

# REPORT FROM THE FIELD



WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY

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2020-2021

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT AND CHAIR

Over the course of the two years covered in this report, the world has been through a lot. So, looking back at how much we've accomplished together for the great rivers of the West is as heartening as it is inspirational. The work you will read about in these pages embodies what can happen when people come together around the things they hold dearest. In this case, it happens to be rivers.

At a time when distractions are constant, Western Rivers Conservancy has maintained an unwavering focus on saving the great rivers of the West. We have doubled down on our efforts to protect them, devising new and creative ways to buy and permanently conserve riverlands. Working at the cutting edge of conservation finance, we continue to secure new sources of funding, find new and diverse partners that share our goals, and ensure that everything and everyone that depends on rivers benefits from our work.

Our efforts are bearing fruit with remarkable outcomes. For example, in Washington, we successfully secured funding through the state community forest program to keep a place called Nason Ridge forever protected and open to all. At McDermitt Creek, on the Oregon-Nevada border, we purchased a farm with over 15 miles of critically important stream habitat for imperiled Lahontan cutthroat trout, and we are working with local ranchers to ensure that protecting and restoring this habitat doesn't come at the cost of livelihoods. In Big Sur, California, we worked for four years to conserve a ranch on the Little Sur River, never giving up, and then partnered with the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County to keep this precious property intact. And in Colorado's La Jara Basin, we are having a landscape-scale impact while maintaining legacy grazing use for communities that have relied on these lands for generations.

In other words, our efforts are yielding meaningful benefits for fish, wildlife and people alike. As you will see in the pages of this report, WRC's creativity and clarity of mission, matched with the generosity of our supporters, allows us to protect some of the most important stretches of river in the West. We have you to thank for committing to what you believe in and then standing by us every step of the way.

Yours in conservation,



Sue Doroff  
President



Bill Brown  
Board Chair



Sue Doroff, President



Bill Brown, Board Chair

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■ 2020/21 PROJECT IMPACT AREAS

## KEY FACTS

### PROJECT SIZE

152 acres

### RIVER MILES

1 mainstem; .75 tributary

### KEY ANIMALS

Canada lynx, grizzly bear, bald eagle, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep

### KEY FISH

Chinook, steelhead, bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, rainbow trout

Selway River

Idaho

RIVER NAME

STATE

# EXPANDING PROTECTION OF THE WILD AND SCENIC SELWAY RIVER

Picture an idyllic wild river: roaring whitewater, horizons notched by snowcapped peaks, corridors of evergreen forests, bear and elk sporadically roaming the riverbank, trout surfacing for flies, and not another human in sight. This is Idaho's Wild and Scenic Selway River.

The 98-mile-long Selway is widely known as one of America's most spectacular, and most thoroughly protected, free-flowing rivers. From its source in the Bitterroot Mountains, the Selway flows west to the Lochsa River to form the Middle Fork Clearwater and is one of eight

ivers designated in the original Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. Much of the river also lies within the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, one of the initial wilderness areas that was protected under the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Thanks to this long history of protection and the river's remarkably untouched quality (only one raft trip is permitted per day), the Selway is one of few rivers that provides vast, unbroken habitat for fish and wildlife. The Selway is also revered by veteran river-runners, as it guarantees boaters a truly pristine wilderness experience.

Before the Selway's confluence with the Lochsa, it leaves the Bitterroot Wilderness and continues through the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. Along this stretch, a few private inholdings along the otherwise wilderness-blanketed river remain unprotected. In 2021, WRC signed a purchase agreement to buy and conserve one of the most important of these inholdings, the 152-acre Selway River Ranch. The ranch is the finest example of a flat, pristine meadow on the lower Selway. It spans nearly a mile of the western bank of the river and includes half a mile of Elk City Creek, a minor but important Selway tributary.

WRC purchased the ranch in spring of 2022 and held it while pursuing funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to convey the property to the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests. Our aim is to keep the ranch intact and undeveloped, protecting fish and wildlife habitat and maintaining the exquisite, untouched character of the Wild and Scenic Selway River, forever. ■



A rafter floats the Selway (left), one of West's most intact wild rivers. WRC recently acquired a rare private inholding along a lower reach of the river that will conserve habitat for great gray owl (pictured) and a myriad of other wildlife.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*In 2021, WRC set out to conserve the 152-acre Selway River Ranch, a rare private inholding along the Selway River, one of the West's ultimate wild rivers.*

*Snake River*

RIVER NAME

*Idaho*

STATE

# CRADLE FOR BIGHORNS IS FOREVER CONSERVED

As iconic as they are sure-footed, bighorn sheep are a signature species in the river canyons of the West. Yet their very existence has been tenuous for decades, and their survival today hinges upon habitat preservation and limiting their exposure to disease from livestock. To address these challenges, Western Rivers Conservancy undertook a two-year effort on Idaho's Snake River to permanently protect the cradle and key range-lands for the Hells Canyon herd of bighorns.

In 2020, downstream of Hells Canyon, WRC permanently conserved the 2,920-acre Ten Mile Creek Ranch on the banks of the Snake River. This singular property is crucial to sustaining Idaho's northern Hells Canyon herd of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, which today numbers only about 150 head. Most of this herd depends on Ten Mile Creek Ranch to birth and raise their young.

With its steep breaks and rugged cliffs, Ten Mile Creek Ranch offers bighorns vital protection from predators and some of the best lambing grounds in the Columbia Basin. Over half of the lambs in the Idaho side of the herd are born on this property. The ranch also provides expanses of intact habitat that keep bighorns distanced from domestic sheep and goats.

To address the risk of a 24-lot development, WRC purchased Ten Mile Creek Ranch in 2018. While we held the land, we worked with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to place a conservation easement on the property, and then we sold the protected ranch to a private conservation buyer. The new owner, who shares WRC's vision for the property, is now partnering with the state to keep the land forever wild and undisturbed.

In addition to its bighorn habitat, the ranch includes four miles of the Snake River, a reach that includes Chinook salmon spawning redds and migration habitat for sockeye salmon, Chinook and steelhead. With its proximity to Hells Gate State Park to the north and the 78,000-acre Craig Mountain Wildlife Management Area to the south, the property will help unify a block of protected wildlands along the lower Snake River where bighorn, bear, elk and other wildlife still roam free, and where more than 100 species of birds are found.

With conservation successes like this one at Ten Mile Creek, we hope the iconic bighorn will forever roam the river canyons of the West. ■



Bighorn sheep populations have plummeted across the West, making lambing sites like Ten Mile Creek Ranch critical to their survival. The ranch sits on the Snake River (pictured) and provides the best lambing habitat for Idaho's Hells Canyon herd of bighorns.

PROJECT SIZE

2,920 acres

RIVER MILES

4 mainstem; 3.75 tributary

KEY ANIMALS

*Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain elk, mule-deer, black bear, chukar, ruffed grouse*

KEY FISH

*Chinook salmon, summer steelhead*



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*WRC has completed protection of the 2,920-acre Ten Mile Creek Ranch, including some of the Northwest's most critical lambing grounds for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep.*



### *Panther Creek, Idaho*

## A BOOST FOR FISH ON A RECOVERING SALMON STREAM

*Building on a massive effort to restore Panther Creek, a prime Idaho salmon stream and a major tributary to the Salmon River, WRC worked to conserve two critical properties with prime habitat for salmon and other wildlife.*

The stretch of Panther Creek that WRC is working to conserve is especially important because it spans a low-gradient, slower-moving reach of the river that salmon depend on for spawning and rearing habitat.

