

# Riverlands

FALL 2018 NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY ISSUE 41

## Saving a Treasured Forest Above Lake Wenatchee



JOHN MARSHALL

In an effort to preserve a critical mountainside above Washington's Lake Wenatchee and Nason Creek, WRC purchased 3,714 acres of forestlands, a property that is cherished for its trails and the scenic backdrop it creates for the lake.

### Nason Ridge

#### Washington

On Washington's Lake Wenatchee, a 3,714-acre parcel of forested mountainside known as Nason Ridge rises above the lakeshore, surrounded almost entirely by the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. The property is crisscrossed by a network of hiking, mountain-biking and cross-country skiing trails that are enjoyed by people from all over, and which link to a similarly robust trail system in the neighboring Lake Wenatchee State Park.

The Nason Ridge property includes 2.5 miles of Nason Creek, which is a critical

source of cold, clean water for the Wenatchee River and a lifeline for imperiled salmon, steelhead and bull trout. Nason Ridge is also highly visible from around Lake Wenatchee and integral to the scenic splendor of the lake, which sits in a bowl of conifer-blanketed mountains in north central Washington.

Until last month, the future of everything that makes Nason Ridge so important—including a vital stretch of Nason Creek, public access, trails, the views, and the stability of the very slopes themselves—was uncertain. That future took a positive turn in spring,

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## This Issue:

### Nason Ridge, WA

*New effort to conserve 3,714 acres above Washington's Nason Creek and Lake Wenatchee*

### Thirtymile Creek, OR

*WRC buys another ranch in effort to protect prime steelhead stream and public access on John Day*

### Snake River, ID

*Critical herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns will benefit from new effort on the Snake River*

### Conejos & Rio Grande, CO

*WRC successfully completes two projects in Colorado's scenic San Luis Valley*

### Chehalis River, WA

*Thirty years in the making, the Chehalis River Surge Plain Preserve is finally complete*



TOM & PAT LEESON

## New Effort in Bighorn Country

South of Lewiston, Idaho, WRC launched an exciting effort to conserve four miles of the Snake River and protect some of the most important bighorn sheep habitat in the Pacific Northwest. In August, we purchased the 2,920-acre Ten Mile Creek Ranch, which lies between Idaho's Hells Gate State Park and the 78,000-acre Craig Mountain Wildlife Management Area.

Our efforts to protect the property will prevent subdivision and development along the Snake and safeguard critical lambing habitat for Idaho's Hells Canyon herd of bighorn sheep. As much as 50 to 80 percent of the herd give birth to their lambs on the property and nurture them amongst the ranch's steep and rocky cliffs.

Ten Mile Creek Ranch lies 35 miles downstream from Hells Canyon, the deepest river gorge in North America and one of the most spectacular river reaches in the world. The Snake River is the lifeblood of the canyon, tumbling out of the Great Basin on its way to the Columbia River. The area's fish, wildlife and botanical values are as great as its scenic, recreational and cultural attributes, and they all depend on the health of the Snake River.

Despite four massive dams on the lower river, this stretch of the Snake remains critically important for anadromous fish and big game mammals, including spring and fall Chinook, summer steelhead, white sturgeon, black bear, Rocky Mountain elk and the area's iconic Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. Conserving the ranch will preserve vital habitat for all of these animals while protecting crucial salmon spawning redds and some of the best steelhead water on the lower Snake.

Now that we own the ranch, we hope to work with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to place a conservation easement on the property, preventing a large subdivision on the river's edge and ensuring this stretch of the Snake River stays healthy for the river's fish and wildlife.



The Olguin Ranch lies at the confluence of the Conejos River and the Rio Grande and is home to diverse bird life, including endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and threatened western yellow-billed cuckoo.

## Two Wins for Rivers in Southern Colorado's San Luis Valley

### Upper Rio Grande

#### Colorado

As the Colorado sun shined down on the San Luis Valley this summer, Western Rivers Conservancy wrapped up two exciting projects along the upper Rio Grande: one at its confluence with the Conejos River and another near the town of Creede, just off the Silver Thread Scenic Byway. Together, they protect 1,259 acres of fish and wildlife habitat and improve access to the Rio Grande for hikers, anglers, boaters and others.

