

Hillingdon Ranch, Four Seasons, Six Generations

by David K. Langford and Lorie Woodward Cantu; forewords by Andrew Sansom and Steve C. Lewis;
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the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, Texas State University

Book Review by DAVID BAXTER

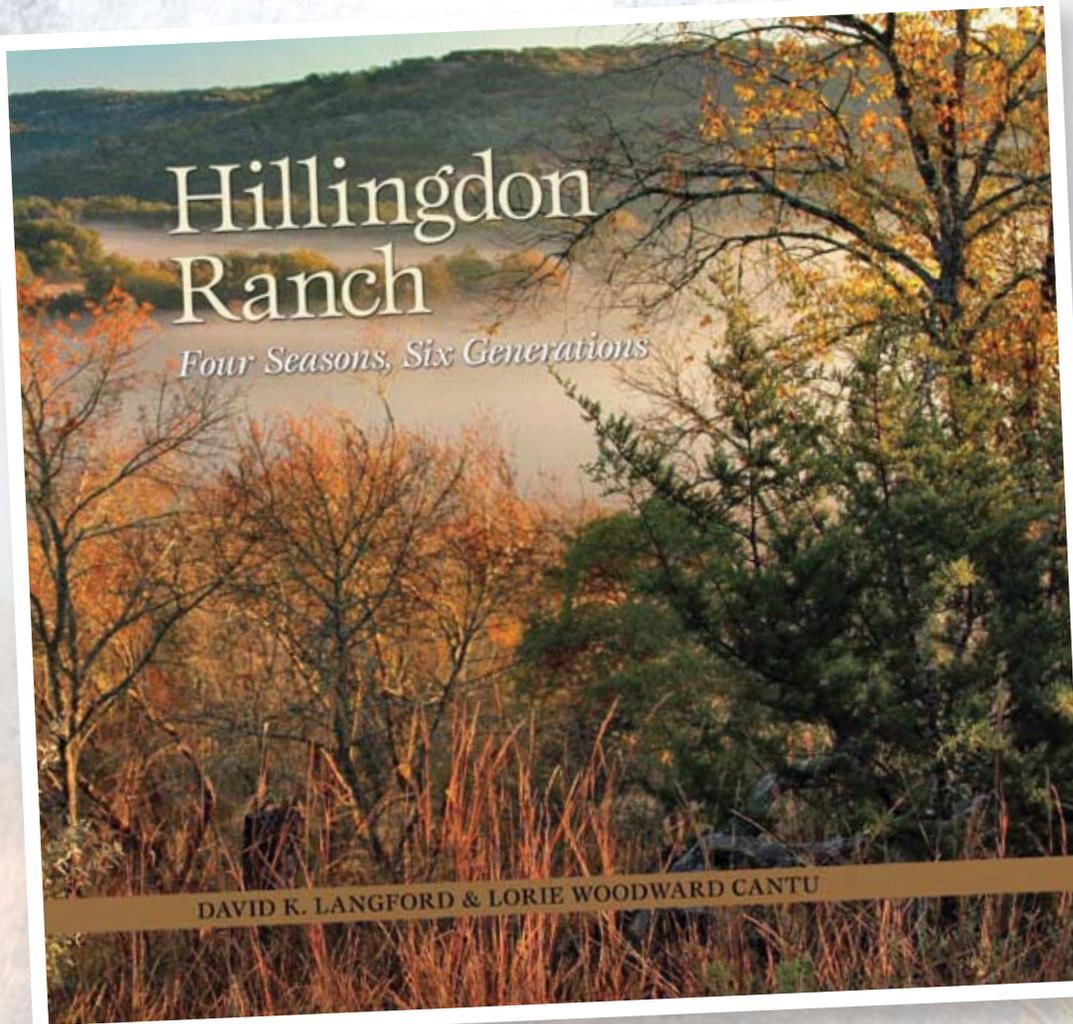


Photo © Lillian P. Russell



Photo © Kim Rollwitz

TWA stalwarts David K. Langford and Lorie Woodward Cantu have collaborated with Texas A&M University Press to produce Hillingdon Ranch, Four Seasons, Six Generations, a handsome chronicle of the Giles Family ranch in Kendall County spanning the seasons and the generations.

It's a long ways from Hillingdon, Middlesex, England, to Kendall County, Texas; a long ways in distance, culture and, most significantly, climate. The English Hillingdon is green from regular, gentle rains brought in by the Gulf Stream. The Texas Hillingdon can be green, sometimes. When it does rain in Kendall County, and the rest of the Texas Hill Country, it often comes in buckets, making up deficits in a matter of hours, carrying off topsoil, livestock and sometimes the ranchers themselves if their land is not properly managed. There are few soft English showers in this part of the world.