If there's a river redemption story out there, it's Idaho's Panther Creek. This spectacular Salmon River tributary has much in common with the better-known Middle Fork Salmon but was decimated by decades of mining. Toxic runoff left the lower river lifeless, and no salmon or steelhead could survive to make it to the upper river.

Massive restoration efforts beginning in the mid-1990s improved water quality, revived aquatic life and ultimately brought salmon back to Panther Creek. Although the stream has come a long way in its recovery, high-functioning spawning and rearing habitat remains limited. The river is a high-gradient stream, and salmon need flatter, slower-moving stretches to spawn and rear. For Panther Creek, protecting these low-gradient stretches is the crux move when it comes to guaranteeing the survival of these all-important fish.

In 2020, Western Rivers Conservancy set out to conserve one of these rare stretches of spawning habitat, a 110-acre inholding

within the Salmon-Challis National Forest that was slated for development. The stretch of Panther Creek that runs through the property is considered a top priority for salmon, steelhead and bull trout recovery by both the U.S. Forest Service and the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. In 2021, we worked to acquire a second property, the 448-acre Forney Tract, which spans nearly a mile of Panther Creek and has prime potential spawning and rearing habitat for salmon. By purchasing these vital properties and conveying them to the National Forest, we will set the stage for restoration and ensure the habitat these fish desperately need will be conserved forever.

In addition to its importance to salmon, Panther Creek is part of the Idaho Birding Trail, which traces the best birding sites in the state. WRC's work will improve river access for hikers, birders and anglers, while building on a larger effort to restore Panther Creek to the great salmon stream it once was. ■



### *South Fork Salmon River, Idaho*

## SECURING ACCESS AND HABITAT ON A WILD SALMON STREAM

In the remote backcountry of central Idaho, Western Rivers Conservancy successfully conserved the South Fork Wilderness Ranch, one of the few remaining parcels of private land along Idaho's spectacular South Fork Salmon River. In doing so, we protected a key stretch of fish and wildlife habitat and created unprecedented new access to thousands of acres of public lands within the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and Payette National Forest.

The South Fork Salmon is an 86-mile tributary to the Salmon River and one of the Columbia Basin's most important producers of Chinook. Historically, a whopping one-fifth of the basin's spring Chinook were spawned in the South Fork. The river today is every bit as beautiful as the better-known Main and Middle Fork Salmon rivers, yet it is exceedingly more remote, accessible by only a handful of steep, rugged dirt roads that descend thousands of feet into the river canyon. One of the best of these roads accesses the 234-acre South Fork Wilderness Ranch.

To protect the property's excellent habitat while securing recreational access for people, WRC worked in two phases. In 2020, we facilitated a conservation easement over the west-bank half of the ranch in partnership with the former landowner and the Payette Land Trust. Next, we utilized the Land and Water Conservation Fund to transfer the eastern half of the ranch to the adjacent Payette National Forest, permanently conserving the east-bank parcel and guaranteeing recreational access into the national forest and wilderness area.

With the completion of this effort, backpackers, equestrians, hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts have a new gateway to the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and its spectacular scenery, renowned big-game hunting and outstanding wildlife-viewing. Most importantly, one of the Lower 48's wildest rivers is one step closer to being protected along its entire length—a win for fish, wildlife, people and the South Fork Salmon alike. ■

*Deep in the South Fork Salmon River canyon, WRC permanently conserved the 234-acre South Fork Wilderness Ranch, guaranteeing access to remote public lands and protecting vital habitat for fish and wildlife.*

Now that WRC has conserved the South Fork Wilderness Ranch, its rugged habitat will be protected for fish and wildlife like mule deer (above), Chinook, bighorn sheep and elk.

## KEY FACTS

### PROJECT SIZE

200 acres

### STREAM FLOWS

10.5 CFS

### KEY ANIMALS

Rocky Mountain elk, pronghorn, sandhill crane, long-billed curlew, sage grouse

### KEY FISH

fluvial Arctic grayling, westslope cutthroat trout, mountain whitefish

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*In 2021, WRC acquired Eagle Rock Ranch, launching an effort to return critically needed water to the Wise River, a major tributary to the Big Hole River, the last system in the Lower 48 with fluvial Arctic grayling.*

## Cox and Old Tim Creeks

### ELSEWHERE ON THE BIG HOLE

Expanding our efforts in the Big Hole Valley, WRC signed an agreement to purchase the 317-acre Clemow Cow Camp in 2021. Two Big Hole River tributaries, Cox and Old Tim creeks, flow through the ranch, which controls 2.77 CFS of water rights on Cox Creek. Our goal is to buy and hold Clemow Cow Camp until we can secure funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund to convey it to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. Through Trout Unlimited's Western Water Project, the water can then be dedicated in-stream for the benefit of the Big Hole's fish. Our efforts will also create new access into the West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area, the largest remaining roadless area in southwest Montana.

## Wise River

RIVER NAME

## Montana

STATE

# DELIVERING WATER FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE IN THE BIG HOLE VALLEY

Montana's Big Hole River is an iconic western stream. One of the country's premier fly fishing rivers, the 150-mile long Big Hole courses through some of the most diverse geography of any river in the state. It is a beloved trout fishery and, remarkably, the only river system left in the contiguous United States with fluvial Arctic grayling.

The Big Hole's Arctic grayling rear in the cold waters of just five main tributaries, one of which is the Wise River. But these cold streams

have been increasingly impacted by water withdrawals, development and a warming climate, threatening grayling populations throughout the Big Hole system. Protecting this handful of tributaries and ensuring they remain healthy is critical to keeping these grayling populations alive.

To that end, WRC purchased the 200-acre Eagle Rock Ranch, which controls the highest major diversion on the Wise River. We intend to convey the property to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest and ultimately dedicate the ranch's water in-stream in partnership with Trout Unlimited's Western Water Project. This will allow us to permanently return 10.5 CFS of water to the Wise River—significant flows for a stream this size. More water in-stream will benefit not just grayling, but westslope cutthroat trout and mountain whitefish, as well as the non-native rainbow and brown trout for which the Big Hole is famous.

In addition to being home to the West's only river with fluvial Arctic grayling, the Big Hole Valley provides outstanding habitat for birds. Upstream of the Wise River confluence, the flat, meandering nature of the Big Hole, coupled with extensive winter snows and late snowmelt, result in abundant wetlands that support everything from sandhill crane and long-billed curlew to sage grouse, American kestrel, killdeer and golden and bald eagle. These and other species rely on the open country of the Big Hole Valley, including places like Eagle Rock Ranch. ■



WRC is working to return water to the Wise River (left), a tributary to the Big Hole, the Lower 48's last river system with fluvial Arctic grayling (pictured).

South Fork Kern River

California

RIVER NAME

STATE

PROJECT SIZE

2,275 acres

RIVER MILES

1.5 mainstem; 1.75 tributary

KEY ANIMALS

black bear, mule deer, California condor, foothill yellow-legged frog

KEY FISH

California golden trout, Kern River rainbow trout

# HOPE FOR WILD FISH AND PUBLIC ACCESS IN THE SOUTHERN SIERRA

With pristine glacial headwaters, wild and scenic river status, renowned whitewater, diverse plant life and native cold-water fishes, California's Kern River is a Golden State treasure of the highest order.

The Kern's two forks originate in the pristine high country of the southern Sierra Nevada. The North Fork collects its waters from the glaciers of Mount Whitney, and the South Fork flows off the high Boreal Plateau. Both course through the Golden Trout Wilderness, home to California's beautiful and brightly colored eponymous state fish. The South Fork Kern sustains California's largest remaining cottonwood forest, and both forks cut through dramatic boulder-strewn granite canyons. Before the two forks meet at Isabella Lake, they are designated wild and scenic along their entire lengths. When it comes to the sheer diversity of life that the Kern system supports, in an area just a short drive from the most populated part of the state, the river is invaluable.