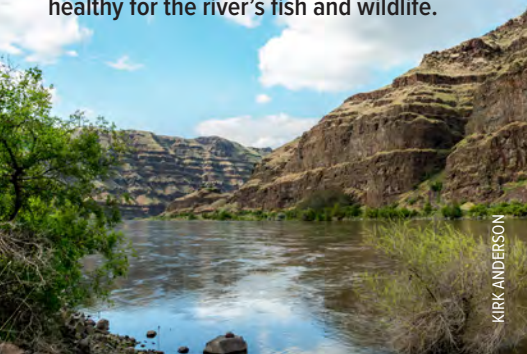
On the Conejos River, we partnered with the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust to conserve the Olguin Ranch and create new access to a mile of the Rio Grande. The ranch lies directly across the river from the 17,019-acre San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area that WRC created this spring. The ranch boasts excellent habitat for endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and threatened western yellow-billed cuckoo and supports a wealth of other species. These include Rocky Mountain elk, mountain lion, pronghorn, ferruginous hawk and sandhill crane. The project also ensured that the ranch itself, a longtime family operation in a valley defined by its small, working ranches and family farms, will stay in production rather

than being subdivided and developed.

Upriver, and northwest of the Olguin Ranch, near the old Freemon General Store (a local landmark along the Silver Thread Scenic Byway), we transferred a key property to the Rio Grande National Forest. The property lies at the eastern edge of the Weminuche Wilderness, upstream of Creede, where a small tributary called Texas Creek flows into the Rio Grande.

The project improves foot access for anglers and others, while ensuring boaters have a half-mile refuge where they can pull over and put their feet on the banks of the Rio Grande without trespassing. Before that, there was nowhere to stop along an extensive reach of the river known as "the oxbows." The project also conserved important wet-meadows, grassland and forests that are important to San Luis Valley wildlife.

Both of these projects are part of WRC's broader efforts in the San Luis Valley, where we created the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund in partnership with the LOR Foundation and our local partners Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust and Colorado Open Lands. ■



# A Conservation-Recreation One-Two Punch

## Thirtymile Creek, John Day River

### Oregon

**O**n Oregon's lower John Day River, between two spectacular BLM wilderness study areas, Western Rivers Conservancy has purchased a second ranch where Thirtymile Creek flows into the John Day. The purchase complements our ongoing effort to conserve Thirtymile Creek and ten miles of the lower John Day, while creating new recreational access to over 75,000 acres of public BLM lands surrounding the ranches.

Thirtymile Creek is the largest tributary to the lower John Day and one of the most important spawning streams for the river's critical run of wild summer steelhead. It's also a vital source of cold water for the John Day. The 2,939 acres we purchased in June, part of the Campbell Ranch, span five miles of the creek, immediately upstream of the Rattray Ranch, which WRC purchased in 2014. Combined, these projects will enable restoration and protection of nine crucial miles of Thirtymile Creek.

***What makes our effort at Thirtymile especially important is the access WRC is delivering for anglers, boaters, hunters, hikers and other recreationists who love and visit the John Day area.***

What makes our effort at Thirtymile especially important is the access WRC is delivering for anglers, boaters, hunters, hikers and other recreationists who love and visit the John Day area. The ranches lie directly between the Thirtymile and North Pole Ridge Wilderness Study Areas, which are in turn surrounded by tens of thousands of acres of additional BLM lands—all of it cut off from the public by private land, until now. The project also lies at the midway point between boating

access sites at Clarno Bridge, upstream, and Cottonwood Canyon State Park, downstream.

WRC is now working to transfer the ranches to the BLM, creating the only public access to a 70-mile stretch of the John Day Wild and Scenic River corridor. This means people will be able to float a stretch of the wild and scenic river in three to four days, rather than the much longer float required before.