This is the story of the Kendall County Hillingdon, a 13,000-acre ranch first established in the mid-1880s by Alfred Giles, a native

of Hillingdon Middlesex, who came to Texas for his health after suffering a bout of rheumatic fever. Plentiful water from Block, Flat Rock and Loma Chiva Creeks and their associated springs drew Giles, as it has drawn settlers before and since. This bit of the Texas Hill Country, with its proximity to San Antonio, tops the list of places drawing urban dwellers in search of their piece of the outdoors. Each year brings more subdivisions and ranchettes with their demands on the landscape, wildlife and, especially, its water.

More than a history of a Texas ranch, *Hillingdon, Four Seasons, Six Generations*, is an allegory of a family and the land, how their stewardship for more than 100 years has sustained Hillingdon and how that land has nurtured and shaped Alfred Giles' descendants.



David K. Langford is the great-grandson of Alfred Giles. Langford is familiar to TWAers as Executive Vice President from 1990 to 2002, and he continues to lend them his voice after retirement. Before coming to TWA, Langford had a career as a photographer, and his photographs of Hillingdon's four seasons are the palette of this book.

Langford took most of the photos between October 2010 and March 2012. During that time, some 20 inches of rain fell on Hillingdon, its driest 17 months ever, including the 1950s with its drought of record, a record well on the way to being broken.

Narrative of Hillingdon's six generations comes from Lorie Woodward Cantu, another longtime TWAer who once served as this magazine's managing editor and who continues to provide feature stories. The Langford/Cantu team goes back a ways. Says Langford, "I put ideas in her head, and she puts words in my mouth. After she writes it, I know what I think."

Cantu's seasonal narrative focuses on two current Hillingdon families: Robin Giles – grandson of patriarch Alfred – wife Carol, son Grant and his wife Misty. These are Hillingdon's operating partners, responsible for managing the ranch as a contiguous unit, even though almost every pasture of the original ranch is owned by different family members, including David and Myrna Langford, who live on their Laurels Ranch portion. The Giles quartet provides the daily management, with the backing of other family members committed to keeping Hillingdon intact and functioning.

The Giles team yearly negotiates leases with some 24 members of

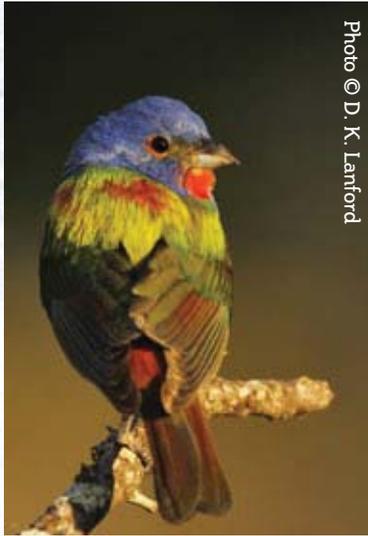


Photo © D. K. Langford

It's hard to mistake a male painted bunting for any other bird. It and many other songbird species thrive at Hillingdon, in part from cowbird control work and the ranch's generally well-managed habitat.