In 2021, WRC set out to conserve the 2,275-acre Fay Creek Ranch, a rocky oasis that lies between the North and South forks, upstream of Isabella Lake. Located in the arid transition zone between the High Sierra and the Mojave Desert, the ranch is prized for its abundant water, including several freshwater springs, a hot spring and Fay Creek itself, which feeds the South Fork Kern. The ranch also provides critical habitat for endangered and threatened wildlife such as California condor, yellow-billed cuckoo, southwestern willow flycatcher, least Bell's vireo and foothill yellow-legged frog.

WRC plans to purchase the ranch and hold it until we can secure funds to transfer it

into public or tribal ownership. In addition to protecting the ranch's habitat and water, we will deliver permanent access to two trailheads on the property. The trails were historically used by the Tübatulabal Tribe and ascend from the valley floor up to the high Kern Plateau. Tribal leaders strongly support public acquisition of the ranch so that the Tübatulabal can reestablish personal ties to the landscape.

Ultimately our efforts will ensure that this very special property becomes part of the incredible landscape of protected public and NGO lands surrounding it, improving habitat connectivity for wildlife and keeping the ranch's precious water untouched for the fish, plants and animals of the Kern River system. ■



Fay Creek Ranch (right) is prized for its abundant water, including fresh-water springs, a hot spring and a stretch of Fay Creek, which feeds the South Fork Kern River, home to threatened California golden trout (pictured).



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*In 2021, WRC launched an effort to conserve the 2,275-acre Fay Creek Ranch to protect a series of freshwater springs and a stretch of Fay Creek that feed the South Fork Kern River in an arid and spectacular setting in the southern Sierra.*

## KEY FACTS

### PROJECT SIZE

1,199 acres

### RIVER MILES

1 mile

### KEY ANIMALS

California condor, California spotted owl, mountain lion, coyote, California red-legged frog

### KEY FISH

South-Central California Coast steelhead

Little Sur River

California

RIVER NAME

STATE

# RIVER CONSERVATION AND TRIBAL RESILIENCE IN THE HEART OF BIG SUR

At the heart of California's Big Sur Coast, where condors soar above ancient redwoods and small coastal steelhead streams, Western Rivers Conservancy and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County completed a landmark effort to conserve a mile of the Little Sur River. Together we placed the 1,199-acre Adler Ranch, located roughly 20 miles south of Monterey, into Esselen stewardship, allowing the tribe to regain ancestral homelands for the first time since the Spanish displaced the Esselen over 250 years ago.

With its oak and chaparral woodlands, whispering grasslands and lofty redwoods, the property provides excellent habitat for wildlife, including California spotted owl, endangered

California condor and threatened California red-legged frog. As throughout Big Sur, the property's redwoods are some of the southernmost stands on Earth, critical for their potential adaptability to climate change.

The Little Sur River is equally important. It is a near-pristine steelhead stream that flows out of the Ventana Wilderness and Santa Lucia Mountains, through the ranch's redwood-shaded canyon, to the fog-swept Pacific shoreline. Steelhead once returned to this stretch of coast by the tens of thousands, but today that number is in the hundreds—if that. The Little Sur River is one of their best hopes for recovery, as it remains Central California's most intact spawning stream for threatened South-Central California Coast steelhead.

WRC set out to conserve Adler Ranch in 2016, seeing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect a prime stretch of the Little Sur and a swath of land with tremendous conservation and cultural value. After protracted negotiations, we gained control of the ranch and then found an ideal steward in the Esselen Tribe, who have called this area home since time immemorial. Together, we secured a grant from the California Natural Resources Agency in 2019 and successfully brought the ranch into Esselen ownership in 2020.

Now and forevermore, nearly two square miles of land at the heart of the Esselen's ancestral domain belong to the Esselen people. While the land is a fraction of their former territory, it will allow the Esselen to reinvigorate tribal culture, conduct traditional ceremonies and teach tribal members and visitors about the area's rich ecological and indigenous history—all while protecting a critical stretch of the Little Sur River. ■



The Esselen Tribe holds its first ceremony in 250 years on ancestral homelands that WRC and the tribe repatriated to the Esselen people (left), in the process of conserving a mile of the Little Sur River (pictured).

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*WRC and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County preserved a mile of the pristine Little Sur River while returning 1,199 acres of ancestral homelands, ancient redwoods and oak woodlands to the Esselen people.*



*South Fork Scott River*      *California*

RIVER NAME

STATE

# KEEPING WATER IN-STREAM FOR CALIFORNIA'S TOP COHO RIVER

When it comes to the survival of coho salmon in California, the Scott River is of utmost importance. A major tributary to the Klamath River, the Scott produces over half of the state's wild coho. Anchored by the South Fork—the mainstem's largest, wildest and coldest tributary—the Scott has clear water, abundant spawning beds and no mainstem dams to block fish migration.

Yet, since John Scott discovered gold there in 1850, the river has suffered from a history of mining, logging and diking. Even today, the Scott Valley's diversions for hay and other crops often leave too little water in the river to sustain salmon and steelhead through their life stages in fresh water.

To improve conditions for these fish, WRC purchased the strategically located 1,596-acre Bouvier Ranch in 2017. The 2.5 miles of the South Fork Scott that flow through the property are designated Critical Habitat for coho. It's a stretch of river so important that, at the height of the drought in 2014, state biologists relocated coho here after rescuing them from the mainstem Scott River's lethally low water. In addition to its exceptional habitat, the ranch's irrigation rights offer the rare opportunity to increase flows in the river by up to 20 percent. Now that the ranch is managed for conservation, this critical boost of water can ensure adequate flows for salmon and steelhead exactly when they need it most.

While WRC held the land, CalTrout, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Siskiyou Resource Conservation Districted together reconnected the main channel to its natural floodplain, rejuvenating side channels where

young coho rear. In late 2020, we permanently protected the ranch's fish and wildlife habitat by placing a conservation easement on the property and transferring it—and management of the ranch's water rights—to the Siskiyou Land Trust. We then sold the land to a conservation buyer, a neighboring rancher who shares WRC's long-term vision for the property and who plans to continue stream restoration work with our partners.

Completing this effort is a significant step for the fish and wildlife that depend on the Scott River. Ultimately, the cold, clear water and restored habitat will bolster coho returns and contribute vital flows to the Scott and the greater Klamath system as a whole. ■



California's Scott River (pictured) produces more wild coho salmon (right) than any other river in the state, and its health is crucial to the species' survival.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*At the close of 2020, WRC completed its efforts to conserve the 1,596-acre Bouvier Ranch to substantially increase stream flows and revitalize salmon habitat within the South Fork Scott River, a potential game-changer for California's imperiled coho salmon.*

PROJECT SIZE

1,596 acres

RIVER MILES

2.5 miles

KEY ANIMALS

*northern spotted owl, bald eagle, pacific fisher, American marten*

KEY FISH

*Chinook salmon, coho salmon, steelhead*





### *South Fork Antelope Creek, California*

## CRITICAL PIECE OF SACRAMENTO SALMON STRONGHOLD PROTECTED

*On the flanks of Mount Lassen, WRC protected 1,150 acres along a key reach of South Fork Antelope Creek, a stronghold for salmon and steelhead in the Sacramento River system.*

California's first wolf in decades, known as OR-7 (above), overwintered on the property that WRC protected in 2020.

