



THE LAST ROUNDUP

**On the slopes of Mauna Kea,
two cowboys chase down the descendants
of King Kamehameha's cattle**

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In the two hours it takes to drive from Waimea to the high rangelands, the cowboys recite a list of everything they hate about their job. “I sure won’t miss this road,” says Tyler, catching a faceful of dust as he hangs his head out the window to watch his truck’s wheels on the pitted gravel road.

“I won’t miss the mud,” says Sheldon. It’s been mostly dry on the mountain this year, but mud is an everyday fact when you work in the clouds. For these cowboys, driving the long, rough track is the first leg of a wearying routine: They catch cattle for three or four days, then spend the time in between sleeping it off and working steady, predictable jobs. Tyler builds fences. Sheldon is a journeyman electrician. “I won’t miss driving back down over the saddle after not sleeping for four days,” Tyler says.

Every weekend for the last five years, Tyler Cran and Sheldon Mattos have gone up Mauna Kea. Best friends since high school, the 30-year-olds are business partners who round up feral cattle on the mountain and take them to slaughter.

The volcano gets drier as the road gains elevation. A carpet of bright, mustard-yellow flowers splays out on either side of the road, spilling down the slopes and climbing toward the summit. It is stunning. Yet in this, the last year of their contract, they no longer notice. They continue to list things they won’t be sorry to leave as the truck grinds upward. The cold. The wind. The isolation. “When we first got this job, everyone said it would be so cool—we could camp up here, even live up here,” Sheldon says. “Now when people say, ‘I would never come down,’ I tell them, ‘Oh, you would come down. Or you would go insane.’ Now when I get into town I start talking to everybody; I say hello to strangers, I’m so desperate for conversation. I am not going to miss that at all.”

Their good-riddance list settles on the one thing they are there for: cattle. They

definitely will not miss stalking the wild Hawaiian kine.

“I used to think cattle were all the same,” says Tyler. “But these have different temperaments. Something just drives them. They are mean.” Tyler could be a cowboy poster child: ten-gallon hat on the dash, dip spit in every empty can. He’s been ranching his whole life—the Crans took over Kapapala Ranch in 1978 from Parker Ranch’s owners. His grandfather Gordon Cran is in the Paniolo Hall of Fame, and he, too, herded cattle on Mauna Kea’s slopes.

“Herefords,” Sheldon adds. He’s a rancher, too, from a long line of Hawaiian paniolo, or cowboys. “They’re vicious.”

Sheldon and Tyler are hunting the direct descendants of King Kamehameha’s cattle, given to the monarch by the great navigator Captain George Vancouver on behalf of England’s King George. The cattle arrived in Hawai‘i in 1793 aboard Vancouver’s ship, HMS *Discovery*. A grateful Kamehameha let the animals roam freely and placed a kapu, or restriction, that forbade anyone to harm them. Without natural predators or competition, the cattle overbred. They arrived in the area where Tyler and Sheldon now work around 1820, scholars believe. In the nearly two hundred years since, Hawai‘i Island has become home to some of the country’s leading ranches. It’s also home to many of America’s last herds of wild cattle.

Vancouver reported in his log that he was pleased with himself and “the particular attention paid by Tamaahmaah [Kamehameha] to the placing of these animals in

the canoes. This business was principally done by himself.” The maka‘āinana (commoners) were less thrilled, as the cattle—which they called pua‘a pepeiao hao, or “pigs with iron ears”—ran wild and terrorized villages. While Vancouver was certain he had done the Islands a favor, today the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands (DHHL) is not so sure; they’re looking these gift cattle in the mouth.

The Humu‘ula and Pi‘ihonua lands—56,200 acres on Mauna Kea’s windward slope—are now being restored to a semblance of their pre-contact, pre-bovine glory. The history of Humu‘ula and Pi‘ihonua is contentious. They are ceded lands, once the property of the Hawaiian monarchy, taken in the overthrow of the kingdom. Once the windward slope has been rehabilitated, though, it will become home- stead land for Native Hawaiians. Tyler and Sheldon are crucial to the resolution of that long fight for spiritual, cultural and historic restitution.

