



Back to Basics

by **RON TORELL**, livestock Extension specialist, University of Nevada, Reno

The ranch four-wheeler

“Four-wheelers and gooseneck stock trailers are the best gifts God ever gave to ranchers,” says Tom Tomera, a third-generation northern Nevada rancher. “You name it, and we use a four-wheeler to get ’er done. We use them to move cattle; check cows, range and water; scatter salt; fix fence; irrigate; and for general ranch transportation.

“Four-wheelers are a real time- and labor-saving device. We can do more work in a day with two four-wheelers and two good dogs than we used to do with a large crew [on] horseback.”

Ranchers generally refer to them as four-wheelers, while sportsmen often refer to them as quads. The correct terminology is all-terrain vehicle, or ATV. ATVs were first produced in the 1970s and 1980s for recreational use. It is estimated that more than 3 million ATVs are currently owned in the United States.

Doug Shippy, owner of Ship’s Cycle in Elko, Nev., says his biggest customers are ranchers, followed by recreationalists and sportsmen.

“Depending on what you want, a basic ATV starts at \$2,000,” he says.

“The bigger, fancier four-wheel-drive models can run as high as \$10,000 or more. Accessories include snow plows, winches, dump beds, lightweight three-point hitch attachments, gun racks, load racks, broadcast seed spreaders, storage bag attachments, herbicide sprayers, chains, cabs, and just about anything you want to have.”

“Four-wheelers are tough,” says Mark Hooper of Hooper Ranches, Halleck, Nev. “In the process of doing our ranch business we push four-wheelers to their limit. This often lands our valued machines in Shippy’s repair shop. We have one four-wheeler that is 10 years

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— *Charlie Hone*

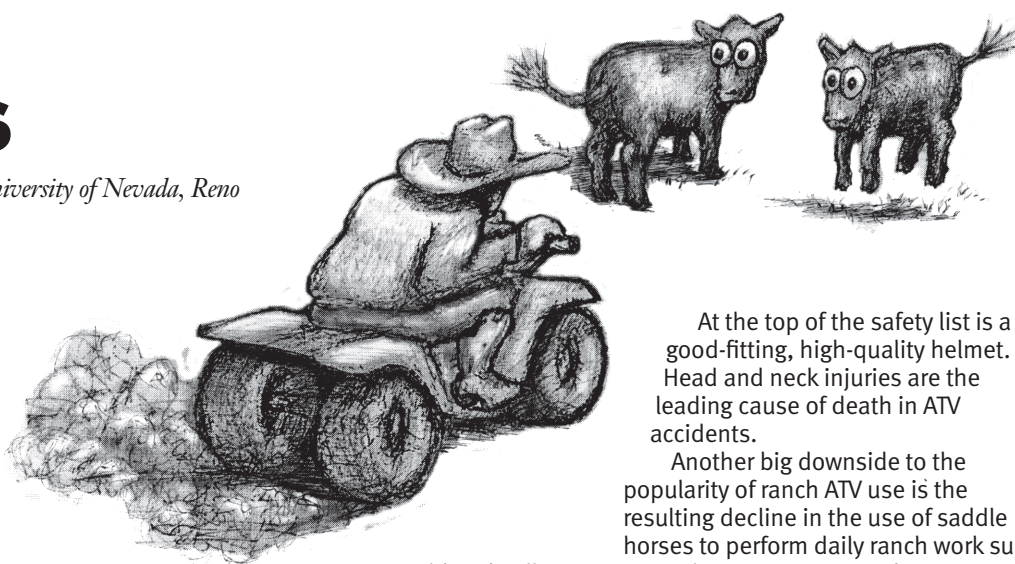


ILLUSTRATION BY CRAIG SIMMONS

old and still running in spite of our rough treatment and the huge workload we demand of our machines. This longevity is largely due to [the] durability of the machine and the great after-sale service and repair Ship’s Cycle offers.”

“Given today’s limited and inexperienced ranch labor pool, we have to get by with fewer people,” Ron Cerri, Orovada, Nev., says. “Our four-wheelers have allowed us to do just that. Not only are four-wheelers a labor saver, but also a money saver. What we used to do with a one-ton [expensive-to-operate] truck, we now do with a four-wheeler. We can go all day on 2 gallons of gas in a four-wheeler. This saves on the bigger ranch vehicles.”

Downsides

There are a few downsides to four-wheelers, with the biggest being safety. “Cowboy hats do not make the best helmets,” says rancher Charlie Hone of Gardnerville, Nev. “You know cowboys are not going to wear helmets, so the next best measure is to exhibit common sense and pay attention.

“Use four-wheelers within their limits,” Hone warns. According to research, Hone is correct. Most accidents are caused by not using caution and common sense, traveling too fast, and overloading or improperly loading. Accidents are more likely to occur with younger, inexperienced drivers. Many ATVs can go as fast as 55 miles per hour and can weigh as much as a quarter of a ton.

ATV safety has been a serious concern since these off-road vehicles were first introduced. These vehicles’ high center of gravity, instability and higher speeds, poor or limited suspension, and occupant exposure all compromise ATV safety. Last year more than 300,000 people required medical treatment for injuries suffered in ATV crashes. As many as 300 people are killed in ATV accidents each year. One in three people killed or injured in an ATV accident is under the age of 16.

According to several internet sites, there are many proactive ATV safety measures that should be taken to reduce the risk of suffering injury or death in an ATV accident. For a complete listing of safety measures you can Google™ “ATV Safety” on the internet.

At the top of the safety list is a good-fitting, high-quality helmet. Head and neck injuries are the leading cause of death in ATV accidents.

Another big downside to the popularity of ranch ATV use is the resulting decline in the use of saddle horses to perform daily ranch work such as cattle management and movement. As a result, there are fewer good horses and fewer good horsemen.

“Wet saddle blankets make for good horses and experienced cowboys,” states Jon Griggs, Maggie Creek Ranch of Elko, Nev. “I still prefer the four-legged to the four-wheeled. Granted, four-wheelers are handy for a lot of uses; however, in range situations such as we have, saddle horses are still necessary for the bulk of our work. We have a lot of tough and rugged country to cover.”

Rangeland degradation due to excessive ATV off-road use is also a big concern to many. This is becoming so much of an issue that legislation is being considered in many states to limit the use of ATVs in certain areas and for some hunting and recreational activities. It is disheartening to hike or ride horseback all day to get to that favorite hunting spot only to find a pile of guts and four-wheeler tracks. ATVs can go where once only hiking or horseback riding was possible.

Keep ATVs in perspective

As you can see, there is both an upside and a downside to the popularity and use of four-wheelers. In a way, the use of four-wheelers only adds to what those of us in the ranching industry are trying to get away from — that fast-paced lifestyle. How can we enjoy the process of being in the ranching business if the roar of an engine and the speed of a vehicle are polluting the fresh air and outdoors that we enjoy so much?

Most of us have never bonded with a four-wheeler as many of us have done with a horse. Most of us have never met a four-wheeler that can think for itself or has a personality, yet we’ve seen both with a horse.

Most of us prefer to install tires rather than shoe horses, and we utilize a four-wheeler out of necessity due to the times we live in. Used properly, four-wheelers can be a huge benefit on the ranch. This should be kept in perspective though, for it is the small things in life that make life worth living.

If you would like to discuss this article or simply would like to talk cows, do not hesitate to contact me at 775-738-1721 or torellr@unce.unr.edu.