On the southern flanks of Mount Lassen, Western Rivers Conservancy notched a key victory for Sacramento River salmon and steelhead. In 2020, we protected 2.5 crucial miles of South Fork Antelope Creek, utilizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund to convey 1,150 acres to the Lassen National Forest for permanent protection.

The near-pristine South Fork feeds Antelope Creek, which joins the Sacramento River near the city of Red Bluff. Antelope Creek is one of six streams that form the designated Sacramento Salmon Stronghold, a suite of rivers that offer the best hope for the survival of spring Chinook, winter steelhead (both threatened) and fall Chinook within the Sacramento system. In short, South Fork Antelope Creek is a top-tier wild fish nursery, and our efforts will help keep it that way.

The property we protected lies on the western side of Lassen National Forest near the Ishi Wilderness and is defined by expanses of giant, old-growth ponderosa pine and incense cedar, which line the

stream within a deep, shaded canyon. South Fork Antelope Creek contains some of the greatest biodiversity in the Lassen National Forest, and biologists place tremendous value on the wildlife habitat throughout the property. The wolf known as OR-7, which was California's first documented wolf in decades, overwintered on the property, a testament to the quality of the habitat. The property's old-growth pines, oak woodlands and grasslands support a variety of other wildlife, including Tehama black-tailed deer, black bear, western and pond turtle.

Antelope Creek is also a popular destination for hikers, equestrians and whitewater kayakers. Our efforts set the stage to extend a hiking trail from the Tehama Wildlife Area downstream into the National Forest, which could one day improve access for outdoor enthusiasts in this rugged area of Northern California. ■



### *Gualala River, California*

## CONSERVING SALMON WATERS, REDWOODS AND WOODLANDS IN WINE COUNTRY

From redwood forests to sandy beaches, the Gualala River flows through some of California's most emblematic landscapes. It begins in the rugged Coast Range and then winds past giant redwoods, through rolling oak woodlands and on to the white-capped waves of the Pacific, where a small, historic beach town shares the river's name.

With no dams, plentiful cold water and large swaths of untouched habitat, the Gualala and its forks provide excellent habitat for coho salmon and winter steelhead, two imperiled runs that have dwindled or disappeared from other coastal rivers. To improve the odds that the Gualala River system stays healthy for fish and wildlife, Western Rivers Conservancy is working to permanently conserve critical headwater streams that flow through the beautiful 4,344-acre Silva Ranch, in the Gualala's headwaters. Our goal is to place a conservation easement on the ranch, which will be held by the California Rangeland Trust. This will protect a stretch of

the Wheatfield Fork Gualala, the mainstem Gualala's largest tributary, as well as a series of cold feeder creeks—more than six miles of cold-water, fish-bearing streams in all. The easement will conserve 40 acres of magnificent old-growth redwoods and thousands of acres of oak woodlands, while ensuring part of the property can provide an ongoing livelihood for the landowners.

The Silva Family, who owns the ranch and shares our conservation vision for the property, is partnering with WRC to permanently protect this critical piece of the Gualala River system. The ranch also lies adjacent to 75,000 acres of protected lands, and adding it to this assemblage will improve habitat connectivity for wildlife at a landscape scale. The result will be a lasting, unbroken haven for imperiled wildlife like California red-legged frog, northern spotted owl, western pond turtle, California tiger salamander and the Gualala roach, a small fish found nowhere else in the world. ■

*WRC continued its effort to conserve the 4,344-acre Silva Ranch, in Sonoma County, to protect a vital stretch of the Wheatfield Fork Gualala River and majestic stands of old-growth redwood*

Silva Ranch (above) contains over 40 acres of old-growth redwoods and thousands of acres of oak woodlands that provide habitat for numerous threatened, endangered and sensitive species.

*Yakima River*

RIVER NAME

*Washington*

STATE

PROJECT SIZE

*812 acres*

RIVER MILES

*3.5 miles*

KEY ANIMALS

*California bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, bald eagle*

KEY FISH

*Chinook, steelhead, rainbow trout, bull trout*

# PRESERVING A PREMIER STRETCH OF A FAMED WASHINGTON TROUT STREAM

The Yakima River is one of the West's premier desert trout streams. It flows 214 miles from Keechelus Lake in the Cascade Mountains to the Columbia River, with a glorious 27-mile stretch through the Yakima River Canyon. Here, in a great sea of sagebrush, the river sweeps around giant horseshoe bends, past high basalt cliffs and rolling desert hills. Year-round, trout anglers take to the Yakima in drift boats and rafts, and in summer people head to the river for day floats in inner tubes. Bighorn sheep, elk and mule deer can be spotted along the banks, and the canyon's crevices and cliffs are home to the state's densest concentration of nesting hawks, eagles and falcons.

In the upper reaches of the Yakima River Canyon lies the 812-acre Yakima Canyon Ranch, spanning two sides of the river at the heart of some of the best fly fishing water in Washington. It is one of just a handful of the canyon's river reaches that aren't protected within the BLM's surrounding Yakima Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and is home to the popular Big Horn boating access site. It's an important property from a fish and wildlife perspective and possesses outstanding river access, excellent camping and breathtaking desert vistas in every direction.

Given its importance, Yakima Canyon Ranch has long been a target for conservation. Western Rivers Conservancy first attempted to purchase the property in 2015, but it took until 2021 to get a deal in place. We secured interim funding to purchase the ranch and are now working to secure an appropriation from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to

convey the property to the BLM. Once funding is secured, we can transfer Yakima Canyon Ranch to the BLM for inclusion within the ACEC, guaranteeing permanent public access and ensuring greater management continuity along the river. Conservation of the ranch will also protect migratory habitat for salmon and steelhead and robust habitat for California bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer and a myriad of small mammals and birds.

Once Yakima Canyon Ranch is in BLM hands, this premier stretch of the Yakima will be permanently protected for the sake of fish and wildlife, and public access to this very special stretch of the Yakima River Canyon will be guaranteed forever. ■



Yakima Canyon provides habitat for the state's densest concentration of nesting hawks, eagles and falcons. Conservation of Yakima Canyon Ranch will protect a critical portion of this habitat and deliver river access to a popular stretch of river. Above: prairie falcon.



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*In 2021, WRC launched an effort to conserve a premier four-mile stretch of the Yakima River with crucial habitat for fish and wildlife, cherished fishing access, great hiking, and the Big Horn boat launch, one of the most important put-ins on the river.*

## PROJECT SIZE

2,524 acres

## RIVER MILES

2.3 mainstem; 1.4 tributary

## KEY ANIMALS

sharp-tailed grouse, white-tailed deer, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, tiger salamander

## KEY FISH

summer steelhead

Okanogan River,  
Antoine Creek

Washington

RIVER NAME

STATE

SAVING OKANOGAN RIVER  
STEELHEAD TOGETHER  
WITH THE COLVILLE TRIBES

To reach their home waters, Upper Columbia River steelhead swim more than 500 miles, overcome nine dams and finally enter the Columbia River tributaries of Washington's arid interior. East of Lake Chelan, they reach the Okanogan River valley, where they face their final challenge: water. In fertile Okanogan County, farms draw heavily from spawning tributaries, often leaving flows too low and warm for steelhead to reproduce. Today, Upper Columbia River steelhead, including a unique population in the Okanogan River, face the threat of extinction.