But first the cattle have to go, not so much because they are problematic in themselves (which they are), but because they make another problem even worse. An invasive plant, gorse, has choked out ancient ‘ōhi‘a and koa forests that once blanketed Mauna Kea. All those yellow flowers along the road are gorse; it is swallowing the upper rangelands whole, and cattle are gorse vectors. They shade in its thorny bough, carrying away the seeds on their coats and in their hooves.

“If I had to invent a weed from hell, it would be gorse,” says Mike Robinson, the forester leading the ‘Āina Mauna res-

Wild Hawaiian kine: The descendants of King Kamehameha I’s cattle have been roaming freely on Mauna Kea for two centuries, and they are feral—which makes catching them a dangerous proposition. “I used to think cattle were all the same,” says Tyler Cran (seen on the opening spread). “But these are different. Something just drives them. They are mean.”

toration for DHHL. But gorse’s single weakness, its kryptonite, is simply shade. By planting tropical hardwoods on Mauna Kea, DHHL aims to eventually shade out the gorse. An added benefit: Once mature, the trees can be harvested by Native Hawaiian communities for commercial timber. A win-win. But things must begin with the cattle, because while they don’t eat gorse, they happily munch koa saplings, which can’t survive their grazing. Another complication: While shade will kill a gorse plant, the seeds can survive in the soil for as long as seventy years. It takes only one pig to dig one hole and gorse seed will sprout decades after the parent is gone. With this in mind, the ‘Āina Mauna Legacy Program is scheduled to take a hundred years.

It starts with two lone paniolo clearing the last major herd of wild cattle in the Hawaiian Islands. Tyler and Sheldon have already hauled more than three thousand head to Kulana Foods or Hawaii Beef Packers, where they’re slaughtered; the meat is distributed locally to Foodland, KTA and other outlets. The pair figure they have another 1,500 or so to go before the year is out, their contract completed and the mountain declared cattle-free. The work has not been easy, and they swear they will not miss it.

Turning off the road toward a gate marked “kapu,” Tyler drives to a pond where a flock of six nēnē paddle serenely in the sun. Parker Ranch dug and piped this drinking hole when it worked this land. When ownership transferred to DHHL in 2002, the water holes and infrastructure were left behind. In dry conditions, water holes make a paniolo’s job simple: They become bait. Build a barbed-wire fence around the hole with pens at one end. When the cattle walk through the one-way gate to drink, they’re caught.

This works, though, only when it’s dry. When it rains the cattle simply lie down and lick moisture from the grass. If it doesn’t rain, they sleep during the heat of the day, then roam at night and in the mornings looking for water. But there’s

no predicting weather on Mauna Kea; the mountain makes its own weather. At the moment the tradewinds have been gone for weeks, and Hawai‘i has seen nothing but dry Kona winds, so the traps are working. But when the trades return and the rain with them, the cowboys will have to try baiting the traps with salt and molasses—expensive but necessary. As the afternoon beats on, the sky turns gray and clouds crowd in. “It might rain,” Tyler says.

As traps go, this design is simple and elegant. It might even be called easy, if ever there were a one-ton wild animal that enjoyed being caught. It would be simpler to shoot every single animal—Sheldon and Tyler could take down three thousand head in a single year—but then they wouldn’t be able to salvage the meat. If there is hunger in Hawai‘i, reasons DHHL, then these cattle ought to feed people. The department struck a deal with the cowboys: Keep the proceeds from any animal they catch and sell. Because the slaughterhouses pay only for good meat (\$.20 to \$.80 per pound), nothing beaten up or bruised, Sheldon and Tyler must catch the Mauna Kea cattle gently to make a profit.

Not so easy. Especially when, repeats Tyler squinting at the gathering clouds, “it might rain.”

Tyler turns off the road into a lush forest. The road here is green as a lawn, and the temperature has dropped twenty degrees. In the mist are outlines of gnarled koa and ‘ōhi‘a. The hillocks, gullies and mossy pu‘u (hills) are spooky and parklike, an imagined landscape in a fairy tale. If Hawai‘i Island contains all but two of the world’s climate zones—no glaciated tundra, no dune desert—which one is this haunted woodland?

