

# **17 dead bodies, rape trees and migrants crawling on his land: Arizona rancher describes life on the frontlines of the border crisis**

By Rob Crilly, Senior U.S. Political Reporter For Dailymail.Com In Bisbee, Arizona 09:20 EST 02 Mar 2024 , updated 10:15 EST 02 Mar 2024

- **John Ladd's ranch stretches for 10 and a half miles along the Mexican border**
- **It is a hotspot for people seeking to evade Border Patrol as they enter the U.S.**
- **He has found 17 dead bodies on his land and can spot the signs of smuggling**

John Ladd's phone is an archive of life on a ranch beside the [Arizona](#) border with [Mexico](#).

He scrolls past photographs of handsome Red Angus and cross-bred Hereford-Brahman cattle, picture after picture of [Donald Trump](#)'s 30ft border wall that spans about six-and-a-half miles of his land. Then he stops at an image of a tree.

'That's a rape tree,' he said, pointing out the women's clothes thrown into the thorny branches.

'Almost all the women who come across get raped by their guides, who then they throw their underwear in the trees.'

The trees have been spotted up and down the border. Academics talk of them as warnings or trophies in the brutal symbolism of violent gangs.



John Ladd, 68, has been a cattle rancher all his life. His land runs for 10 and a half miles along the Arizona border with Mexico. That puts him on the front lines of the border crisis



Ladd has learned the telltale signs of human smuggling on his land, like this 'rape tree' where guides toss women's clothes en route to the highway that cuts through his ranch

**EXCLUSIVEREAD MORE: [A cartel turf war, shootouts, hundreds strolling through gaps in the wall: Inside Arizona's border crisis](#)**



Arrivals included people from Senegal and Guinea Conakry in Africa, as well as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Peru, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Ecuador

Ladd, 68, has been a rancher all of his life. In the past 30 years he has learned about such savage displays, as well as the patterns of migrants who cross the border and the cartels who control turf on the other side.

His 16,000 acres lie in the busiest part of the entire border. Border Patrol agents in the Tucson sector [recorded 250,000 apprehensions in just the first four months of the fiscal year — almost a 200 percent increase on last year.](#)

His family has kept cattle here for four generations or 127 years.

These days he keeps count of the dead bodies he has found on his land — 17 in total (not counting those found on the 60ft strip of federal land at the border). They are migrants who succumbed to the desert heat in summer or the cold in winter or whose hearts gave out or the victims of violence.

'They're not seeking asylum,' he told DailyMail.com at the end of a day sorting calves for market. His shirt was spattered with blood from a dehorning operation.

'They're military age males in camouflage, Balaclavas and a cell phone.

**They don't want to get caught.'**

**While migrants in other spots hand themselves in for processing, hidden cameras operated by the Cochise County Sheriff's Office show images of arrivals crossing the Ladd ranch headed for the highway.**

**They use kneepads and travel at times on all fours to evade detection. Crawling through the brush they often show up on imaging devices as animals.**

**'We're not scared,' added Ladd. 'But we know what we're going to do if we're confronted, you know, kids, grandkids, wives, everybody.'**



**Hidden cameras operated by the Southeastern Arizona Border Region Enforcement (SABRE) Team shows how migrants try to evade detection as they cross Ladd's land**



Some people entering come with carefully bundled packages on their backs. Ladd said this was how bales of marijuana entered the country illegally



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Ladd is the fourth generation to raise cattle on the ranch. In recent years he has seen cartels change their business from smuggling drugs across his land to smuggling people

His weapon of choice is a Smith and Wesson six-shooter. 'But I carry a Glock because it has more bullets,' he said.

Hanging over ranches in this part of the world is the case of George Kell. He is due to go on trial next month charged with the second-degree murder of Gabriel Cuen-Butimea, who entered the country illegal and died on Kelly's property.

The border rancher has pleaded not guilty and says he only fired warning shots.

State Republicans are pushing to allow greater protections for ranchers defending themselves on their own land.

Their bill proposes a slight change in wording to extend existing 'Castle Doctrine' that allows homeowners to use deadly force against intruders if they believe their life is in danger. The change would afford similar rights to landowners against trespassers.

Rep. Justin Heap recently told a state House Judiciary Committee hearing that it was designed to fix a loophole.

'If a farmer owns 10,000 acres of farmland, his home may be a half a mile away from where he is, and if he sees someone on his land, can he approach them and trespass them from his property?' he said, according to [AZ Central](#).





'America needs to wake up it this. This has already changed America, in the last three years and it'll never be the same and the border will never be the same,' said Ladd



Ladd has 16,000 acres of land in southern Arizona outside the town of Bisbee. His herd includes Red Angus and cross-bred Hereford-Brahman cattle. He sells the calves at market



His family has owned this land for 127 years and the ranch now covers 16,000 acres



Local news is filled with reports of crashes involving vehicles used by smugglers. A Border Patrol vehicle is seen here after being rammed by a van filled with migrants

**Ladd said he did not know much about the bill.**

**'I'm in favour of having American citizens and private property owners have more control over their destiny,' he said. 'That's the bottom line.'**

**It is not hard to find the spots where cartels send across small squads of migrants. On a tour of his land, Ladd pointed out a dip in the terrain.**

**The vertical bars of the wall show dates of repair, where construction teams patched up the points where coyotes cut through the wall with acetylene torches. Just loosening one bar allows them to push it open enough for a body to slip through.**

**One bar carries five dates just in February, including one day earlier.**

**'It's a low spot right here,' said Ladd. 'We call this a draw. The permanent cameras can't see it. And then to compound that problem, we don't have the agents patrolling because they're processing arrivals in other areas.'**

**The land on the other side of the wall is controlled by the Sinaloa cartel, viewed by the American intelligence community as the most powerful and dangerous.**

**Ladd has seen the business model change in front of his eyes. The human smugglers were once do-it-yourselfers, or mom-and-pop outfits, charging a few dollars to cross the border.**

**Now the going rate is \$6000.**



**Another day at the border in Arizona's Tucson sector. Dozens of newly arrived migrants line up near Sasabe to be collected by Border Patrol Wednesday. It is the busiest sector of the border**

**Migrants await CBP processing at squalid camp on AZ border**



President Joe Biden visited the border in Texas Thursday, but ranchers like Ladd said he would have learned little and should have come to Arizona where arrivals are more numerous

'And if you don't pay the cartel they kill you. That's how tough it is now,' he said.

'The whole industry has changed. For the cartels, it's their moneymaker and the drugs are a sideline.'

He said he had little time for politics and does not much like the thought of

a Biden-Trump rematch in November's presidential election.

But he had seen things get worse almost as soon as President Joe Biden took office.

'America needs to wake up to this. This has already changed America, in the last three years and it'll never be the same and the border will never be the same,' he said.

Border Patrol used to express exasperation with him when he publicly revealed the huge numbers of migrants being caught on his land. Now, he said, they like him to mention that they estimate they are only able to pick up about one in six arrivals.

'They're not allowed to talk about it,' he added.