One of the greatest champions for these imperiled fish is the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, whose ancestral

homelands spread across parts of the Okanogan River valley. For a decade, the tribes have sought to acquire a large ranch along Antoine Creek, a critical steelhead stream and a vital source of cold water for the Okanogan River. The 2,524-acre property, called Antoine Valley Ranch, includes over two miles of Antoine Creek, as well as an

earthen dam on a detached, upstream parcel of the ranch. The dam is located above a natural migration barrier for steelhead, but still severely limits flows in the creek, often de-watering it to lethal levels for fish.

With the goal of returning flows to Antoine Creek, Western Rivers Conservancy negotiated purchase of the ranch and partnered with the Colville Tribes to achieve our shared vision. In the final days of 2020, we successfully bought the property and immediately transferred half of it to the tribes with funding from the Washington Department of Ecology's Streamflow Restoration Grant Program. We leased the remaining lands to the Colville, allowing them to begin restoration efforts and stream-flow modifications for the benefit of fish while we work to secure funding to transfer the remaining lands. Instead of removing the dam, the Colville are using it to release water for steelhead when the river is drawn too low—an unexpected but perfect opportunity to guarantee steelhead have enough water to spawn throughout their natural range in Antoine Creek. The number of steelhead returning to the stream has already increased.

Our efforts also set the stage for extensive stream restoration and replanting of the ranch's lowland agricultural fields with native sagebrush grasslands. The results will be improved habitat for animals like threatened Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, migratory birds, mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk and other animals that rely on the property as part of a vital migratory corridor. ■



WRC's efforts at Antoine Valley Ranch (left) will significantly improve stream-flows and habitat for threatened Upper Columbia River steelhead (pictured).

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*On Washington's Okanogan River, WRC launched a partnership with the Colville Tribes to return 2,524-acres of ancestral homelands to the tribes and resurrect Antoine Creek, a vital spawning stream for Upper Columbia River steelhead that has been starved of water for years.*



*Nason Ridge, Washington*

# SAVING A FOREST FOR NASON CREEK AND LAKE WENATCHEE

*In 2021, WRC successfully secured Community Forest funding from the Washington State Legislature, locking in the future of Nason Ridge as a community forest for the benefit of fish, wildlife and people.*

Above left, Nason Ridge rises from the shore of Lake Wenatchee. The Wenatchee River flows out of the lake just upstream of the river's confluence with Nason Creek.

Nason Ridge is a highly visible 3,714-acre mountainside rising above the southern shore of Lake Wenatchee, blanketed in conifers and crowned by a rocky ridge with sweeping views across the North Cascades and the Chumstick Valley. It is a beloved outdoor destination, with an extensive network of trails that connect to the neighboring Lake Wenatchee State Park. It is also flanked by four-plus miles of Nason and Kahler creeks, two crucial sources of cold water for the Wenatchee River and prime habitat for Chinook, coho, sockeye, steelhead and bull trout.

Long owned by Weyerhaeuser Company, Nason Ridge had an uncertain future until 2018, when the company put it up for sale following persistent local opposition to extensive timber harvest. Given the property's importance to the Wenatchee River system, Western Rivers Conservancy negotiated a deal with Weyerhaeuser to purchase the property. We then joined forces with Chelan-Douglas Land Trust, Chelan County and the local community to raise funds to permanently protect Nason Ridge by conveying it to a

steward that could keep the property intact and in public hands forever. The ideal steward turned out to be Chelan County, which shared our vision to see Nason Ridge managed as a community forest and public recreation area.

To bring the community forest to life, the partners set out to raise \$6 million to convey the property to Chelan County and to underwrite its stewardship as a community forest. Immediately following WRC's purchase of the property, the partners and local community members raised over \$1 million in private funds. WRC then spearheaded an effort to raise the remaining funds through a variety of public and private sources, including \$3 million from the Washington State Community Forest Program.

Once community forest funding was approved by the Washington State Legislature in 2021, a new future was locked in for the property: The Nason Ridge Community Forest. Now, Nason Ridge will forever be managed for the benefit of fish, wildlife and the people of Washington and beyond. ■



WRC protected one of the most extensive intact stretches of riverfront remaining on the lower Nisqually River.

Flowing from Mount Rainier, the Nisqually River is one of the least-developed rivers entering Washington's Puget Sound. It is also one of the state's most important salmon streams, with healthy runs of fall Chinook, coho, chum and pink salmon, as well as steelhead, bull trout and cutthroat trout.

Though its headwaters and estuary are federally protected, the Nisqually faces intense pressures along its lower reaches. In 2019, one of the most intact stretches of the river was listed for sale, a 172-acre property that the Nisqually Indian Tribe and the Nisqually Land Trust sought to conserve for years. In 2020, WRC successfully brought that vision to life

*Nisqually River, WA*

# VICTORY FOR A PUGET SOUND SALMON STRONGHOLD

by negotiating a deal that was amenable to all the partners involved, gaining control of the property and then orchestrating its transfer to the Nisqually Land Trust, an ideal steward for the property.

This group effort conserved a mile of the Nisqually and some of the river's best unprotected salmon habitat. That's a win not just for salmon, but for Puget Sound's declining Southern Resident killer whale population, which depends heavily on the salmon run for survival. In a rapidly urbanizing region that is losing fish and wildlife habitat, this project is a critically important conservation gain. ■

*Methow and Chewuch Rivers, WA*

# CONSERVING SALMON STREAMS AND OPEN SPACE IN THE METHOW VALLEY



Above, the Methow River glows beneath an early-summer sunset. WRC's work here helped preserve two critical properties along the Methow and Chewuch rivers.

In 2021, WRC successfully conserved two key properties along the Methow and Chewuch rivers, the two major arteries flowing through Washington's spectacular Methow Valley. On the Methow, we placed a restoration-access easement on the 35-acre Stafford Ranch, which we purchased in 2018. We sold the protected ranch to a conservation buyer in 2021, laying the groundwork for the Yakama Nation to begin restoring critical salmon and steelhead habitat.

On the Chewuch, we conveyed the historic 328-acre Wagner Ranch to the Methow Conservancy. Wagner Ranch, which WRC purchased in 2018, was one of the largest

contiguous tracts of private riverfront ownership remaining in the valley. It spans 1.5 miles of the Chewuch River, where more than a dozen different salmon habitat restoration opportunities have been identified. It also adjoins a 14,800-acre unit of the Methow Wildlife Area, providing superb habitat connectivity for wildlife. In the case of both properties, the efforts of WRC and its partners are helping preserve the unique natural, biological and historic character of the Methow Valley. ■

PROJECT SIZE

45,650 acres

RIVER MILES

30 miles

KEY ANIMALS

Rocky Mountain elk, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, mule deer, gray warbler, pygmy nuthatch

KEY FISH

Rio Grande cutthroat trout

La Jara Basin

Colorado

RIVER NAME

STATE

# LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION IN THE RIO GRANDE'S HEADWATERS



An angler fishes Jim Creek, one of the cold-water streams that flows through the La Jara. The property (left) is a vast swath of public land with all the benefits conservation landscapes provide.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*In the San Luis Valley, WRC has partnered with the Colorado State Land Board to secure a conservation future for the 45,650-acre La Jara Basin property, one of the Centennial State's great natural and community treasures.*

some dating back to the earliest signs of human habitation in North America.

Because of the La Jara Basin's importance as protected, intact open space, however, it no longer meets the objectives of the SLB's mission. Aware of WRC's work across the state, the land board approached WRC to help deliver a conservation solution for this important place. WRC has since assembled a diverse partnership of state and federal natural resource land management agencies to initiate a strategy that will allow for compatible agricultural uses while protecting habitat, preserving open space and keeping the La Jara open to all.