It’s beautiful, but it’s also an ecological calamity, says Robinson. Before Western contact the forest had a crown-to-crown, leaf-to-leaf canopy. Post-contact, timber was logged to melt blubber in the whaling trade. Then came the cattle, which trample and eat seedlings. In recent droughts Vancouver’s cattle girdled the ‘ōhi‘a by chewing off the bark all the way around, killing

the trees outright. As dramatic as these foggy slopes are, they cannot currently support a native forest, nor are they a suitable home site for Native Hawaiians.

We continue driving down into the darkening, wet woods and spot our first feral cattle. They are enormous and plentiful. At the sound of the truck, the herd scatters. Five years into the hunt, they’ve learned to be afraid. Hulking, horned beasts lope over the gulches, ridgelines and creeks. Mothers flee with calves. We hear them calling, lowing. The solitary bulls stand their ground, spoiling for a fight.

In this forest, only Kamehameha’s Herefords can be found, says Sheldon. These woods are too perpetually wet for water-hole traps and too unfriendly for domestic cattle gone feral. When the rains come, the road washes away completely, so the paniolo drive in on bulldozers, hauling in ATVs instead of horses. Here they chase cattle into deep, wide-jawed drive traps. In tandem, Tyler and Sheldon direct the herd into a pen and slam the gate closed. Then they double back for stragglers and rope the mean ones to trees. On the bikes they zigzag over moguls, with mostly two wheels down, two in the air. One time a rear axle fell clean off; it hung on only by a brake cable. Another time, a bull hooked a bike in its side. It just kept going, circling around the pivoting bull.

Dangerous, but not nearly as much as once the animals are caught. One time Tyler and Sheldon were inside the drive pen, tag-teaming a bull, taunting it, trying to move it along, when it turned and charged Sheldon. He jumped to climb the wall with muddy boots, but his foot slipped. He got hooked. “The bull just kept massaging his legs, back and forth. He wouldn’t leave him alone,” Tyler says. “I was so mad.”

Early on Tyler and Sheldon brought friends up to ride and rope on weekends, but it proved too dangerous. One day a buddy, Keola Kawaihae, lassoed a bull and took it down, then tied its four legs together, a routine move that any Hawai‘i Island paniolo has trained for since he could ride. But mountain bulls are nasty

Ride ‘em: Cran drives cattle on an ATV. With his partner Sheldon Mattos, Cran is clearing the cattle to begin the century-long process of restoring the denuded slopes on the windward side of Mauna Kea, which were once forested by koa and ‘ōhi‘a trees like those seen on the next spread. The eventual goal is to create commercial koa forest and homesteads for Native Hawaiians.









and determined. The bull ripped one leg clear, and with three bound legs it stood, chased Keola and knocked him high in the air. The kid landed with a thud. He was lucky the bull didn't have horns; it was feral from ranch stock, Sheldon says. After that, Tyler decided that the mountain wasn't a place for playing cowboy with pals. "You've always got to have someone watch your back," says Sheldon.

Occasionally it's not a "someone" who's got your back. Tyler was once chasing a bull on horseback; he roped him, dallied up on the saddle horn, then tied the bull to a tree. But the branch gave way. Suddenly his horse Hammer was all that held the weight of a furious bull, locked in an interspecies tug of war. "It takes so much heart for a horse to do that," Tyler says. "Such a huge heart. They trust you as much as you trust them."

The price of beef has made such risks easier to bear. When Tyler first took on the contract, the low price of cattle and the steep learning curve made it a losing proposition. He spent more on gear, gas, horses and maintenance than he could make on the meat. Now, though, reservoirs are drying up in California and Texas. There have been cold snaps in the West and droughts in Brazil. The cattle supply in the United States is at its lowest in sixty-five years, while demand for beef is rising. Prices are hitting record highs. It's been a good year for King Kamehameha's meat.

