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COLLIN AND SHANE BAILEY with Henry, the yak calf. Photos by Tony Hooker.

Savannah Ridge Farms — *Raising something to ‘yak’ about*

By Tony Hooker
For the Bailey family, the transition to their current no-till, fully organic farm operation has been a gradual one. For several years, they cash rented their ground before sons Shane and Collin tried their hand at farming to help with college expenses. Fast

forward a few years, and the family made the decision to move forward with the venture, purchasing the ground where their operation now sits and began operation as a conventional farm. As they progressed, they knew that they wanted to incorporate livestock into their operation, but they really didn't have the infrastructure to support a cattle business.

Enter a fortuitous conversation that family patriarch Ron Bailey had with someone at his church, tons of research and visits to other farms, and in 2020, the Baileys began to raise yaks, a hearty bovine that originated in the Himalayas. I recently had a conversation with brothers Shane and Collin about their farming operation.

Why do you call your operation Savannah Ridge Farms?

<SB> Our goal is to have as many plant and animal species on the farm as possible. By doing this, we aim to make our farm resilient and as biologically diverse as the huge savannah grasslands you see across the world. Our farm is located right on a glacial ridge, also.

Why Yaks?

We wanted to integrate livestock back into our farming operation, mainly for the soil health benefits. We tried raising cattle for 8 months, and it didn't really work with our rotation. We raise them on alfalfa, and we struggled with that. We kind of stumbled onto Yaks. We did some more research and they just kind of fit our operation. They're extremely winter hardy, so our herd is on pasture year-round. They're out in the elements 365 days a year. They overwinter fantastically, the cold does

not bother them. They probably prefer the winter over the summer months.

Are they adversely affected by higher temperatures?

<CB> If we get really hot weather, yes.

<SB> If the heat index is over a hundred for an extremely long time, it does put some stress on them, but they pull through it. It's not life-threatening stress, but it does stress them out a bit.

They're native to the Himalayas, right? And the lower altitudes don't affect them?

<SB> The altitude doesn't really bother them here. A fun fact is that Yaks are the only mammals that can live at 20,000 feet of elevation. We really wanted to integrate livestock, and cattle just didn't fit the bill. Honestly, I have to give credit to my dad. He stumbled upon them and did some research at some farms out west and we kind of dove into it headfirst.

Is the organic piece intentional? How did that come to be?

<SB> We started transitioning our farm ground to organic in 2016. It was a multitiered piece as to why we did that. For one, for health reasons personal and soil health. I think it's a lot better for the biological health of the soil. And two, being a small operation, we were looking for a niche to fill. We were looking for something that would add value to our farming operation without going out and purchasing or renting more ground. That was also a key component to it. It allows us to have a more value-added product without expanding our land base.

According to your web-

See YAKS on page D3

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