More than 30 miles of perennial cold-water streams flow through the La Jara Basin, including La Jara Creek, Jim Creek and Torsido Creek, all tributaries to the Conejos River and the Rio Grande. Jim and Torsido creeks support populations of Rio Grande cutthroat trout (a Colorado Species of Special Concern), and the property provides crucial winter range for large ungulates like elk, bighorn sheep and mule deer. Research on the eastern flank of the property has uncovered hundreds of archaeological sites, including one known as La Botica, or "the pharmacy." Eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, the site contains evidence of 8,000 years of medicinal plant gathering.

Conservation of the La Jara Basin will build on WRC's near-decade of work protecting habitat and public access in the San Luis Valley. It will ensure the lasting protection of a vast and vulnerable landscape that is the backbone of thriving communities, fish and wildlife in this southern corner of Colorado. ■

In spring 2021, WRC began a partnership with the Colorado State Land Board with the goal of permanently protecting one of the most important landscapes in the San Luis Valley: the 45,650-acre La Jara Basin property. Centered at La Jara Creek, the property is surrounded by protected public lands, including the Rio Grande National Forest, BLM land, wilderness areas and several Colorado State Wildlife Areas.

The La Jara is one of the San Luis Valley's great natural, cultural and community treasures, a vast swath of public land with all the benefits that conservation landscapes provide—from recreation to seasonal grazing, to the climate benefits of intact open space and free-flowing streams. It is also home to important Native American and cultural sites,



*Dunton Meadows, Dolores River, Colorado*

## KEEPING THE DOLORES RIVER'S HEADWATERS INTACT

*In 2021, WRC signed an agreement to purchase the 162-acre Dunton Meadows parcel with the hope of protecting a fragile alpine meadow, habitat for imperiled cutthroat, and critical headwater flows for the Dolores River.*

Dunton Meadows (above) is defined by a broad wetland meadow which rests in the shadow of snowcapped Mount Wilson.

From its headwaters at nearly 12,000 feet in the San Miguel Mountains to its confluence with the Colorado River near Moab, Utah, the Dolores River charts a 240-mile course through pristine alpine meadows, ponderosa pine forests and sheer-walled sandstone canyons. Several stretches of the lower river have been determined eligible for wild and scenic designation, and below McPhee Reservoir the Dolores offers one of the country's longest wilderness river floats.

In summer 2021, Western Rivers Conservancy set out to conserve a crucial property in the headwaters of the Dolores, a 162-acre inholding in the San Juan National Forest. Known as Dunton Meadows, the property is set in a high-elevation saddle between the East and West forks of the Dolores, dominated by a broad wetland meadow below the snowcapped summit of Mount Wilson, at the edge of the Lizard Head Wilderness.

This subalpine meadow provides excellent habitat for birds and other wildlife and

captures snowmelt and rain that feed a nearby stream called Coal Creek. This headwater tributary of the Dolores offers some of the richest habitat in the entire upper Dolores for imperiled Colorado River cutthroat trout. Surrounded by national forest and wilderness, Dunton Meadows is also important from a recreational perspective. Several trails cross or start on the property, and a stream called Meadow Creek, which bisects the southern edge of the parcel, is a popular trout fishing stream.

Our goal is to purchase Dunton Meadows and protect it in perpetuity by conveying it to the San Juan National Forest. Ensuring this property remains intact and open to all will benefit the fish, wildlife and people of Colorado forever. The Dolores is one of the West's great rivers, and WRC's work at Dunton Meadows marks the beginning of our efforts to make a difference for this outstanding river system. ■



At the confluence of the Rio Grande and Conejos River, the Olguin Ranch in Colorado provides outstanding habitat for birds (and those who watch them).

Near its headwaters, the Rio Grande winds through the high San Luis Valley, where birds outnumber people and small family farms are a way of life. At the confluence of the valley's two largest rivers—the Rio Grande and Conejos—WRC continued its efforts to conserve Olguin Ranch, a block of superb habitat across the Rio Grande from the San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area, which we created in 2018. The same year,

*Conejos River, Colorado*

## CONSERVING A HAVEN FOR BIRDS ON THE CONEJOS AND RIO GRANDE

WRC partnered with the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust to place a conservation easement over the 1,168-acre Olguin property. We then donated a small conservation easement on the ranch to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, establishing the country's 567th unit of the National Wildlife Refuge system: the San Luis Valley Conservation Area. In late 2021, we dropped the final piece into place by selling the ranch to a conservation buyer. ■

*Gunnison River, Colorado*

## PROTECTING ANOTHER MILE OF THE MIGHTY GUNNISON

Much of Colorado's lower Gunnison is protected within places like the BLM's Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. But stretches of the lower river remain vulnerable. To fill those gaps, WRC has purchased and conserved 954 acres and eight miles of Gunnison riverfront since 2008. In 2020, following a seven-year effort,



The Gunnison River, inside the Dominguez Escalante National Conservation Area.

we conserved another 150 acres along a mile-long reach, including prime camping flats for boaters. With funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, we are helping to keep the Gunnison a sanctuary for fish and wildlife while expanding the Dominguez-Escalante NCA. ■



WRC returned desperately needed flows to a reach of the Little Cimarron that was typically drawn dry in summer and fall.

In Colorado's Southern Rockies, WRC completed a pioneering effort to re-water a stretch of the Little Cimarron River. In 2012, we purchased a foreclosed farm with senior water rights on the river. In 2014, we transferred the water

*Little Cimarron River, Colorado*

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN TROUT STREAM RE-WATERED AT LAST

to the Colorado Water Trust and, in 2019, established a split-season irrigation agreement—the first of its kind in the state—to ensure year-round flows for fish while meeting the needs of agriculture. In 2020, we sold the land to a neighboring farmer who embraces the water-sharing plan. Now, the farm remains a productive part of the local economy, and the river remains connected year-round for trout—a model solution to water challenges across the West. ■

McDermitt Creek

RIVER NAME

Oregon & Nevada

STATE

# SAVING A GREAT BASIN LIFELINE FOR IMPERILED LAHONTAN CUTTHROAT

In the arid expanses of southeast Oregon and northern Nevada, where sagebrush habitat is disappearing and cold streams are as rare as the native trout they support, WRC is seizing a last-chance opportunity to change the fate of one of the West's most imperiled fish.

Nevada's state fish, Lahontan cutthroat are a bright-orange species of migratory trout that once thrived in cold-water streams and lakes across the Great Basin. Today, they hover on the brink of extinction as the basin's perennial streams dwindle and warming temperatures and non-native fish threaten their survival. If there's hope for Lahontan cutthroat, it hinges on protecting strongholds like McDermitt Creek, which once had thriving Lahontan populations and retains plentiful habitat and tributaries that still harbor isolated, genetically pure populations.

To permanently conserve this rare stream, WRC purchased the 3,345-acre Disaster Peak Ranch, which includes 7.5 miles of McDermitt Creek and over 11 miles of tributary streams. The effort will allow WRC's partners to reconnect 55 miles of viable fish habitat on and around the property, doubling the number of stream miles available to Lahontan cutthroat across the fish's northwest range. Biologists can now access the property to remove non-native fish from McDermitt Creek and begin reintroducing genetically pure populations of Lahontan cutthroat from the property's isolated tributaries. If successful, the effort will restore healthy, self-sustaining runs of Lahontan cutthroat within the full length of McDermitt Creek—a critical step toward recovering this threatened species.

WRC's efforts at Disaster Peak Ranch will also conserve critical grassland habitat for

wildlife like greater sage grouse, the colorfully plumed bird so iconic of the sagebrush steppe. The ranch and the vast public protected areas surrounding it are also home to California bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, great horned owl, beaver, Columbia spotted frog, Nevada pygmy rabbit and dozens of other species that will benefit from the project.