Restoration efforts have already begun on Thirtymile Creek and will continue as WRC transfers the ranch lands to the BLM. While we are proud to deliver public access to this great Oregon river and the lands along it, what matters most is the biological integrity of Thirtymile Creek. Protecting and restoring this crucial stream is key to the long-term vitality of one of the Pacific Northwest's healthiest runs of wild summer steelhead, as well as the salmon, bighorn sheep and other wildlife that define this dramatic slice of the Columbia Plateau. ■



On Oregon's John Day River, WRC is working to protect the most important lower-river tributary for one of the Pacific Northwest's strongest runs of wild summer steelhead.



NICK HALL

### Nason Ridge CONTINUED FROM COVER

# SUCCESS on the Chehalis

For nearly three decades, Washington's Chehalis River Surge Plain Natural Area Preserve has protected part of the largest and healthiest tidal surge plain in the state. Now, 29 years after the preserve was created, it is finally complete. This summer, Western Rivers Conservancy, together with the Weyerhaeuser Company, conserved 1,469 acres of land at the heart of the surge plain by transferring it to the Washington Department of Natural Resources, which owns and manages the preserve.

The Chehalis River drains a vast area of western Washington, forming the largest river basin in the state, after the Columbia. Fed by rivers and streams that flow from the Cascade foothills, the Willapa Hills, glacial prairies and the Olympic Mountains, the Chehalis eventually drains into Grays Harbor on the Pacific, where it forms the Chehalis River Surge Plain. Here, where salt water from the Pacific surges inland with the tide to meet the freshwater of the Chehalis River, a diverse and highly productive wetland ecosystem is formed.

Dense forests of moss-draped Sitka spruce and western red cedar tower above finger-like sloughs and are home to bald eagles, ospreys and a host of other bird life. These sheltered sloughs provide habitat for abundant fish and wildlife, including spring and fall Chinook, coho and chum salmon, steelhead, river otter and beaver. The preserve also provides an outstanding system of water trails for kayakers and canoeists and a series of shorter forest trails for hikers.

The Department of Natural Resources recognized the importance of the surge plain long ago, and in 1989 successfully protected a significant portion of it by creating the natural area preserve. Since then, DNR has wanted to protect the rest of it, a vision that finally became a reality after WRC and Weyerhaeuser transferred the land to DNR. Now that the preserve is complete, DNR can ensure the lasting health and natural integrity of this remarkable place. ■

when Western Rivers Conservancy was able to negotiate an agreement with Weyerhaeuser, a Seattle based timber company that put the property on the market following local opposition to a planned clear-cut.

WRC recognized the property's natural and recreational merits and simultaneously saw its vulnerability. Because the property is easily accessible from State Highway 2, which travels along Nason Creek, and is a major artery between Seattle and eastern Washington, it would have been highly attractive for development. But given the property's importance to fish and wildlife, WRC had a different vision for Nason Ridge, the same one held by the community of Lake Wenatchee and beyond: conserving the land in perpetuity, for all to enjoy.

WRC purchased Nason Ridge in June and launched a fundraising campaign with the Wenatchee-based Chelan-Douglas Land Trust to raise the money needed to permanently conserve the property. For the time being, WRC will hold the land, allowing for public use and enjoyment of the property while we work to secure funding to permanently protect this special place. Once we accomplish that, Nason Creek, Lake Wenatchee and the Wenatchee River will all be better off, as will the fish and wildlife that make this area unique. ■

## Cold-Water Lifelines for Salmon and Steelhead

Central Washington's Wenatchee River is an important salmon-bearing tributary to the Columbia. What makes it so critical are the handful of clean, reliably cold tributaries like Nason Creek that flow from near-pristine wilderness areas and provide excellent spawning and rearing habitat for salmon and steelhead.

Nason Creek, which flows through the Nason Ridge property that WRC purchased, supports eight species of fish, including spring Chinook, summer steelhead and bull trout (all listed), as well as sockeye, cutthroat trout, rainbow trout and mountain whitefish.

Nason Ridge is WRC's second project on Nason Creek. In 2012, we protected a 648-acre property above the creek, upstream from Nason Ridge. Prior to that WRC conserved over nine miles of Icicle Creek, another crucial tributary to the Wenatchee.



USGS



JOHN MARSHALL

WRC's efforts at Nason Ridge will ensure a cherished trail system stays open for recreationists, while keeping the forests around it healthy for the fish and wildlife of central Washington.