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# THE LUCKY COUNTRY

THE MCGREGOR FAMILY HAS CARVED A PRIME CATTLE AND SHEEP PROPERTY OUT OF SCRUBBY DESERT ON SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S LIMESTONE COAST.

STORY **GRETEL SNEATH** PHOTOS **JOHN KRUGER**

Willalooka Pastoral Company's Angus herd reaping the benefits of a wet winter.





Kate and Thyne McGregor with their children Missy, 1, Digby, 3, and Archie, 4. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Matt Steendam works in the yards; mother and calf; Digby and Archie are never far from the farm action; Yvette Fisher weighing steers.

IT HAS BEEN THE wettest winter at Willalooka Pastoral Company since 1992. Late rains have left the roads awash and water from the wetlands is flowing over the spillways. Black swans are nesting on their own small island sanctuary, and thousands of tiny red-gum saplings growing along the banks of the Big Reedy Swamp fight for rays of dappled sunlight in the shadow of their forebears. Nature is breathing new life into this Limestone Coast property in the upper south-east corner of South Australia, but so, too, is the young family that took up residence here eight years ago.

Thyne and Kate McGregor and their children Archie, 4, Digby, 2, and Missy, 1, are the next generations of overseers. Thyne’s family purchased the property in 1958, when it was 2000 hectares of partially developed desert country. It was one of several McGregor pastoral holdings; the portfolio also included interests in cattle stations in the Alice Springs region and a substantial property on the Nullarbor Plain. Growing up in the Adelaide Hills, Thyne, now 37, could see his father Alan’s passion for Willalooka in particular.

“It essentially started off as a predominantly scrub block, but he always saw it as good breeding country with lots of great shelter,” Thyne says. Working closely with on-site manager Malcolm Macdonald, Alan developed the initial investment into a productive 10,000ha aggregation of six properties supporting the nation’s then top-performing Angus Murray Grey stud, a leading South Australian fine wool merino stud, and more recently, in response to changing market demand, a pure-bred Angus herd.

When Alan died in 2005, Thyne and his older siblings, Stirling and Iona, chose to keep going with their mother Skye’s

support and, in 2008, the family purchased the esteemed stud The Basin. The stud had originally been established in 1961 on a nearby property, and was well positioned as one of the State’s leading seed-stock suppliers. The McGregors joined it with their own stud, Willalooka Angus, to create the largest registered Angus stud in South Australia.

“The Willalooka name is well known by all major feedlots for performance, and The Basin had a great reputation for producing animals that perform in harsh environments and who finish early, so it made sense to combine these attributes,” Thyne says.

Thyne had left his Sydney job in sales and marketing and moved home to oversee the operation. It was a role that came with enormous responsibility; not only was there stock, staff and budgets to grasp, but an 810ha wetland precinct featuring a series of interconnecting basins, which form part of a local farming lifeline known as the Marcollat Watercourse.

“The swamps are seasonally inundated; they don’t stay this full forever, and are meant to dry out and fill up again, but not long ago, there was an almost decade-long dry stretch,” Thyne says. “It has only been during the last three or four years that the country has returned to the long-term norm of being wet again, and it’s great seeing everything full and flowing properly.”

In one of South Australia’s most significant regeneration projects, a series of man-made weirs have been designed to recreate natural water flow. The area provides important habitat for migratory waders, and up to 35 species have been recorded, including glossy ibis, common greenshanks, Australasian shovellers and hardheads (also known as white-eyed ducks). “The conservation and biodiversity values of the wetlands





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**Red-gum saplings and birdlife on Big Reedy Swamp.**  
**LEFT: Kate lifts up fences that are designed to enable large mobs of cattle to be moved between paddocks with ease.**

are well known, and we consider ourselves lucky to be the custodians,”Thyne says.

Farm manager Andy Love was captivated by the wetlands when he began working at the property as a 17-year-old jackaroo. “The reason I’m still here 38 years later is because it’s such a beautiful property,” he says. “You go out into those wetlands, and it’s just unbelievable.”

Andy took over as manager from his long-time boss and mentor Malcolm Macdonald, who held the position for more than 50 years. He is one of five full-time staff that live on-site with their families, and each has played a role in the regeneration of land around the edge of the watercourses, fencing off former grazing areas to reinstate a corridor of native vegetation.

“Nothing can be completely natural again, however it is amazing to see the thousands of red-gum saplings starting to grow around this watercourse in the wet years; it shows the plan is working,” Thyne says. “If we hadn’t fenced them off from livestock, we wouldn’t have achieved this.”

The Willalooka landscape was also the first thing to win Kate McGregor over. The 32 year old had grown up on a farm less than two hours away, between Penola and Naracoorte, and had been working as a nurse in Sydney when she packed up and moved south with Thyne.

“It was difficult in the beginning, because even though we were the owners, everyone had been working here for so long and, understandably, felt a strong degree of ownership as well, so it took a little while to establish what we wanted to achieve, but everything is now going really well,” Kate says.