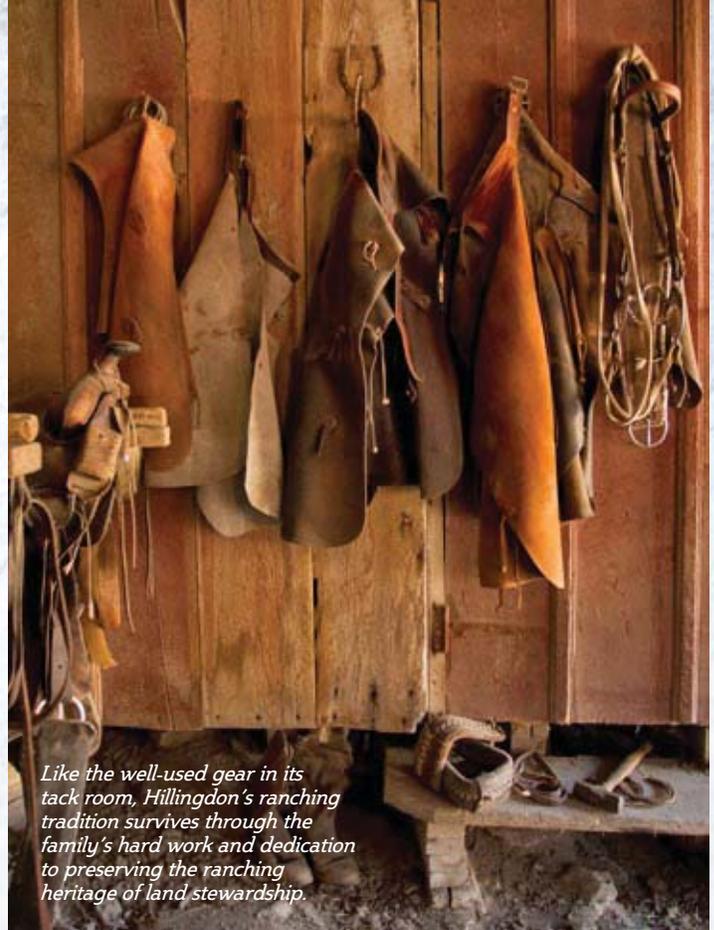


Photo © D. K. Langford

Like the well-used gear in its tack room, Hillingdon's ranching tradition survives through the family's hard work and dedication to preserving the ranching heritage of land stewardship.

the family, runs sheep, Angora goats and cattle, including descendants of the original Angus that Alfred imported from Scotland. They see to fences, water gaps, windmills, gates, predator control and, lately, adjust ranching operations to accommodate mountain bikers that provide yet another cash flow to Hillingdon. "Better to innovate and expand revenue sources and keep pastures filled with goats and bikers than filled with asphalt and rooftops," said Robin Giles.

And those rooftops and asphalt roads are just over the horizon.

Hillingdon, like every well-managed Texas ranch, serves as a huge sponge, soaking up ever-precious rain and slowly releasing it into its creeks, then downstream into the Guadalupe River to quench the thirst of all Texas citizens. As the rooftops creep closer, they nibble at the fence lines of Hillingdons everywhere, shrinking and fragmenting vital habitat, paving over the stewardship of people such as Robin, Carol, Grant and Misty Giles, muffling the voices of people such as Langford and Cantu.

Hillingdon Ranch is a rallying cry for urban and rural Texans to understand their intertwined fortunes and combine their substantial talents and energies towards "... policies that conserve the common good, while protecting the heritage of private landowners."

With that collective force, the Kendall County Hillingdon and hundreds of other private lands will continue to prosper for all Texans. The Middlesex Hillingdon is now part of London's western boroughs and home to Heathrow Airport – plenty of rooftops and asphalt there. 🐾

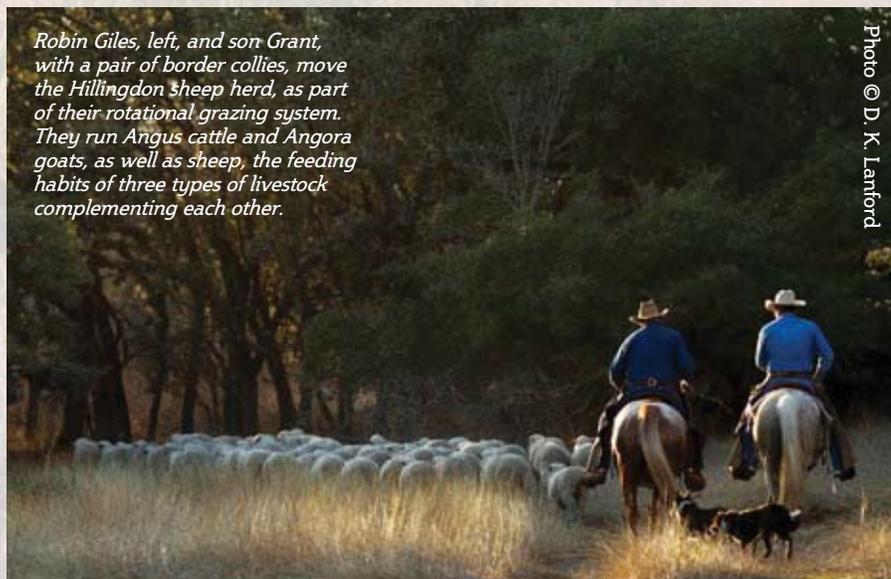


Photo © D. K. Langford

Robin Giles, left, and son Grant, with a pair of border collies, move the Hillingdon sheep herd, as part of their rotational grazing system. They run Angus cattle and Angora goats, as well as sheep, the feeding habits of three types of livestock complementing each other.

