



Whoa, Wildcatter!

Stop the world, shoot some skeet and eat some steak at this history-loving luxury ranch. | By *Connie Dufner* |

There are Texas myths and there is mythic Texas. The former—big oil, big hair, big money, big autos—all true but not the whole truth of Texas. The latter: Sweeping sunsets of puffy pink clouds, salty characters, a place so big that you experience it in unfolding episodes rather than staccato sound bites. That's the feeling we got on a recent trip to Wildcatter Ranch in Graham—as if we had woken up in a strange place but instantly knew it was Texas.

The ranch spans 1,500 acres off State Highway 16, about 90 miles northwest of Fort Worth, with 2.5 miles of frontage along the Brazos River near Possum Kingdom Lake. (Luckily, there has been no damage from recent wildfires.) The seven-year-old property, with 34 rooms and a rockin' steakhouse, is the perfect getaway from the city. But be prepared—getting away means just that. Graham is ghostlike even on a weekend; the closest Starbucks is 60 miles away in Weatherford. And the ranch, while thoughtfully appointed and well-provisioned, isn't exactly equipped with a concierge—that is, unless you count multitasking Jay Brewer, the ranch activities manager, who leads skeet shooting expeditions, horseback riding outings and ATV tours, all with trusty canine Macho.

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No, the appeal of Wildcatter Ranch lies in the sheer physical beauty of its remote setting and the aggressive pride of place, as in, you're in the country so act like it. A word to the wise—order steak, or else the waitress will ask, as ours did: "You're at a steakhouse and you're ordering chicken?"

And that's just the way owner Anne Street Skipper wants guests to experience her ranch. The great granddaughter of Graham's founder and a relative by marriage of the Loving family, for whom the county and the famous Goodnight-Loving cattle trail are named, Skipper also enjoys the ranch's historic ties. For example, there's the matter of *Lonesome Dove*, the epic novel by Larry McMurtry, that fictionalizes the friendship between retired Texas Rangers Woodrow Call and Augustus McCrae, who drove longhorn cattle from Texas to Montana, much like Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving did in 1866 when they drove cattle to Wyoming. "Larry McMurtry will say it is a work of fiction, and it is, with an awful lot of very close historic facts," she says. To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the book winning the Pulitzer Prize, Wildcatter is hosting a *Lonesome Dove* Weekend Sept. 23-25. Guests are encouraged to wear costumes and channel their inner Gus and Call. "Fans of *Lonesome Dove* can repeat every line of

LARGER THAN LIFE
From top: A trail ride along the Brazos River frontage. Luxurious guest cabins sit atop a bluff, each with a wide porch and rocking chairs. Wildcatter Ranch is near the site of the Goodnight-Loving cattle trail.



Gus McCrae; his philosophy and his sayings fit into their daily lives," Skipper says. "I do believe we will have a great weekend, with good conversations about old Western lore and how things really happened." ■

