

541-763-4480, www.opli.org

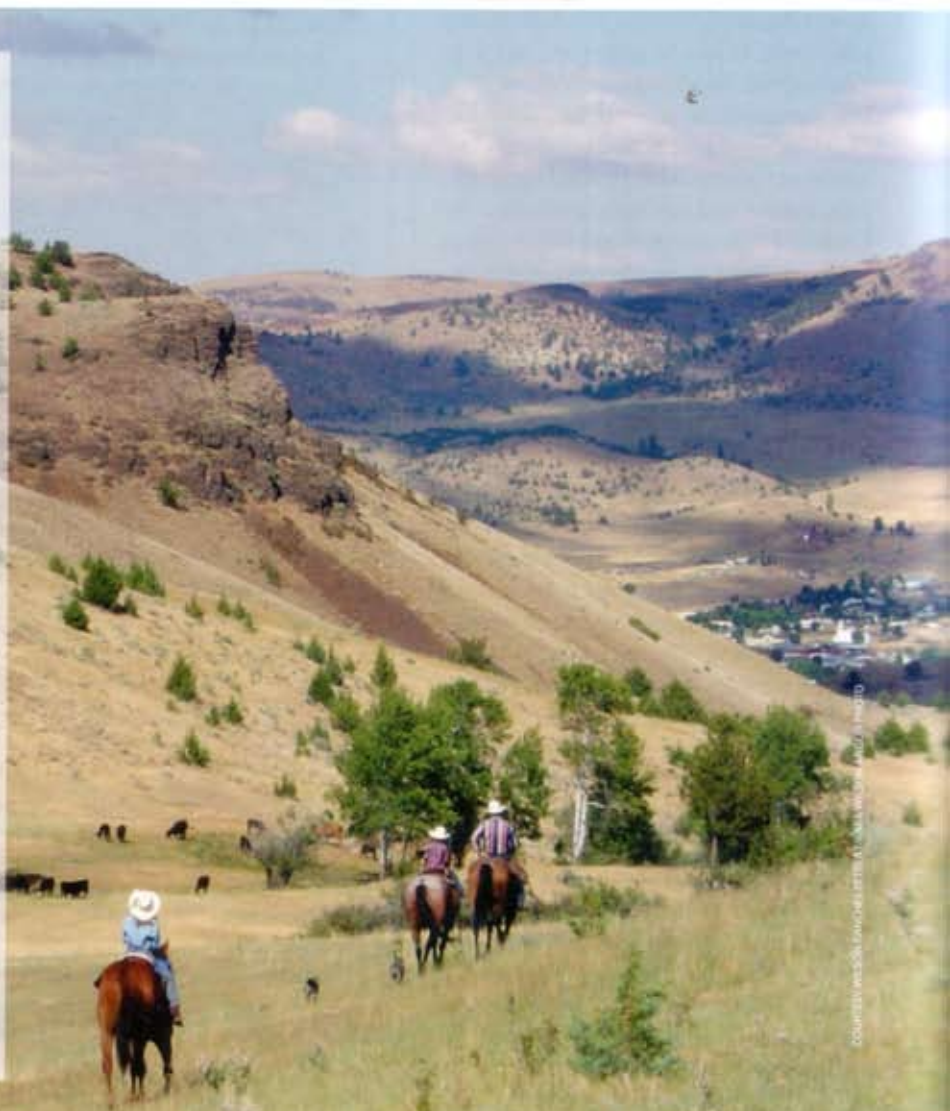
Plan an outdoor workshop with this educational group in Fossil that focuses on North Central Oregon's natural history.

JOHN DAY RIVER FISHING

Lower your lure into the longest undammed river that flows into the Columbia. For a guided trip, the Wilsons recommend Mah-Hah Outfitters (888-624-9424, www.johndayriverfishing.com).

UPLAND GAME BIRD HUNTING

With an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife license, you can hunt chukars, quail, and pheasant from October through January.



COURTESY WILSON RANCHES RETREAT, WWW.WILSONRANCHESRETREAT.COM

French Roll Breakfast Casserole

Courtesy of Nancy Wilson, Wilson Ranches Retreat

Serves 8

4 large French rolls
6 eggs
1½ cups half-and-half
¾ cup milk
1½ tablespoons sugar
¾ teaspoon vanilla extract
¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
Pinch of salt
Praline topping (recipe follows)

Slice the French rolls in half. Butter a 11" x 14" baking pan. In a large bowl combine the eggs, half-and-half, milk, sugar, spices, and salt. Beat until well blended but not too bubbly. Dip each half of a French roll in the mixture and place in the baking pan. Pour the remaining milk-egg mixture evenly

over the rolls. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

In the morning while preparing the Praline Topping, preheat the oven to 350°.

