



A HOME ON THE RANGE

For a native western couple living on the East Coast, it was all about the land. Their mission—to find the perfect ranch property, no matter how remote—took them to almost ninety properties scattered across Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. It was the husband who had a lifelong dream of owning a ranch; he had grown up hunting and fishing. It was the wife who undertook the search. The moment she glimpsed the property that would become their ranch, a dramatic site backed by mountains on the edge of Montana’s Bob Marshall Wilderness, she knew. “Despite the extreme weather conditions,” she recalls, “I fell in love with the openness of the land and how raw and primal it felt.”

The topography is stunning: vast open plains that intersect dramatically with timbered limestone escarpments, interspersed with hay meadows. With the reintroduction of bison to the landscape, the ranch hosts every species of animal that was present when Lewis and Clark passed through the region more than 200 years ago. In fact, this relatively pristine part of Montana is one of the last places in the lower 48 where grizzlies still venture out from the mountains onto the plains. While the property is remote, far from a town, ski area, or airport, the couple was more interested in riding, hunting, fishing, and raising their children in nature than logistical convenience or in-town amenities. Long term, they intended to call it home.

Having perused rustic architecture books for years, the landowners were familiar with the work of Pearson Design Group. They knew they wanted a rugged, handmade look appropriate to the region and its history but one that could still be comfortable and livable. When PDG founder Larry Pearson first saw the property, he was awed. “It was powerful. The landscape goes from valley floor to forest peaks, almost like multiple experiences.”

The land had been used primarily for cattle ranching for a century; the previous owner had also established it as a recreational fishing outfit. The pastures were overgrazed and the handful of primitive buildings had limited electricity and no telephone access. But wildlife was abundant; even during construction there were signs of bear activity on-site. The task, therefore, explains Pearson, “was more than just producing architecture and design; it was also undertaking an analysis of the ranch and surrounding lands, including wildlife patterns and the effects of wind. The owners took their responsibility very seriously, asking questions like how one can build in a way that is supportive of native landscaping and animal populations.”

A home designed by Pearson Design Group and built by On Site Management in close consultation with its owners has a rugged hand-hewn aesthetic appropriate to its remote mountain setting at the edge of Montana’s million-plus-acre Bob Marshall Wilderness. It’s constructed of restacked walls and trusses of antique hewn timbers, weighty, distinctive chimneys, and a metal roof. The porch columns and rafters are lodgepole pine.



The owners undertook a significant amount of habitat restoration work to return riparian corridors to native habitat, and one direct result has been an increase in the moose population. They also made a significant decision early on to ranch with bison rather than cattle. “The ranch was part of the bison’s winter range back in the 1800s,” says the wife. “Bison grazing habits improve habitat for the various species of birds that depend on the prairie, and bison are complementary to the grass range, as long as you can keep them moving. They are also largely impervious to the extreme weather changes you have on the front.”

First, though, the owners needed a working compound. Architecturally, they sought an updated rustic aesthetic in structures built to last. To this end, On Site Management was a crucial partner, contributing fine craftsmanship, meticulous attention to detail, and creative problem-solving, an important consideration when one is fifty minutes from the nearest town and dealing with Montana weather. The team—homeowners, architects, and contractors (the owners did their own interior design in partnership with PDG)—worked on the plans for close to four years, from siting the access road to building in multiple phases. The ranch manager’s house came first, followed by other ranch outbuildings—ultimately twelve structures in all. For a full year, the owners lived on-site in a yurt.

“We were asked to reinvent the ranch in a historic but nouveau way,” says PDG lead architect Justin Tollefson. All structures had to have an eye on history but also needed to meet a young rancher’s needs. There would be a working compound which would serve as the hub of activities, with various support buildings and a caretaker’s house. There would also be a main lodge for the owners, a romantic getaway cabin for guests, and a classic barn designed as an iconic marker in the landscape.

The two-story main house is sited in a protected valley in an old mule pasture. It is constructed of restacked walls and trusses of antique hewn timbers and grounded by weighty, distinctive fireplaces, with lodgepole pine porches and rafters, reclaimed plank exterior siding, and a metal roof. Interiors are finished with reclaimed hemlock interior paneling and flooring and, in the kitchen, antique white oak and reclaimed hemlock cabinetry. The emphasis is on regional appropriateness and handmade integrity. “It’s a functioning home and ranch as much as it is a retreat,” Tollefson explains. “We attempted to create something that represents the material palette of the American ranch.”

