Gregg Vinson leans out the open driver's side window of the white Jeep. "Hey, Mama!" he calls. "You're fat, Mama!" He maneuvers his torso back into the car and turns to me. "I love my cows. I really do."

Gregg drives across the ranch's rolling hills, narrating the story of every animal we encounter. That cow just gave birth—she's a good strong cow. Auburn hair ripples shiny over taut muscles. "See that one over there?" he says, referring to a thinner cow ambling across the pasture. She has a six brand—born in 2006. "She's getting old. Her hair isn't as shiny. It's time for her," he says, and then leans out the window to tell the cow just that. "You've had a good life, Mama!" He returns. "She's been here fighting off mountain lions for nine years. She's a good strong cow, but now it's her time. So why shouldn't she become food? We think that's reasonable."

A lifelong Arizona rancher, Gregg Vinson, 60, owns and runs the Jojoba Beef Company with his son, Gary Vinson, 33. The name refers to the meat from cows raised entirely on a range filled with jojoba plants, a dense green scrub with small leaves and nutrient-dense seeds better known for the oil they produce.

Their ranch, called A Diamond Ranch, spreads across 22,000 acres—six square miles—of upper Sonoran desert scrub. This is copper country—the meandering Gila River is just visible at the bottom of a valley rolling with hills the color of a rusted copper pot: splotches of turquoise sagebrush, amber dirt, green prickly pear, olive green jojoba. Visible from the ranch's highest point is the open-pit copper mine in Ray, where 250,000 tons of ore are extracted every single day.

To raise cattle on wild desert scrub, you take a very big piece of land, section it off into pastures, and rotate the cattle across those pastures, giving each section of land time to breathe and grow anew. The word pasture evokes rolling green hills and even squares, but a pasture is simply any fenced piece of land, and here, a pasture is measured by access to water. "Water in a desert ranching operation is the limiting factor," says Gary. "Water is life."

Since they bought the ranch in March of 2013, Gary and Gregg have installed nearly 15 miles of pipeline and installed five solar pumps in place of petroleum-powered generators to pump well water into those pipelines. "You don't need to finish cattle on irrigated pastures," Gregg says. He mutters numbers, his voice twangy and slow: "Two hundred times twice is twenty-four hundred times three-sixty-five." Finally, he concludes that they're using about four acre-feet of water every year to sustain their 200 head of cattle. "It's not very much water at all," he says. "*One cow* on irrigated farmland will use four acre-feet of water."

Gregg Vinson and his son, Gary (right), raise cattle on wild desert scrub for their Jojoba Beef Company.

(Above) Cows are weaned from their mothers at around nine months; Gregg and Gary will keep them close at hand for a couple of weeks to let them settle down and gain some weight before releasing them back onto the range. (Below) Jojoba seeds are a large part of the diet of these desert-bred cows.

Gary and Gregg—but mostly Gary—spend their days moving cattle from pasture to pasture, spreading their impact across the land. "We make quick, intensive moves," says Gary. During the summer, cattle wander the lowlands, near the river. When it rains, the cows wander high in the hills to find grass. When it gets hot again, they come to the river to munch on mesquite pods and slurp cool water. When cold air collects in the valley, they leave the river bottom and sleep on the ridges, seeking sun.

"The way to manage the ranch is simply to try to figure out the way animals roamed and ate a thousand years ago," says Gary. "How did animals behave without human intervention? We try to mimic that for our rotation."

These cattle are a breed called Beefmaster, a mix of Hereford, Shorthorn, and Brahman developed during the Great Depression to withstand drought. They will live long lives out on the range before they become beef—4 to 12 years, depending on the animal. That, compared to a conventional operation, where cattle are slaughtered between 2 and 3 years old. Gregg and Gary's cows often birth between eight and 10 calves, so it's worth their time to invest in their animals, to make sure they know how to survive and thrive in a wild landscape. Mountain lions take a few of their calves every year, but that's just the cost of doing business in the West, Gregg says.

Because they're older when they go to the slaughterhouse, the meat is less tender. "I'm trying to teach our customers that there's no association between tenderness and flavor," says Gregg. "Chewy is good. This is an old cow—it's lived a long life on the ranch, and so all those life flavors are in the meat."

Jagged mountains frame the bright sky, the edge of White Canyon Wilderness visible in the distance. "We process cattle twice a year in response to rainfall," says Gregg as we descend back to the ranch house. "The rain causes a lot of grass to grow. And then it gets dry and the grass dries up. That's pure carbohydrates. Ranchers have always known that if you want to get fat, eat carbohydrates."

"Part of gathering is habituating the cows and habituating to the cows," says Gary. "If you habituate the cows and understand how they move, then you have to do less gathering."

Gregg really wants people to understand that when done properly, cattle grazing on wild forage can *improve* a piece of land. "Animals grind up the pasture with their hooves. They chew species down to where they're supposed to be, and then they grind that carbonaceous material into the ground. I can tell you exactly how many tons of manure I'm putting onto this pasture."

That movement of manure and carbon helps the soil hold water and build organic matter, leaving the land more fertile than it began. "We're conservation ranchers," Gregg says. "It's very important to our customers that we are that. Urban people don't have much control over what goes on out on the land. This is all public land. Our customers know when they buy our beef that we are managing our land. They feel a part of it." And they know that this attention extends beyond the cattle to the other wildlife sharing this space—mule deer, javelina, quail.

When I ask him why he's a conservation rancher, Gregg pauses, surprised. "For me personally, it's stewardship," he says, finally. "I have a deep sense of taking care of something and not abusing it."

He loves selling beef at the farmers' market, the only place they do. Gregg tells customers worried about eating animals that "death in the natural world is very slow and very cruel. These cows have lived a long life on the range and it's their time to die. We take them to the processor and then it's done. It's a good way to go."

"Ranching is a noble profession," says Gregg. "When Gary was a kid, I used to wake him and say, 'You've got to get up and feed the world.'" He pauses. "There's a little struggle to it, of course, but nothing worth doing doesn't have a little struggle."