The DHHL contract has not only become a boon for the two men and their families, but it's strengthened their friendship, says Tyler's wife Taira. "I definitely get jealous of Sheldon, his other wife," she tells me over dinner. "He gets to spend more time with him than I do. But I don't know if it's because of Sheldon or because of roping the cows." Taira is an O'ahu surf champ who still seems starry-eyed that she could fall so hard for a cowboy that she'd be willing to live far from the breaks. "This is pretty much my second marriage," Tyler agrees. "If I'm in a bad mood, Sheldon knows what I need, sight unseen, without us talking. I wouldn't want to do this with anybody but Sheldon. Weird, but it works."

Time on the mountain has weathered and aged these friends. They have grown dusty, callused, handsome and pragmatic. "I've watched those men grow up on that hill," says Robinson, who gave them the contract five years ago and takes an avuncular pleasure in the pair's accomplishments. After forty years in the forest, Robinson is looking toward retirement. His work on Mauna Kea will be a career capstone, and Tyler and Sheldon his last colleagues. "They're just nice guys," he says. "Honest and nice."

It didn't rain overnight. In the morning, Tyler drives up to check the traps. He idles the truck beneath an 'ōhi'a tree, grabs a rope and steps toward the trap, tacking a wide circle around the tree. Each step is deliberate, light-footed and slow. The caged cattle get twitchy as he approaches. Bulls dip their heads and kick at the red dirt, snorting and ready to charge. Tyler two-steps swiftly up to the gate and ropes it shut.

One cow is trapped within the barbed wire but not inside the holding pen; she must have jumped over the panels and is now standing idly on the bank drinking away, neither in the trap nor free to roam. Tyler paces toward her. She sees him and keeps slurping, alert and alone. He gets nearer, lasso coiled for when she panics. We hear a bleat as the cow bursts through the barbed wire fence, ripping it completely with the force of her body. "Some respect the wire, some just bulldoze through it," Taira had said, giving a new literalism to the word. The cow flees into the dense gorse, leaving long threads of hair hanging on the slack wire.

There are now six cattle in the pen: two bulls, a calf, three cows. Tyler has to shuttle them from the lower pen into a higher enclosure so he can set the trap for another night. But the cattle will not move away from water. The paniolo climbs the panels and swings his lasso. With a single throw they are spooked. The cows cluster into the upper enclosure, and the bulls stay behind to fight. Tyler lobes a second throw. The bulls, too, get startled into the upper pen.

Six cattle caught. They have booked twenty head for the slaughterhouse by Tuesday. If the second water-hole trap works as well as the first, Tyler will have made more than half his commitment to the market in a single night.

No such luck. The trap at the second water hole is empty. There are no cattle anywhere. The trap's door is swung wide open as though it has a welcome sign on it: Drinks are on the house. "It happens," Tyler says.

At the end of a four-day weekend on Mauna Kea, Tyler and Sheldon can barely even see, says Tyler. "I always think I see cows in the middle of Saddle Road."

"I know I've seen something in the road," says Sheldon. Night marchers? "Maybe, but they had better leave me alone, I'm so tired."

Time on the mountain has shaped their adult life, and now that era is ending. What will they do when it is over? "I'll get up at seven when it's gone," Sheldon says.

"I won't miss the unpredictability a bit," says Tyler. He and Taira are talking about starting a family. He wants to focus on fencing, where he can estimate hours and bill for materials without having to account for weather or ornery bulls or plain bad luck.

"There will be nothing running at me angry or hooking me," says Sheldon.

Then again, they might not be finished with wild cattle yet. Tyler has been selecting wean-offs from the traps for his own future ranch. The descendants of King Kamehameha's cattle might no longer roam free on the volcano, but they are by no means gone.

By New Year's Eve 2016, a legacy from the time of Hawai'i's kings will surrender to its last sundown. "It was a lifelong dream of mine to do something like this," Tyler says. "We might bad-mouth it, but there's something that keeps us going. There's nothing like it. When the sun comes up, we realize it's taught us a lot about life," Tyler says.

"It is a privilege," Sheldon agrees. "No one gets to do this." HH

New-school paniolo: Mattos (left) and Cran plan their approach. The pair are in the last year of their contract with the Department of Hawaiian Homelands and have rounded up some three thousand head. While the work is hard, the weather brutal and the rewards uncertain, for paniolo like these, "It's a privilege," says Mattos. "No one gets to do this."