The owners came to the project having done an enormous amount of research. The wife had assembled a voluminous, pre-Pinterest design brief, an assemblage of inspiration

The homeowners scouted almost ninety properties throughout the mountain West to find the perfect site to build a ranch from the ground up. The project consisted of twelve structures, starting with a working compound and including a main house, guest house, and iconic barn. What used to be cattle pasture now supports bison, a species that can withstand tough conditions while walking softly on the land.

photos with descriptions, even detailing preferred masonry style and finishes. They had well-thought-out ideas regarding what they were seeking, she says. “We wanted a home; we didn’t want a lodge. And we wanted it to look as though it had been there a hundred years but with a little touch of Gstaad, with fur blankets and modern furniture.”

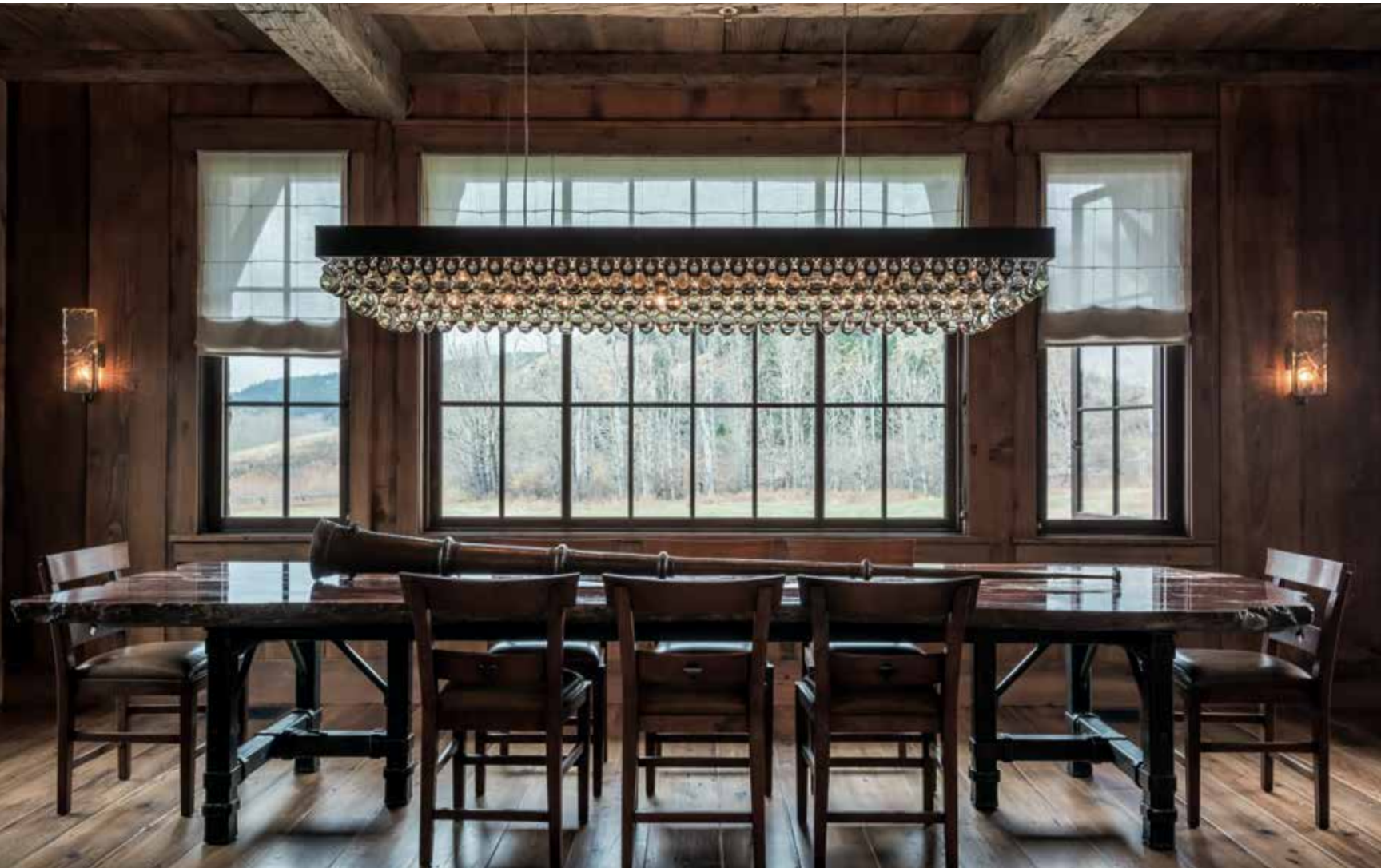
All furniture, textiles, and artwork choices were driven by the owners. They worked closely with blacksmith Wil Wilkins, for example, to design authentic handcrafted accents using repurposed materials such as wagon wheels, barbed wire, and ore-cart track. These touches extended to the great room chandelier and sconces, as well as cabinet hardware and mudroom hooks. They scoured sources across the country to create clean interiors which combine antiques, traditional artwork, antlers, and wildlife mounts with contemporary, comfortable furnishings.