As we work to identify the ideal long-term steward for the ranch, we are positioning the property for long-term habitat conservation and compatible grazing. Together with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Nevada Department of Wildlife, Trout Unlimited and other partners, we are working to realize a shared hope of Lahontan cutthroat trout surviving into the next century and beyond. ■



Bright-orange Lahontan cutthroat (pictured) are the state fish of Nevada. The imperiled species depends on cold streams like McDermitt Creek, which flows through Disaster Peak Ranch (right).



PROJECT SIZE

3,345 acres

RIVER MILES

7.5 mainstem; 11.5 tributary

KEY ANIMALS

greater sage-grouse, Columbia spotted frog, pygmy rabbit, California bighorn sheep, greater sandhill crane

KEY FISH

Lahontan cutthroat trout

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*In a last-ditch effort to save one of the few genetically pure Lahontan cutthroat trout populations from extinction, WRC purchased the 3,345-acre Disaster Peak Ranch on McDermitt Creek, a rare stream that offers this population its only hope for survival.*



## KEY FACTS

### PROJECT SIZE

2,200 acres

### RIVER MILES

3.3 miles

### KEY ANIMALS

yellow rail, greater sandhill crane, Forster's tern, cinnamon teal, gadwall, Oregon spotted frog, American fisher

### KEY FISH

rainbow trout, Lost River sucker, shortnose sucker, Miller Lake lamprey

Williamson River

Oregon

RIVER NAME

STATE

# A BOOST FOR WATER AND WILDLIFE IN THE WILLIAMSON'S HEADWATERS

Every year, millions of birds take to the skies along the Pacific Flyway, an aerial super-highway stretching from Patagonia to Alaska. Along the way, most of them descend upon the upper Klamath Basin, where six national wildlife refuges are home to a freshwater mosaic of lakes and meadows that draw over 260 bird species, including ducks, geese, songbirds, swans, herons, grebes, eagles and others.

Western Rivers Conservancy successfully expanded one of these refuges—the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge—preserving critical swaths of wetlands and meadows and improving stream flows into the marsh that will help rejuvenate habitat for birds, fish and other wildlife.

The project centered on the Williamson

River, a renowned Oregon trout stream that winds through the 40,000-acre Klamath Marsh and then supplies most of the inflows to Upper Klamath Lake, the source of the Klamath River. Where the Williamson enters the refuge, WRC purchased the 2,200-acre Timmerman Ranch, including its key water rights, in 2019. Three miles of the Williamson flow through the property, feeding wet meadows and marshlands that are vital to the area's bird life. In 2020, we secured funding from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, allowing us to convey the ranch and its water rights to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, expanding the refuge and improving water conditions in the upper Williamson and Klamath Marsh.

The property hosts tens of thousands of nesting and feeding birds throughout the year, and the USFWS expects those numbers to grow as it restores the property's natural meanders and marshlands. Deer, elk, antelope and the state-sensitive American fisher all rely on the ponderosa pine forests on the ranch's uplands. The project also benefits the Williamson's scale-tipping native redband and rainbow trout, along with two endangered sucker fish and the state-sensitive Miller Lake lamprey.

The Klamath Basin's long-term recovery depends on conservation efforts like this one. By delivering increased headwater flows and better water quality, this project will bolster the efforts of all who depend on a healthy Klamath River, including the Klamath Tribes, the agricultural community and recreationists. Most of all, the effort improves conditions for the fish and wildlife of the Klamath River system, which sustains some of the most diverse bird life and greatest salmon runs in the West. ■



WRC's expansion of the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (left) benefits hundreds of species of birds. Among them, ducks, geese, raptors, songbirds and sandhill cranes (pictured).

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*In 2020, WRC successfully expanded the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge by 2,200 acres, conserving three miles of the famed Williamson River and improving stream-flows and water quality within the Klamath Marsh.*

*John Day River*

RIVER NAME

*Oregon*

STATE

PROJECT SIZE

*4,097 acres*

RIVER MILES

*3.2 mainstem; 2.6 tributary*

KEY ANIMALS

*California bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, burrowing owl, sagebrush lizard*

KEY FISH

*summer steelhead, spring Chinook*

# PRESERVING HISTORY, HABITAT AND PUBLIC ACCESS ON THE JOHN DAY RIVER

Year after year, recreationists make their way to the John Day Wild and Scenic River's wondrous lower canyon. Few other places in the Pacific Northwest embrace visitors with such an expanse of restorative solitude, complete with bighorn sheep, spectacular canyon walls, superb fishing and gentle waters. And few other rivers in the Columbia Basin offer greater hope for summer steelhead.

Prior to Western Rivers Conservancy's efforts in the basin, the most important tributaries to the lower river were unprotected, and private property made a 90-plus-mile stretch nearly inaccessible to the public. As large ranches along the river have come up for sale, WRC has set its sights on conserving them to protect fish and wildlife habitat, restore key cold-water tributaries and improve recreational access. Over the course of a decade, WRC has created Cottonwood Canyon State Park, conserved two ranches at Thirtymile Creek and permanently protected over a dozen miles of the lifeline streams that support the Columbia Basin's healthiest run of summer steelhead. In the process we have also created some of the only public access to the lower river.

Building on these efforts, WRC purchased the 4,097-acre McDonald's Ferry Ranch in 2020. The property spans three miles of the John Day River in a landscape dominated by prime sagebrush-steppe habitat, and it possesses the lowest viable boating take-out on the river. Steeped in history, McDonald's Ferry Ranch is named for the old ferry that carried Oregon Trail pioneers across the river. Even today, century-old wagon ruts are visible on the property.

After purchasing the ranch, WRC secured funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund for a pending conveyance of the property to the Bureau of Land Management. This will permanently protect the ranch's rare block of sagebrush and grassland habitat, which supports Oregon's largest herd of bighorn sheep, as well as Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, pronghorn and a wide array of birds and reptiles. It will also lay the groundwork for restoring Grass Valley Canyon Creek, which flows through the ranch and was rerouted decades ago, severely limiting spawning habitat for steelhead.

With its combination of history, habitat and recreation, McDonald's Ferry Ranch will be a superb addition to the growing conservation and recreation landscape WRC is assembling on the John Day River, the longest undammed river west of the Rockies. ■



A hiker takes in the view of the lower John Day at McDonald's Ferry Ranch (right). The property contains prime sagebrush-steppe habitat that wildlife such as pronghorn (pictured) depend on.



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*Expanding our work on the John Day River, WRC purchased McDonald's Ferry Ranch to permanently conserve three miles of the John Day, secure recreational access to the river, safeguard a critical boating take-out and revive a key steelhead tributary.*



## Umatilla River, Oregon

# UPPING THE ODDS FOR THE UMATILLA'S SALMON AND STEELHEAD

*In partnership with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, WRC set out to conserve the 991-acre Umatilla Floodplain Property at the confluence of the Umatilla River and Birch Creek.*

Above, WRC and members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation discuss the importance of the Umatilla Floodplain Property, which contains two miles of the Umatilla River and a mile of lower Birch Creek.

Eastern Oregon's Umatilla River has faced a myriad of challenges over the years. It was drained dry along its lower reaches for half of the last century and remains heavily de-watered throughout much of its 89-mile run from the Blue Mountains to the Columbia River. Fortunately, there are new hopes for this critical salmon stream, which once again sustains Chinook and coho salmon, summer steelhead and bull trout.

