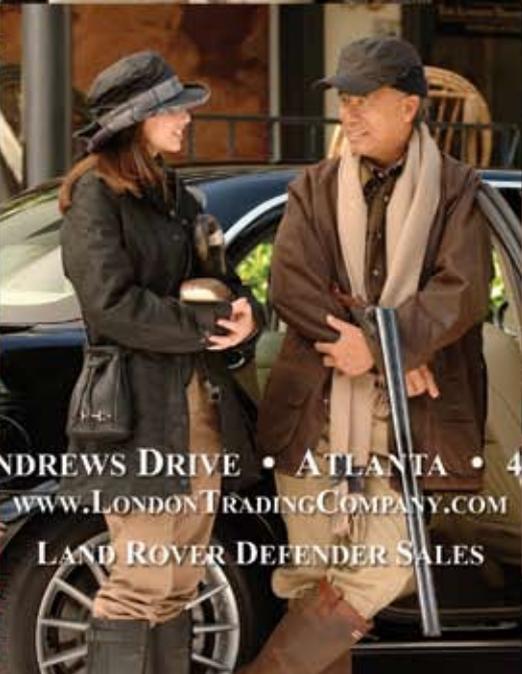




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LAND ROVER DEFENDER SALES

# Wild Heritage

By Todd Tanner



The first time I passed through Pinedale, Wyoming, back in 1994, it was a sleepy little town with great scenery and a couple of wonderful trout streams. Pinedale itself was known for its prime location between the Wind River Mountains and the Wyoming Range, while the surrounding countryside offered some of the best big game habitat in the lower 48. Elk, deer, bear, moose, pronghorn . . . you'd be hard pressed to find a spot with more hunting opportunities. At the same time, the fly fishing on both the upper Green and New Fork rivers was exceptional.

Times change, though, and now Pinedale is afflicted with what you might call Beverly Hillbillies Disease. "There's oil in them thar hills," along with huge fields of natural gas, and the story is playing out pretty much as you'd expect – especially given our nation's indefatigable thirst for energy. Land that used to be critical habitat for mule deer, pronghorn and sage grouse has been bulldozed, roaded and drilled until it looks more like a vast industrial site than some of the best winter range in Wyoming. In fact, let's call a spade a spade. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management is responsible for taking a large chunk of public property – country that used to afford truly excellent big game

*Federal land managers are allowing prime mule deer, pronghorn and sage grouse habitat to be sacrificed on the altar of energy production.*



*A small herd of pronghorns moves past a well near Pinedale, Wyoming where oil and gas drilling are destroying hundreds of thousands of acres of wildlife habitat.*

hunting and wingshooting – and turning it into an open wound that oozes septic liquids and noxious air.

It's enough to drive you crazy. It sure as hell made me want to "re-educate" the politicians, bureaucrats and corporate executives responsible for the mess.

Yet at the same time, we do need to keep in mind that our country depends on cheap, plentiful energy. We fill up our gas tanks when the

fuel gauge drops toward empty, and we turn up our thermostats when the cold weather arrives. If we take oil and gas out of the picture, there's no way we'll continue to enjoy the incredibly luxurious standard of living we take for granted here in the

United States. We can't have it both ways – if we're going to use fossil fuels, we have to accept that there will be some associated environmental costs.

But – and this is one hell of a big "but" – would someone please explain why the energy companies can't figure out how to extract oil and gas without destroying hundreds of thousands of acres of wildlife habitat? After all, the Good Lord isn't

creating any more land for elk, mule deer, pronghorn or sage grouse. Or for hunters, either.

I suppose that all the damage I saw recently in Pinedale would be a little easier to swallow if we were actually doing our very best to protect the places we drill. But we're not. Both the Bureau of Land Management (which is in charge of issuing the vast majority of leases for the area) and the energy companies themselves are fixated on minimizing production costs at the same time they maximize oil and gas extraction and profits. Anything that stands in the way of those primary objectives – for example,

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protecting mule deer wintering grounds or sage grouse leks from unnecessary development – gets the short end of the stick.