As it is a working ranch, the work continues. A recent addition is a separate outbuilding linked to the house by a glass connector. As always when building in a pristine area on the edge of a major wilderness area, sensitivity to site remains paramount. For the owners, it’s about respecting the environment—the land, vegetation, wildlife, regional history, and neighbors. It’s also about being self-reliant when far from town and subject to long, harsh winters. Special places demand an attitude of stewardship and thoughtful consideration in animals to graze; deciding where to build and how to fence to mitigate effects on wildlife and neighbors; and considering the aesthetics of new construction in a timeless landscape.

This new old ranch was built to sit lightly on the land while lasting for generations. And as exemplified by the roaming bison, now thriving, it embraces the past while looking to the future.

BELOW: A Tibetan prayer horn lies on a petrified redwood slab atop a base by blacksmith Wil Wilkins. Custom crystal-and-bronze lighting fixture is by Ochre; handblown ice sconces by Lianne Gold through Ralph Pucci.

RIGHT: Pollaro redwood slab coffee table, Alexander Lamont leather chairs and candlesticks, BDDW couches and chairs ground the lodgelike great room. Wil Wilkins made fireplace tools, chandeliers, sconces and door hardware. The zebra ottoman and organic side table bring the outdoors in.





ABOVE: A mudroom entry has room for boots, cowboy hats, slickers, and all the tools of the ranching trade. It also has an English signal cannon and antique Ethiopian chairs. The hammered-iron sconces, sourced from Patrick Kovacs Kunsthandel, were part of a hunting room presented at the 1910 International Hunting Exhibition in Vienna.

RIGHT: A quiet office with an English partner's desk is illuminated by 19th-century brass chandeliers from Denton Antiques in London. The distinctive fireplace is a Pearson Design Group specialty. Western art—Julius Seyler's *Blackfoot Indian* and Carl Rungius's *Goats*—completes the tableau.





LEFT: The guesthouse living area has the feel of a full-size home with a kitchen, dining area, and living room with a stone fireplace. Wil Wilkins made the chandelier and fireplace screen and tools. The dining table and chairs were handcrafted by On Site Management. Comfortable furniture and built-in window seats lend a homey feel.

ABOVE: An apron-front sink, beamed ceiling, and generous island make for efficient meal prep in a welcoming space.