PRALINE TOPPING

½ cup melted butter
¾ cup packed light brown sugar
½ cup chopped pecans
1½ tablespoons light corn syrup
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground nutmeg

Combine all the ingredients in a medium bowl and mix well. Spread the topping evenly over the rolls and bake at 350° for 40 minutes, until puffed and lightly golden. Serve hot.

and the only two restaurants in town are the Big Timber Family Restaurant and the Shamrock. A guest had recommended the latter, so we set off for town. As we walked into the Shamrock we stepped over a sleeping dog. Everyone at the bar turned and stared at us—some with spoons raised, about to stir ice into their sweating glasses of beer.

We ordered two 16-ounce rib-eyes and the bartender-slash-cook stepped into the open kitchen. Setting a quarter of ruby-red local beef on the counter, she sliced into the well-marbled meat, returned the quarter to the cooler, and flat-topped us two juicy pasture-fed steaks, along with salads and twice-baked potatoes. Even I, with my small appetite for big beef, polished my plate.

Back at the ranch we slept well in our upstairs room, one of seven with basic, comfortable amenities. In the morning we awoke early to the smell of bacon. Despite sleeping like snakes with full bellies, we were hungry again. Besides we had to fuel up for the day's cattle drive.

We made our way downstairs for breakfast with our hosts and three other guests. Nancy served up her French roll breakfast casserole, along with thick dry-cured bacon, a pitcher of orange juice, and dark, delicious coffee.

As I ate, my eyes wandered to the U.S. and world maps on the wall. They were studded with pushpins representing the hometowns of the nearly 12,000 guests that the Wilsons have hosted in their seven

years of operation. Oregon was so solid with pushpins that we didn't add another.

Phil and Nancy have 15 horses and 400 head of cattle. Many local ranchers work with beef cooperatives such as Oregon Country Natural Beef and Strawberry Mountain Natural Beef, but the Wilsons remain independent and family-run. Their children Kara, Milne, and Zane help out around the ranch and B&B. "Our goal within five years is to sell all our beef directly to our clients rather than selling our cattle at auction," says Nancy. "Guests are always asking for that because they know exactly what we're doing and how well our cows are raised."

The Wilsons run cattle drives throughout the week, in line with a green-friendly twice-over grazing program that promotes perennial grasses, and guests are always welcome to saddle up and lend a lasso. Last year the Wilsons hosted an 81-year-old woman from California who hadn't ridden a horse since 1948. "She went riding for six hours with her girlfriends on a cattle drive and had a blast," Nancy told me. "She didn't get off her horse once."

While Phil and Nancy and their son Zane hooted, hollered, and corralled the cows, we saddled up and got to know our horses.

Throughout the day, moving cattle from pasture to pasture, we were graced with big-sky horizons and stretches of rolling hills with no sign of man for as far as the eye could see.



Phil Wilson and Wally work hard to give guests a good time at Wilson Ranches Retreat.

Phil and Nancy can be tricksters, so watch out. They've been together since high school, and their communication often hinges on a raised eyebrow or a knowing glance. One day, Phil was talking about Nancy to their guests over breakfast while she busied herself in the kitchen. He bemoaned a couple of his wife's make-believe shortcomings and as she returned to the dining table, he added gravely with downcast eyes, "It's too bad I set my sights so low."

A few moments of uncomfortable silence later, Nancy stood up and said, "I mean, don't you people realize how short I am?" Laughter erupted and napkins were thrown.

Although, I'm sure at times during the cattle drive we were more a hindrance than a help, the Wilsons never let on and allowed us, in very good humor, to take part in everything.

After six hours and a wide circuit of the ranch we returned—a little bow-legged and sun-kissed—and thanked our horses as well as our hosts for such a memorable trip. Unfortunately, we had to be back in Portland that night—work was at our heels.

We gathered our belongings, said our goodbyes, and enviously watched as Phil hung up his cowboy hat, grabbed a bag of leftover bacon from the kitchen, and kicked back, cowboy boots and all, on a comfy chair, with his well-deserved snack.

As for us, we stopped by the Shamrock for two more steaks—no snakes—and a couple of beers on the rocks.

Wilson Ranches Retreat is open year-round; for details, visit www.wilsonranchesretreat.com or call 866-763-2227.

Liz Crain is a freelance food writer based in Portland, OR.