

Grass-power fuels Bushy Park

ANYONE who is still questioning the paddock potential and commercial versatility of black Angus cattle need look no further than the Farquharson family's Bushy Park Angus operation in western Victoria.

The Bushy Park Angus herd is one of the biggest family-owned commercial beef operations in southern Australia. The herd boasts 4000 Angus breeders which are spread over three properties – the family's original base Bushy Park at Birregurra, and its two expansion holdings, Kalabity and Caupaul, which are both north of Casterton.

The Farquharsons first venture into Angus cattle was in the early 1980s with the purchase of 70 cows.

They were attracted to the breed because of their easy-care nature and superior carcass attributes. From that modest beginning, Greg Farquharson and his wife Dinah have built a significant commercial beef operation over three decades, driven by genetic refinement and increasing capacity.

A key ingredient to their sustained success has been the active involvement of their sons, with Scott and his partner Penny at Kalabity, and Tim and his partner Melissa at Bushy Park.

Until recently Greg and Dinah's daughter Jodie also had a hands-on role with the business, but is recently married and now farms elsewhere.

Scott, who manages the 2200 hectare property at Wando Bridge, less than 20 kilometres north of Casterton, plus a further 800ha of adjacent leased country, said "growing grass" was the cornerstone of the family business.

"The whole aim of our operation is to grow large amounts of grass. We aim to grow eight tonnes of feed per hectare a year over the whole place and anything over that just means we get bonus weight gain," he said.

Kalabity is built on a phalaris-cocksfoot-sub clover base, with

At a glance

- ◆ Bushy Park Angus, Birregurra and Casterton
- ◆ 4000 Angus breeders across three properties
- ◆ One of the biggest family-owned commercial beef operations in southern Australia



underperforming paddocks quickly identified for renovation and sown down to cereal for two seasons, before a permanent pasture is re-established.

"That phalaris-cocksfoot-sub clover mix lasts a long time," Scott said.

"There's paddocks here still performing well that were sown down in the 1970s."

Given the sheer numbers being carried, there is simply no room for passengers, whether they be paddocks or animals.

"We're running one cow-calf equivalent to about every 2ha. You could run one cow to the hectare and she will do it, but you'll end up being overstocked," Scott said.

The family operation turns-off about 3500 calves annually, leaning heavily on the unrivalled marketability of young Angus cattle.

"We aim to be turning-off young stock at between 400kg-500kg liveweight.

"We're always looking to finish as many steers as possible on grass. About a third of our calves are sold into one of a number of certified grass-finished black Angus programs via several processors in southern Australia."

There is no shortage of marketing options for the Farquharsons,

especially because they have a reputation for producing large lines of well-bred young cattle which are the right colour for the market and consistently perform for their purchaser.

"Of the heifers which aren't fattened and sold direct to the processor, a portion might go to the live export trade to China or Kazakhstan, while others might go to fill an Australian breeding order," Scott said.

"Backgrounders are generally chasing the heifers as well and a lot of our steers which we don't finish ourselves go into feedlot lines."

Scott said the biggest challenge in trying to turn-off finished cattle while running a breeding operation is juggling the carrying capacity over a 12-month cycle.

"In the timeframe you've got to work with, we can pile the weight onto the cattle as much as we want,

of spring, the calves are big enough with their frame size to build meat onto."

Even in the failed spring of 2014, Kalabity steers were putting on up to 3kg a day in the paddock-growth rates that any feedlot would be happy with.

"That just shows that you can finish Angus cattle on grass really very easily, you just need the grass and the structure in your cattle," Scott said.

"The financial incentive to sell them as finished animals is certainly there. If you can get the weight on your cattle and sell them as a 600kg finished product, you're adding a lot of value to the animal and you'll be rewarded for it."

Confirmation that prime cattle from across the Bushy Park Angus herd perform on-the-hooks has come via the family's success in regional carcass competitions.

In 2011, Bushy Park claimed the coveted grand champion carcass from the field of 228 beasts entered in the Southern Grassfed Carcass Classic, which is run in conjunction with Teys' Naracoorte plant.

The winning 350-kilogram carcass was an August 2009-drop from Kalabity and scored 90.773 points – the highest score in the event's history. It had an exceptional Meat Standards Australia marbling score of 620 off grass with an eye muscle area of 94 square centimetres and P8 fat of 15 millimetres.

"Clients really like our cattle. They tell us they are really happy with how they kill out," Scott said.

"I guess our cattle are sought-after because we can put large lines together and fill large pens in feedlots. We can move 150-500 steers onto a buyer in one hit and they'll be very consistent across the consignment. When we're filling trucks, there might be a 20kg difference on a load of animals all the way through."

The performance of Bushy Park's young sale cattle is directly linked to the Farquharsons' breeding philosophies.

The injection of about 1200-1400 heifers a year into their spring-calving breeder system helps ensure there is plenty of selection pressure on older cows.

Sire selection is also a key to genetic improvement and better performance in the paddock.

Scott said the benchmarking and performance recording undertaken by Angus breeders meant that the genetic progress in the Bushy Park herd was all but assured.

"The best thing about the Angus breed and the Angus breeders in particular is that they're really good at doing that work for us," he said.

"As a commercial operation we just multiply what the studs are breeding. Really, we're just pushing the top five per cent of proven sires anywhere in the world. The figures are done for us."

Getting those genetics on the ground and turning-off as many calves as possible each year requires a smart mix of balancing the needs of breeders with young cattle.

"All the cows calve in a seven-week period, so there's 4000 calves on the ground quite suddenly. It's like mushroom season," Scott said.

Cows are all rigorously assessed for structure and temperament and then pregnancy tested with a probe 40 days after joining.

"Anything that's empty or not up to scratch is moved on," Scott said.

Heifers calve-down in August, a month before the cows start calving, giving the maidens an extra month to get back in calf the second time around.

"The second calvers are usually the hardest ones to get back in calf, so we give them an extra month to cycle," Scott said.

"Our second calvers usually scan at between 5-15 per cent empty. From there, the third calvers and older are back under 5pc empty."

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- SCOTT FARQUHARSON, Casterton

the only thing we can't speed up is the structure – actually getting the frame on the animal.

"With the system we've got with the number of calving animals we've got, in the 14-16 month timeframe we're working on, any calves that aren't grass-finished are sold to backgrounders or feedlotters to make room for the younger drop."

"Steers are growing a frame the whole time until we get that second spring on them. By the time you get to the peak

