

RIVERLANDS

NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY

Issue 34

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New Catalyst for Conservation in the San Luis Valley

RIO GRANDE, COLORADO

This fall, Western Rivers Conservancy's effort to conserve key reaches of Colorado's upper Rio Grande received a major boost. In September, the LOR Foundation awarded a major grant to WRC, Colorado Open Lands and the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, to create the San Luis Valley Fund. The Fund, which WRC will manage, establishes a \$2 million re-granting program to bolster local conservation efforts and clinches a partnership between the three organizations, allowing them to amplify their land and water conservation efforts within the San Luis Valley.

With an average elevation of 7,664 feet, the San Luis Valley is one of Colorado's great natural and cultural treasures. It is home to a wealth of public protected lands and federally designated areas, including Great Sand Dunes National Park; the Alamosa, Baca and Monte Vista National Wildlife *Continued on page 3*



The upper Rio Grande flows through the broad San Luis Valley, where WRC is working to conserve this Colorado treasure.

RUSS SCHNITZER

In Southern California, a New Effort to Protect a Desert Lifeline

SANTA MARGARITA RIVER, CALIFORNIA

In the arid lands around San Diego—where even a trickle can sustain life—the Santa Margarita River provides a precious lifeline for the single most biologically diverse region in the Lower 48. A rare southern California river with significant flows, large protected areas and no main-stem dams, the Santa Margarita supports the southernmost viable population of steelhead in North America.

From its high desert source, the river gathers a handful of tributaries in the Santa Ana Mountains, pours through Temecula Canyon and meanders through a large floodplain in the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base, finally entering the Pacific near Oceanside. The river's varied journey takes it through dry canyons, chaparral-covered hills, riparian woodlands and coastal marshes, providing habitat for 52 mammal species and 43 reptile species, including 30 threatened or endangered animals like the arroyo toad.

But most remarkable is the valley's colorful array of birds—236 species—the highest avian diversity on California's southern coast. Enthusiasts from near

Continued on page 2



In southern California, WRC committed to purchase 1,384 acres along five miles of the Santa Margarita River, a rare stream in a region afflicted by drought.

MYLES MCGUINNIS



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Victory for Columbia and Snake River Salmon

CATHERINE CREEK, OREGON

The best hope for recovering imperiled Columbia and Snake River salmon and steelhead are high-quality tributaries where fish spawn and rear in large numbers. Perhaps the most stunning example of this is Catherine Creek in northeast Oregon, where WRC has just completed a game-changing project for a key wild run of Chinook salmon.

Catherine Creek pours cold and clear from the Wallows and runs northwest through the town of

Union before entering the fabled Grande Ronde, a tributary to the Snake. It is a nurturing arm for the entire Snake River system and a top priority to recover the purest wild run of Snake River spring Chinook.

On its upper reaches in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, Catherine Creek's pristine spawning habitat is so productive that the creek's lower, more developed stretches cannot support all of the young fish coming down to rear. Downstream, the creek is channelized and lacks the complex habitat of a healthy salmon stream. But that's poised to change.

In 2014, Western Rivers Conservancy purchased 545 acres along this lower stretch to help revive this critical run of salmon. This fall, we conveyed the land to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, which is using funding from the Bonneville Power Administration to extensively restore the original, winding channel of Catherine Creek. Additionally, the property's water rights have been dedicated in-stream, helping ensure not only enough habitat but ample flows to support a strong comeback for Chinook and summer steelhead.

When restoration is complete, the project may tip the scales for some of the Pacific Northwest's most fragile fish populations. ■

WRC completed a project on Oregon's Catherine Creek that enables restoration of 2.5 miles of top-priority salmon and steelhead habitat.



DAVE JENSEN

SANTA MARGARITA, CONTINUED

and far visit the Santa Margarita for a rare glimpse of birds like the least Bell's vireo or southwestern willow flycatcher, both endangered.

The Santa Margarita is protected along nearly its entire length: upstream within the 4,000-acre Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve and downstream in Camp Pendleton. In November, Western Rivers Conservancy signed an agreement to purchase a 1,384-acre property that connects these two large protected areas, providing an unbroken ecological link from desert mountains to the sea. The property, owned by the Fallbrook Public Utility District, includes five miles of the Santa Margarita and two miles of Sandia Creek, an exceptional tributary.

Conserving this stretch of river will not only improve the odds for endangered steelhead but also arroyo chub, a tiny fish that once thrived in southern California's waterways and now is a species of concern. With the property now secured, WRC

Right: WRC's efforts on the Santa Margarita River will protect public access to trails that run along and above this unique southern California stream.



AMILES MCGUINNESS

is working to secure conservation funding and find a long-term steward for the lands.

We're thrilled to be part of this incredible opportunity that will also enhance compatible public access to the Santa Margarita, a cherished destination for people looking to escape the city to hike, ride horses and be rejuvenated by nature. ■

Rare Wildlife Corridor Forever Conserved

BIG SHEEP CREEK, WASHINGTON

In the wild country of northeastern Washington, Western Rivers Conservancy has protected part of the primary route for grizzly bears and other large mammals to move between Canada and the United States: Big Sheep Creek.