There have also been some personal challenges along the way. In 2010, the couple’s eldest son, Archie, was diagnosed





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with spinal muscular atrophy type 2 just before his first birthday. The condition destroys the nerves of the spinal cord and has left him wheelchair bound. But he approaches life with the same gusto as any boisterous four-year-old farm boy. “Instead of focusing on what Archie can’t do, we always focus on what he can do, and he is a very bright, assertive little boy,” Kate says.

Archie clearly rules the roost in the sibling pecking order, racing along in his electric four-wheel drive wheelchair, a devoted Digby ever in his wake. The wheels – and indeed most of the machine – are caked in mud, but his parents aren’t fussed.

“Archie calls it his ‘supermachine’ and there aren’t many places that he can’t go with it – he can race through puddles, ride up dirt mounds, collect sticks and rocks with his younger brother, chase the cows and help get the horses in without getting bogged,” Kate says.

That bold approach to life extends to the McGregors’ business philosophies; in 2009, they took the Willalooka Pastoral Company in a new direction, making the decision to exit the stud business and focus on the commercial operation. They sold the entire Murray Grey and seed-stock herd to S. Kidman and Co., and had a dispersal sale of the Angus cows, selling around 200 cows with offspring. The remaining 1200 head formed the base of the commercial herd, which has now been built up to 1600 breeding cows. Willalooka Basin is still a registered stud, with an additional 100 spring calving cows as well as heifers run at a separate property in the Adelaide Hills.

“The primary function is to produce high-quality bulls from a select group of registered cows, all of which are artificially inseminated in order to guarantee the quality of the genetics in the commercial Willalooka Basin herd,” Thyne says. Most of the steers



The eco-luxury accommodation venture is Kate’s latest project. Guests are given exclusive use of the four-bedroom Willalooka Wetlands Eco Lodge, set in seclusion among gum trees overlooking Big Reedy Swamp. OPPOSITE: Kate says she was won over by the Willalooka landscape.





The property is home to the Willalooka Poll registered sheep stud, producing larger framed fine poll merinos.

go to feedlots to be prepared for the export market, empty heifers are grown out on grass for Meat Standards Australia grading or are destined for the European Union, and females in calf are sold to other producers. “We also sell to a range of processors, and will favour the local ones as long as the price is right,”Thyne says.

The style of farming is much more intensive than typical station country, with a dominance of lucerne-improved pastures on rotational grazing, and native grasses, tall wheat grass, phalaris and clover on the wetter flats. “We are trying to run a non-feeding system topped up with hay only when required during drought, and it’s a similar situation with the sheep, feeding minimal amounts of grain prior to lambing,”Thyne says.

The property is also home to the Willalooka Poll registered sheep stud, producing larger-framed fine poll merinos. The flock began with traditional heavy cutting ewes in 1958, but in 1999, Willalooka entered into a joint venture with Lorelmo Stud from the New South Wales highlands, crossing elite Willalooka sheep with the best Lorelmo genetics during an intensive embryo-transfer program conducted on Willalooka. The partnership between the two properties is no longer in place, however the program has produced a flock with significantly finer wool, and there are currently about 9500 breeding ewes on Willalooka. Dry sheep are shorn every eight months, with the main shearing of ewes and newly weaned lambs taking place each October. Surplus young ewes are sold to clients who have recognised the performance of the sheep in the higher rainfall country, and older ewes are either sold to other breeders or processing plants.

Adding to the property’s diversification, Willalooka Pastoral Company has recently been opened to overnight guests for the first time, with Kate launching an eco-luxury accommodation venture. The self-contained, four-bedroom Willalooka

Wetlands Eco Lodge is set in total seclusion among gum trees overlooking Big Reedy Swamp, and has its own airstrip and all-weather vehicle access. “Not everyone has the chance to embrace nature like we do, and we are well aware that we have something special here – particularly with the wetlands – so it made sense to share it with others,” Kate says.

The contemporary modular lodge features a natural palette of spotted gum cladding and limestone sourced on the property and, like so many isolated rural homes, it operates entirely off-grid, creating its own power and collecting its own rainwater. The property’s location roughly halfway along the traditional Melbourne to Adelaide touring route has proven to be a selling point in itself, as it makes a handy and highly unique stopover, however a majority of guests book a stay specifically in order to get back to nature.

“We’re happy to let them wander and enjoy – take a picnic and go walking and birdwatching around the wetlands, or collect wood for a small campfire,” Kate says. “It’s a really wonderful lifestyle here, with plenty of freedom to roam.”

For a family that took a little while to settle, the McGregors have gradually become interwoven with the landscape, and Willalooka is now very much home. The children have their own horses, and Kate takes them riding most days. There’s also eggs to collect, vegetables to harvest and the constantly flurry of farm jobs to keep the little ones entertained.

“A while ago, we had the liquid fertiliser contractors here, so there were big trucks and tractors coming and going – Archie and Digby were in their element,” Kate says. “It’s always a hive of activity here, and the boys just love going over to the sheds and being among the action. We realise that we are very lucky to be able to experience this every day.”