



News Release

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New State Wildlife Area in Colorado's San Luis Valley, thanks to collaborative effort on the upper Rio Grande

COSTILLA COUNTY, CO — In the heart of the San Luis Valley, a new state wildlife area now protects 17,019 acres of public open space along the Rio Grande, as well as outstanding habitat for fish and wildlife, thanks to the efforts of Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC) and its partners Costilla County, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), the LOR Foundation and Colorado Open Lands.

In Costilla County, where a century-old history of Spanish land grants still defines property lines, less than one percent of land is public. River access is almost nonexistent.

That percentage received a healthy bump on Thursday, when the partners created the San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area, adding 4.5 miles of the Rio Grande and thousands of acres of neighboring uplands to the public trust for all to enjoy.

The new state wildlife area is located on the south side of the San Luis Valley, about 15 miles north of the New Mexico state line.



Media photos can be found at: www.westernrivers.org/browniehillimagegallery/

“When Costilla County adopted its Trails, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan in 2012 after a two-year public process, this large parcel of land was identified as a priority for a conservation easement due to the river corridor and habitat values,” said Ben Doon, Costilla County Administrator. “At that time, we could have never dreamed that it would become protected public open space. This has been a fantastic coalition to work with, and it is an important moment for the county.”

WRC purchased the property in 2016 using a loan from the LOR Foundation. The goal was two-fold: Conserve a high-quality reach of the Rio Grande and connect the Costilla County community to the river.

“The Rio Grande weaves a remarkable thread of life through the San Luis Valley,” said Dieter Erdmann, WRC’s Interior West Program Director. “Its importance to fish and wildlife and to the communities of the valley are beyond measure. When we saw the rare opportunity to create public open space along the river while protecting vital habitat, we jumped on it.”

WRC spent the next two years building the partnership that resulted in this unique funding, ownership and management outcome, ensuring both public access and habitat protection in perpetuity.

“This project is an incredible addition to the public land and wildlife resources in the San Luis Valley,” said Rick Basagoitia, area wildlife manager for CPW in Monte Vista. “Colorado Parks and Wildlife is proud to be a partner in this project. Few places in Colorado offer this type of opportunity to conserve wildlife and to provide wildlife-related recreation for the public.”

The property is one of the few remaining large, intact tracts of private land within the Rio Grande Natural Area and lies between the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge and New Mexico’s Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River corridor.

This stretch of the river, and the lands around it, are crucially important to native fish and wildlife. A portion of the Rio Grande that flows through the property is designated Critical Habitat for the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher, and the river serves as a concentration area for dozens of bird, mammal and amphibian species, including bald eagle, river otter and northern leopard frog.

The property’s hilly shrublands provide important winter range for mule deer, pronghorn and Rocky Mountain elk herds that move from higher elevations to the valley floor in winter months. Its grasslands and sagebrush uplands also provide habitat for a variety of declining species, including mountain plover, sage thrasher and horned lizard.

In 2017, the project partners finalized a land management plan to guide habitat restoration and future recreational use. The same year, CPW and Costilla County installed more than five miles of riparian fencing to exclude year-round grazing in the river corridor and allow recovery of this sensitive habitat.

This week, the project was completed when WRC and USFWS protected the property with a conservation easement and conveyed the lands to Costilla County. The property will be managed on Costilla County’s behalf by CPW as the San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area.

“Thanks to the creativity and leadership of our partners, these places will be conserved into the future, for the benefit of both people and wildlife. We look forward to continuing to work with our partners on this effort,” said Noreen Walsh, Regional Director for the Mountain-Prairie Region of the USFWS.

Costilla County’s acquisition of the property was made possible through funding from GOCO and the Gates Family Foundation. Public access to the property is further guaranteed through a deed of restriction, held by Colorado Open Lands, which requires that the county keep the lands open to the public in perpetuity.

The USFWS acquired the conservation easement on the property as part of its Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area, using \$1.02 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The project was also made possible with the support of the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund, which was created in 2015 by WRC, the LOR Foundation, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust and Colorado Open Lands. The fund is a collaborative effort to bolster local conservation efforts in the San Luis Valley and to preserve the region’s rich cultural heritage, all while enhancing livability for valley communities.

“The San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area is a perfect example of what can be accomplished through collaboration,” said Erdmann. “The state, county, private foundations, and the nonprofit sector came together to deliver public open space and conservation along this important reach of the Rio Grande. The San Luis Valley is better for it.”

ABOUT THE PROJECT PARTNERS

Colorado Open Lands is a nonprofit land trust that works to enhance our state’s quality of life by protecting its private land and water resources. Since 1981, COL has helped landowners conserve more than 500,000 acres of Colorado’s agricultural land, critical wildlife habitat, and scenic lands around the state and fostered partnerships responsible for critical innovations in conservation funding, conservation easement defense and more. Please visit www.coloradoopenlands.org for more information.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife is a state agency that manages the state’s wildlife resources, hunting and fishing opportunities, and 42 state parks. Visit cpw.state.co.us for more information.

Costilla County is home to the oldest town in Colorado, San Luis, the county seat, and the county is one of the original 17 counties established when the Territory of Colorado was incorporated in 1861. Part of the Mission Statement of the county includes, “To ensure economic stability, protect the pristine and natural environment...and provide a healthy environment for all the citizens of the county...” Visit www.costillacounty-co.gov for more information.

Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) invests a portion of Colorado Lottery proceeds to help preserve and enhance the state’s parks, trails, wildlife, rivers, and open spaces. GOCO’s independent board awards competitive grants to local governments and land trusts, and makes investments through Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Created when voters approved a Constitutional Amendment in 1992, GOCO has since funded more than 5,000 projects in urban and rural areas in all 64 counties without any tax dollar support. Visit GOCO.org for more information.

The LOR Foundation is dedicated to improving quality of life in the Intermountain West through locally driven solutions. The Foundation partners with rural communities in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming. For more information, please visit www.lorfoundation.org.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. Visit www.fws.gov for more information.

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, WRC secures the health of whole ecosystems. WRC has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers, including the Yampa, John Day, Gunnison, Salmon, Hoh, Snake and Madison Rivers. To learn more, please visit www.westernrivers.org.

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