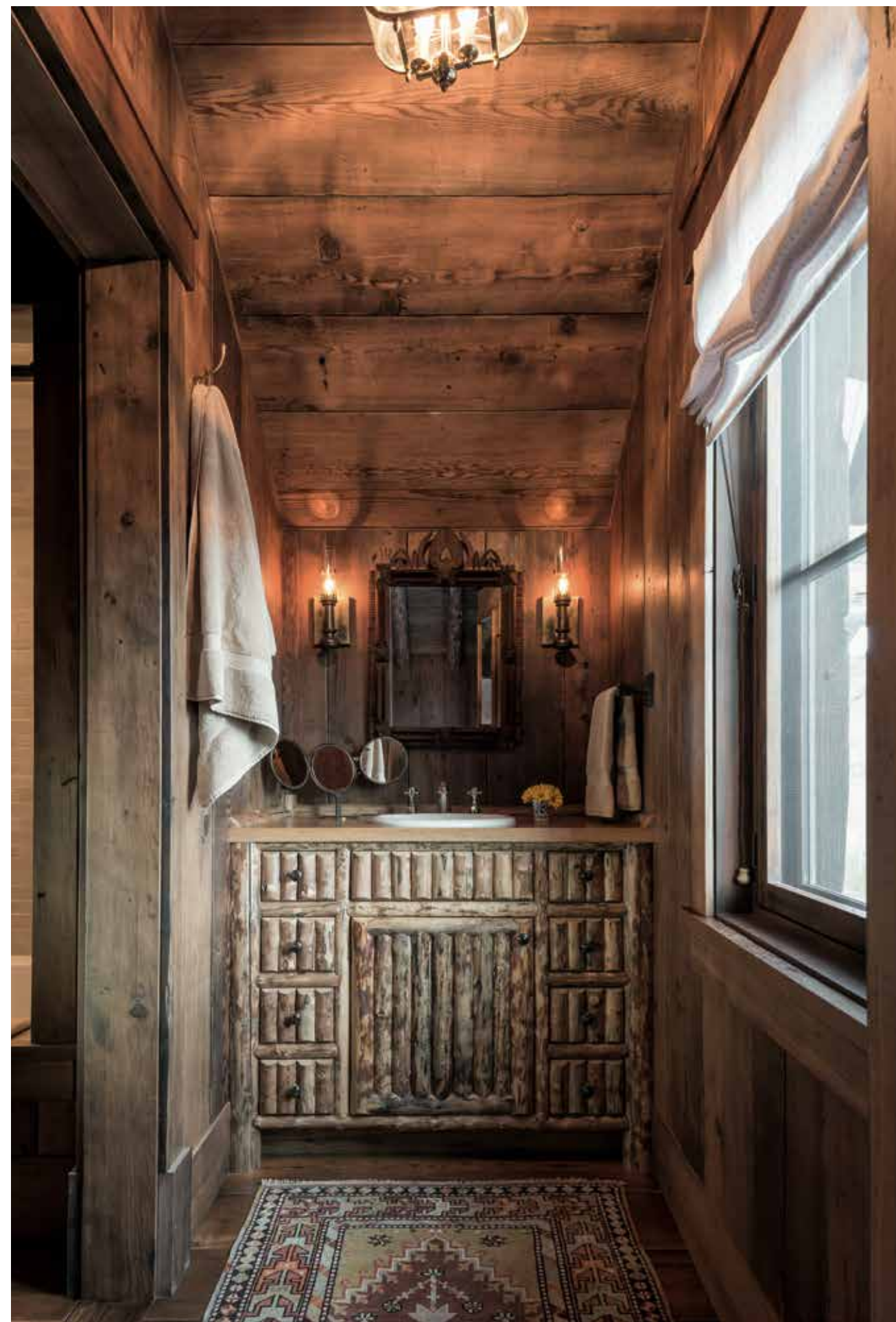
FACING: The homeowners spend a lot of time in the cozy sitting area situated between the kitchen and dining room; its asymmetrical fireplace exudes warmth and charm. The Moroccan carpet is antique, from Doris Leslie Blau. The remarkable side table is an Indonesian lychee wood stump from Balsamo.



ABOVE: In the kitchen of the main house, tile from Paris Ceramics is combined with Taj Mahal quartzite countertops and custom-made oak cabinets by On Site Management. Lighting fixtures are antique; the oven hood and pot rack were handmade by Bill Moore of Bar Mill Iron Forge. Brass mugs are from BDDW.

The graciously proportioned master bedroom is illuminated by an antique brass chandelier and sconces from Bjorn Wiinblad. The Bronze/Holly cabinet, nightstands, and walnut slab headboard are from BDDW. The rugs are Turkish. Art photography by Nick Brandt bring the wild indoors.





FACING: A custom copper and tin tub from William Holland occupies pride of place in the master bath; perched nearby is the Pieds de Bouc stool by Marc Bankowsky. The pendant is vintage Austrian.

LEFT: An early 1900s tramp art mirror flanked by antique 19th-century railroad sconces found on 1st Dibs hangs over an applied-pole vanity made by the woodworkers at On Site Management.





ABOVE: The new owners did extensive amounts of land and riparian habitat restoration on the property, which was formerly a working cattle ranch. The property is within prime grizzly bear habitat.

RIGHT: An iconic barn serves as a marker in the landscape. Classic in form, it is built to last with reclaimed wood, a fire-savvy standing-seam metal roof, shed roofs, and double cupolas.