In fact, a former BLM biologist who worked extensively on the oil and gas fields near Pinedale told me about federal managers directing their underlings to ignore the BLM's multiple-use mandate and concentrate on issuing as many drilling permits as possible; about oil company executives walking into BLM offices and demanding that biologists sign off on drilling permits they hadn't yet studied; about BLM managers stating that required wildlife studies were pure window dressing – the fix was in and the new drilling permits were going to be issued regardless of the biological opinion; about BLM employees who were so afraid of losing their jobs that they were unwilling to report the unethical or illegal behavior they witnessed on a regular basis.

In short, the Bureau of Land Management is taking valuable wildlife habitat that they've been entrusted to manage, land that belongs to every single American, and turning it over lock, stock and barrel to energy companies who have very little incentive to protect the public domain. I'm not sure how the BLM squares this approach with their mission statement: "It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations." But the lack of planning, the lack of oversight and the blatant disregard for wildlife habitat are obvious to anyone who visits places like the Jonah Field or the Pinedale Anticline.

Which doesn't mean that a handful of responsible companies and some courageous federal employees aren't working to protect the area's more sensitive landscapes, or to mitigate the damages that have already occurred. There are obviously some ethical individuals trying to make the

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best of a difficult situation, and these people deserve a tremendous amount of credit for their work. But in the end, we're left with two big losers: wildlife and sportsmen.

I asked Dr. Rollin Sparrowe, past president of the Wildlife Management Institute and a recipient of The Wildlife Society's prestigious Aldo Leopold Memorial Award, how he'd address the situation. Dr. Sparrowe, who spent 22 years at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and has three degrees in wildlife biology and management, lives just outside Pinedale. His suggestions were eminently practical:

1) Create a comprehensive plan for each stage of well-field development, based on solid baseline data on habitats and wildlife.

This requires balancing development with wildlife needs, and moving away from the "maximum extraction" approach currently championed by both leaseholders and the BLM.

2) Establish a transparent decision-making process that assures the public's interest in wildlife and other land values are treated equally with oil and gas production. Corporations currently have far more influence on development decisions than the general public (including sportsmen and conservationists).

3) Federal land managers must be held accountable for the promises they make to the American people. At the same time, regulations that protect wildlife and habitat should be enforced, not ignored.

4) The BLM needs to institute a real adaptive management plan, where the government (and leaseholders) learn from past mistakes and adjust well-field operations to minimize the negative impacts on wildlife.

As Dr. Sparrowe noted, "The majority of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management have been leased to oil and gas interests. Core portions of these

  
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lands are critical wildlife habitat for winter, migration, and reproduction. On significant areas with the highest wildlife values, gas deposits have exceeded expectations and their rapid development has been demonstrated to adversely affect mule deer, sage grouse, and pronghorn. Current forecasts are for much more intensive development in core wildlife habitats and expansion into as yet only lightly developed habitats.”

While there’s no chance that we’re going to walk away from our dependence on oil or natural gas in the near future, we shouldn’t have to sacrifice our finest big game and upland bird habitat on the altar of energy production. By any standard, including their own internal assessments, the Bureau of Land Management has failed to honor its commitments to the public. It’s about time that the government decided to respect its mandate to “sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

