

# News Release

September 12, 2023

## **Conservation Partnership Delivers Big Win for Fish, Wildlife and Public Access on Lower John Day**

**SHERMAN COUNTY, Oregon** – Western Rivers Conservancy and the Bureau of Land Management permanently conserved the 4,097-acre McDonald's Ferry Ranch, protecting 3.2 miles of the Wild and Scenic John Day River and placing the lowest boating takeout on the river into public hands forever.

WRC purchased McDonald's Ferry Ranch in 2020 and held the property while assembling the funding and partnerships needed to permanently protect it. On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, WRC conveyed the property to the BLM, conserving vital habitat for fish and wildlife, preserving portions of the historic Oregon Trail, and securing public recreational access on this stretch of river in perpetuity.

"The John Day is one of the West's most extraordinary and important rivers, and all of us at WRC feel infinitely proud that we were able to work with BLM to protect this critical stretch of the Wild and Scenic John Day," said Alex Barton, project manager for Western Rivers Conservancy.

The ranch provides important winter range for large mammals like California bighorn sheep, pronghorn, elk and mule deer. It also supports diverse bird life, with habitat for burrowing owl and ferruginous hawk, and ample nesting opportunities for bald eagle, golden eagle and peregrine falcon. The area is home to numerous species of upland game birds.

Grass Valley Canyon Creek flows through McDonald's Ferry Ranch for approximately 2.6 miles and offers an opportunity to revive a once productive steelhead tributary. The John Day sustains the Columbia River Basin's healthiest run of wild summer steelhead, and Grass Valley Canyon Creek was historically an important spawning tributary for steelhead. Decades ago, the lower channel of the creek was cut off from the mainstem, blocking fish passage. Conserving the property creates the potential for future restoration and reconnection with the river.

The lower John Day River carves a dramatic canyon into Oregon's finest sagebrush shrub-steppe habitat, and is a major destination for hikers, anglers, boaters and hunters seeking the solace of a desert canyon. Conservation of McDonald's Ferry Ranch secures permanent public access to the lowest viable boating takeout on the lower John Day, before the river cascades over the unrunnable Tumwater Falls ten miles downstream. The property also provides hikers and anglers

with three miles of riverbank access to seasonal steelhead and summer non-native bass fishing, as well as spectacular views of the canyon from ridgelines on the property.

Two miles of the Oregon Trail pass through the property, with visible wagon ruts that were left by settlers moving west. WRC's efforts are helping to preserve this heritage, while allowing the public recreational access for fishing, hunting and hiking on the property.

McDonald's Ferry is the fourth property that WRC has conserved on the John Day. In each case, it opened up river access points for public recreation. With the completion of the McDonald's Ferry effort, WRC, the BLM and Oregon Parks and Recreation Department have together conserved a total of 31 miles of the mainstem of the John Day within a 64-mile stretch of the wild and scenic river corridor. This brings the number of acres conserved to nearly 43,000 (nearly 67 square miles), from Rattray Ranch at Thirtymile Creek, to Cottonwood Canyon State Park and now downstream to McDonald's Ferry.

"The lower John Day used to be incredibly difficult for people to access," says Barton. "Now, there are four locations where people can access miles and miles of river and tens of thousands of acres of canyon country and sagebrush, including the remote McDonald's Ferry Ranch."

Funding for the conveyance of this property to the BLM came from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. LWCF is America's most important federal conservation and recreation program and has protected critical open space and improved outdoor recreation opportunities in nearly every state and every county in the U.S.

*This project was made possible through funding and support from the Carol and Velma Saling Foundation, Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Outdoor Fund, onX, Autzen Foundation and the Rose E. Tucker Charitable Trust.*

###

## ABOUT

**Western Rivers Conservancy** acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By cooperating with local agencies and organizations and by applying decades of land acquisition experience, Western Rivers Conservancy secures the health of whole ecosystems. Western Rivers Conservancy has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers, including the Hoh, Methow, Nisqually, John Day, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit [www.westernrivers.org](http://www.westernrivers.org).

## CONTACT INFORMATION

**Danny Palmerlee**

Communications Director, Western Rivers Conservancy

503-241-0151

[dpalmerlee@westernrivers.org](mailto:dpalmerlee@westernrivers.org)