In recent years, the river has been slowly recovering, thanks largely to the efforts of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), which have led the way in fisheries recovery with federal, state and local partners. A critical piece of this conservation puzzle is a 991-acre ranch called the Umatilla Floodplain Property, at the confluence of the Umatilla and Birch Creek. The property contains the largest floodplain restoration potential in the entire Umatilla Basin. WRC, which has worked with the CTUIR for years, was able to negotiate an

agreement to place a conservation easement on the ranch, laying the groundwork for the CTUIR to restore 317 acres of agricultural land to functioning floodplain, and to dedicate the ranch's water rights permanently in-stream for fish. Our efforts will also conserve two miles of the Umatilla River and a mile of lower Birch Creek, the Umatilla's top producer of steelhead.

In all, the project promises to be a major win for mid-Columbia salmon and steelhead, while bolstering the CTUIR's efforts to restore these imperiled fish runs. It also deepens WRC's relationship with the CTUIR, a longtime partner, demonstrating the ways we can work together to save habitat for salmon, steelhead and other fish and wildlife of the Columbia Basin. ■



## Elk Creek, Oregon

# NEW EFFORT FOR SNAKE RIVER STEELHEAD AND PUBLIC ACCESS

In a remote and rugged river canyon in eastern Oregon, Western Rivers Conservancy launched a new effort to conserve 453 acres along Elk and Crow creeks, crucial headwater streams that provide clean, cold water for Joseph Creek, the Grande Ronde and ultimately the Snake River.

The property lies roughly 13 miles west of the magnificent Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and 11 miles northwest of the Zumwalt Prairie Preserve, one of the most intact native grasslands left in the West. To the south lies the Eagle Cap Wilderness, the crown jewel of the Wallowa Mountains. Both Joseph Creek and the Grande Ronde are designated wild and scenic rivers. Joseph Creek is named for Chief Joseph, the iconic late-19th century leader of the Wallowa band of Nez Perce.

The 1.25-mile stretch of Elk Creek and the quarter mile of Crow Creek that flow through the property are designated Critical Habitat for threatened Snake River summer steelhead, and both streams are home to

native redband rainbow trout. The area is also considered priority habitat for Rocky Mountain elk.

In addition to protecting prime fish and wildlife habitat, WRC's efforts will guarantee continued public access to major portions of the Wallowa Valley Ranger District and Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, which are both popular for hiking, hunting, food foraging and wildlife watching. A key Forest Service road crosses part of the property and provides the primary access to four established campgrounds, dispersed camping, over 15 public trails and a popular overlook.

WRC purchased the property in spring 2021, and we plan to convey it to the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest with funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Once we do, the steelhead nurseries in Elk and Crow creeks, along with the property's excellent wildlife habitat and recreational access, will be protected in perpetuity. ■

*In 2021, WRC purchased a 453-acre property along Elk and Crow creeks to protect prime spawning habitat for Snake River steelhead and a key access road into the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.*

A family explores Elk Creek (above), one of two Joseph Creek tributary streams where WRC is working to conserve crucial fish and wildlife habitat.

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**Retirements and Transitions:** *During 2020 and 2021, four staff members who played key roles at WRC retired or pursued other opportunities. Willis Yarberry and Shaun Hamilton retired; and Zach Spector and Dieter Erdmann set out to paddle new streams. The great rivers of the West are better for their work.*

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California State Parks  
California Trout  
California State Water Resource Control Board  
California Wildlife Conservation Board  
Chelan County  
Chelan-Douglas Land Trust  
City of Alamosa  
Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts  
Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program  
Columbia Land Trust  
Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts  
Colorado Parks and Wildlife  
Colorado Open Lands  
Colorado Water Trust  
Costilla County, Colorado  
The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation  
The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde  
The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation  
The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs  
Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians  
Douglas County, Oregon  
EP Carbon  
Fall River Resource Conservation District  
Esselen Tribe of Monterey County  
Forest Investment Associate  
Foster Garvey  
Gilliam County Soil and Water Conservation District  
Gilliam County Weedmaster  
GJ Livestock  
Green Diamond Resource Company  
Great Outdoors Colorado  
Great Western Malting Company  
Gualala River Watershed Council  
Hancock Timber Resource  
Heart of the Rockies Initiative  
Helendale Community Services District  
Hoh River Trust  
Hood River County  
Hood River Valley Residents Committee  
Hood River Watershed Group  
Idaho Coalition of Land Trusts  
Idaho Department of Fish and Game  
Idaho Department of Water Resources  
Idaho Rivers United  
Idaho Water Resources Board  
Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation  
Land Trust Alliance  
Law of the Rockies  
LOR Foundation  
Mesa Land Trust

Mojave Desert Land Trust  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Natural Resource Conservation Service  
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation  
National Park Service  
National Wildlife Refuge Association  
The Nature Conservancy  
Nevada Department of Wildlife  
The Nez Perce Tribe  
NOAA Fisheries  
North Santiam Watershed Council  
Northern California Regional Land Trust  
Okanogan Conservation District  
Opportunity Fund  
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Oregon Parks and Recreation Department  
Oregon State Weed Board  
Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board  
Oregon Youth Conservation Corps  
PacifiCorp  
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation  
Pacific Northwest Trail Association  
Payette Land Trust (WY)  
Portland General Electric  
Resources Law Group  
Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust  
Rio Grande Natural Area Commission  
Rio Grande Water Conservation District  
River Partners  
Sandy River Basin Partners  
The Sawtooth Society  
Scott River Watershed Council  
Scott River Water Trust  
Sherman County Soil and Water Conservation District  
Sierra Nevada Brewing Co.  
Sierra Nevada Conservancy  
Sierra Pacific Industries  
Siskiyou Land Trust  
Siskiyou Resource Conservation District  
Smith River Alliance  
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District  
Steamboaters  
Stratum Group  
Trout Unlimited  
Tübatulabal Tribe  
U.S. Bureau of Land Management  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
U.S. Forest Service  
U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service  
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Washington Department of Ecology  
Washington Department of Natural Resources  
Washington State Parks  
Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office  
Weyerhaeuser  
Wild Salmon Center  
Wild Sheep Foundation  
Yakama Nation  
Yampa River System Legacy Partnership  
Yampa Valley Land Trust  
Yurok Tribe

For Western Rivers Conservancy's updated financial statements,  
please visit [westernrivers.org/financials](https://westernrivers.org/financials)



**PHOTOS:** p4 Ellen Bernstein; p5 Tom and Pat Leeson; p6 Kirk Anderson; p7 Douglas Hutchinson; p8 K. Shade; p9 Tom and Pat Leeson; p10 John Lambing; p11 Mark Conlin; p12 Michael Carl; p13 Kodiak Greenwood; p14 Mathew Pendergast/Esselen Tribe of Monterey County; p15 Doug Steakley; p16 Nate Wilson; p17 Alamy; p18 Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife; p19 Jason Hartwick; p20 Alamy; p21 Tyler Roemer; p22 Ellen Bishop; p23 Mary Edwards; p24 LightHawk; p25, top Tom and Pat Leeson; p25, bottom Ellen Bishop; p26 Christi Bode; p27 Christi Bode; p28 Mindy Lundy Kramer; p29 top and bottom Russ Schnitzer; p29 middle Rich Durnan; p30 Native Trout Addict; p31 Ellen Bishop; p32 Alamy; p33 Tom and Pat Leeson; p34 Tom and Pat Leeson; p35 Sage Brown; p36 Ellen Bishop; p37 Ellen Bishop; Back cover Tom and Pat Leeson.



## WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY

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