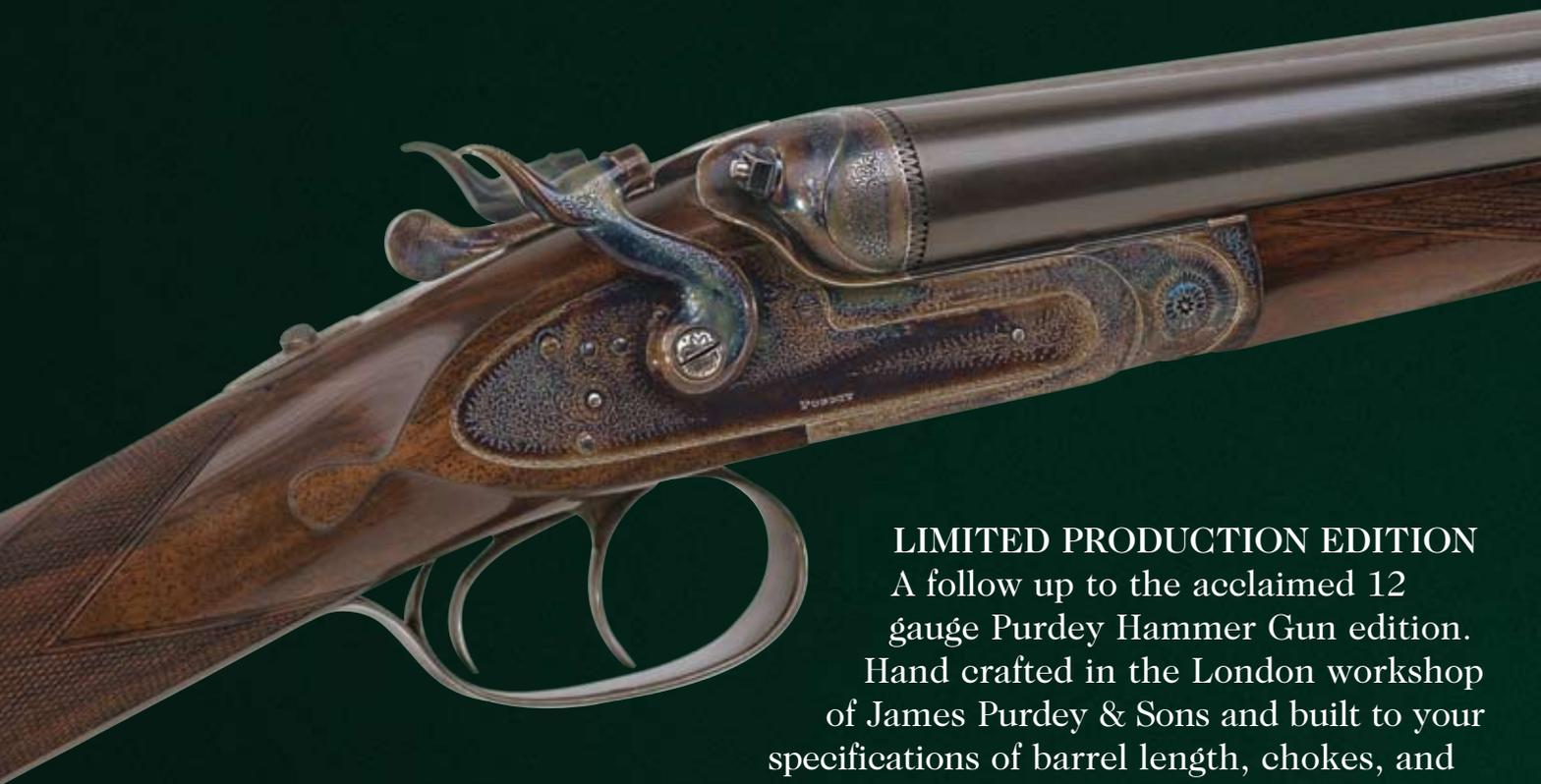
The problem, of course, is that it’s currently “business as usual” at the BLM, and that’s not likely to change unless hunters and fishermen start raising Cain. So in the end, it’s up to us. We can demand that our Federal government uses sensible scientific guidelines when it comes to energy development on BLM and Forest Service lands (there are currently plans for as many as 10,000 additional wells in the Pinedale area alone, along with all the related roads, traffic and pipelines) or we can sit on our backsides and watch some of the finest big game habitat on the continent get trashed.

From where I sit, that’s an easy call. So let’s make a point of letting the people in charge – our Congressmen and Senators, as well as President Bush and Secretary of the Interior Kempthorne – know where we stand on this vital issue. Because when it comes to saving the places we hunt, the choices are pretty damn simple. You’re either with us or against us. 🇺🇸

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