Flowing south from Canada's Monashee Mountains, Big Sheep Creek snakes through gentle, fertile terrain en route to the Columbia River, drawing an impressive array of wildlife through the valley to hunt and forage. Exceptional streamside habitat, ponds and hundreds of acres of wetlands anchor a thriving food chain from insects to carnivores.

At the heart of this movement corridor is the 2,440-acre Bennett Meadows property, which WRC purchased in 2014. We are excited to announce that, in the waning days of November, WRC conveyed the lands to the Colville National Forest, utilizing an appropriation from the Land and Water Conservation Fund through the National Trails Program.

The property includes prime habitat for many charismatic and rarely seen animals, including more



TOM & PAUL IERSON

than half of Washington's recovering grizzly bear population as well as moose, mountain lion, fox, pine marten and the elusive wolverine, an endangered species. On snowy mountainsides, Canada lynx, Rocky Mountain elk, mountain goats and bighorn

Continued on page 4

We did it! WRC successfully conserved 2,440 acres along Big Sheep Creek, preserving prime habitat for a wealth of fish and wildlife, including more than half of Washington's recovering grizzly population.

RIO GRANDE, CONTINUED

Refuges; Rio Grande National Forest; the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area; and the Rio Grande Natural Area. In addition, over 340,000 acres of private lands have been protected by landowners and conservation partners around the valley.

At the heart of the valley is the Rio Grande, which flows from its headwaters in the San Juan Mountains on the west, across the Valley floor and then south to New Mexico. Its tributaries and riparian areas provide habitat for over 200 bird species, including 95% of the Rockies' greater sandhill crane population. The waters of the Rio Grande also sustain the working ranches and farms that form the base of the region's agricultural economy.

Unique to two of the Valley's six counties are *acequias*, a system of community water distribution ditches which often predate Colorado's statehood—and in some cases even its status as a territory. Acequias support hundreds of small-scale farmers in Costilla and Conejos Counties and form the organizational core for numerous small communities.

While acequias represent some of the oldest water rights in Colorado, many of the networks operate informally. A focus of the Fund will be preserving this

rich heritage of acequia irrigation while enhancing livability for valley communities. The re-granting program will be central to this effort and increase the capacity of local conservation organizations working at the community level.

The partnership created by the San Luis Valley Fund is both a catalyst for conservation within the valley and an exciting step forward for WRC. Our first effort on the Rio Grande was in 2014, when we gained control of 16,707 acres along 5.6 miles of the upper river within the Rio Grande Natural Area. Now we are working in partnership with two outstanding organizations to bolster conservation efforts throughout the valley, while simultaneously working to preserve more of the upper river and its most important tributaries. ■

The San Luis Valley is home to the Rio Grande and is a major staging area for the more than 20,000 sandhill cranes that stop here each winter.



ROZANNA HANALVA



WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY

OUR MISSION

Western Rivers Conservancy protects outstanding river ecosystems in the western United States. We acquire land to conserve critical habitat, provide public access for compatible use and enjoyment, and cooperate with other agencies and organizations to secure the health of whole ecosystems.

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WRC Launches Crowdfunding to Save Blue Creek

This month, WRC launched a crowdfunding campaign to complete the Blue Creek Salmon Sanctuary on the Klamath River, in the heart of the California redwoods. Over the course of this project, WRC has raised over \$42 million through innovative funding sources, including carbon offsets sales, New Markets Tax Credits, foundations, government funding and private donations. We're now down to the final \$12.8 million, which we need to raise to bring this project to the finish line. We need your help to get there.

Conserving Blue Creek is critical—without it, the salmon and steelhead runs of the Klamath River would collapse. Learn more and donate to our Indiegogo page at savebluecreek.com. Most importantly, tell your friends. Together, we can Save Blue Creek, one square foot at a time! ■



DAVE JENSEN

BIG SHEEP CREEK, CONTINUED

Continued from page 3

sheep make their own route through the property, which also has suitable habitat for wolves.

This four-mile stretch of river is also home to imperiled redband rainbow trout, and it provides cold water and gravel to sustain threatened bull trout downstream.

Beyond fish and wildlife, the project offers tremendous recreational value. The property is the first addition to the newly designated Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, which traces 1,200 miles of spectacular terrain from the Continental Divide to the Pacific Ocean.

Conservation of the Big Sheep Creek property was made possible through generous support from The Vital Ground Foundation, Conservation Northwest, Horizons Foundation and the Charlotte Martin Foundation. ■



DAVE JENSEN

The cold, clear water of Big Sheep Creek provides outstanding habitat for imperiled redband rainbow and bull trout.

Thank You for Joining Us!

We'd like to thank everyone who made recent first-time gifts to Western Rivers Conservancy. For a complete list of our supporters, please visit our Supporters page at www.westernrivers.org.

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