

## A mighty river runs through it

### Oregon's newest state park — unlike any other — takes shape along the John Day River

By [Mark Freeman](#)

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Like trespassing fishers of old, Pat Kollodge pulls back two strands of barbed wire and steps onto one of northeast Oregon's historical cattle ranches in his quest to find where the wild things are.

The wire marks the downstream edge of the Murtha Ranch, a spread that envelopes 16,000 acres along 16 miles of the lower John Day River, the northwest's longest untamed stream that still teems with wild summer steelhead.

The walls of Cottonwood Canyon — home to Oregon's largest herd of bighorn sheep — rise like a moonscape around Kollodge as he begins a mile-long hike in waders, fly rod in hand.

But Kollodge walks without fear of repercussions, because he and Oregon's other 600,000 licensed anglers now have an open invitation to traverse this previously off-limits territory — some of the state's newest public land — to cast for wild steelhead.

"It's great to see the 'Private Property, No Trespassing' signs go away," Kollodge says.

The signs are gone because massive Murtha Ranch is in the midst of becoming the newest, largest and perhaps the rawest state park in Oregon.

Over time, parks officials believe the new Cottonwood Canyon State Park could rise from the wilds of the John Day basin and become a monument to the outdoor experience this less-explored part of Oregon has to offer.

The Oregon State Parks Department in September bought 2,443 acres of the ranch for just under \$2.3 million, with an eye toward acquiring more over the next four years.

Agency officials next spring will start hashing out a development plan to expand accessibility to the stream and adjacent habitats — with an eye toward preservation.

"Given the size and the nature of the landscape, people are going to look at this as one of our truly wild places," state parks' spokesman Chris Havel says. "And we're looking at what new things we can do with that wild land experience that we know Oregonians love.

"This could really be the park that this generation is known for," Havel says.

For generations, the Murtha family has run cattle and cultivated some of the streamside lowlands on 8,114 acres of private land, plus another 8,000 acres of federal Bureau of Land Management land for which the family owned grazing rights.

Like most ranchers in the region, they offered little or no public access to land-locked public lands nor

to the John Day River, which is the Northwest's longest undammed river and sports what is widely considered the healthiest run of Columbia River Basin summer steelhead, which are listed federally as a threatened species.

Ranchers in that neck of Oregon simply showed no interest in tourism, says Art Campbell, a retired Medford teacher who published his book, "The John Day Drift and Historical Guide," in 1980.

"Those guys were pretty hard-nosed," says Campbell, 77. "They pretty well controlled everything."

But the Murtha family decided to sell its holdings and put the property up for sale less than two years ago.

In stepped the Portland-based Western Rivers Conservancy, a nonprofit group interested in protecting the uniqueness of the basin.

Along with protecting the steelhead run, conservancy members saw an opportunity to preserve the ranch's vast, native shrub-steppe habitat, restore the once vibrant cottonwood riparian zones and open the area to the public for low-impact recreation ranging from fishing and hiking to camping and hunting.

The conservancy bought all 8,114 acres and the grazing lease for an undisclosed amount of money, and is selling it in pieces to state parks while the entities work together for habitat protection and public access.

"It was a private ranch for decades and decades," says Josh Kling, the conservancy's assistant program director. "They didn't allow people on their ranch. Now that it's being conveyed to a public entity, all those lands are being made available for public access."

"It's 16,000 acres along 16 miles of river," he says. "That's just a lot of land you couldn't get to before. It's pretty exciting."

Kollodge is familiar with both the water and the land. As the BLM's John Day park ranger, he patrols the water and its bustling boating and fishing crowds that favor the water around the ranch's upstream holdings, south of the Cottonwood Bridge on Highway 206.

Wild steelhead, however, are his passion. And hiking into new steelhead riffles of this fledgling park might become an obsession.

He motors his pickup slowly down the end of Starvation Lane, where the dirt road is bladed into the rocky canyon without any thought of OSHA in mind.

Chukar disappear over embankments as fast as they emerge. One wrong tug on the steering wheel could send the pickup tumbling downhill for days.

But the trek has a singular purpose.

"This place is lousy with wild steelhead," Kollodge says.

It could get even better, says Kling.

The ranch holdings include the lower three miles of Hays Creek, an important steelhead spawning and

rearing stream that flows year-round — a rarity among north-central Oregon creeks.

"There's already such amazing habitat there," Kling says. "With a little more help, it'll do better."

Havel says state parks officials plan a public process beginning next spring to establish a plan for adding a small, vehicle-access campground with river access, along with boat-in and hike-in camping sites. They even have an open mind toward public hunting in fields rich with mule deer and upland game birds.

By 2013, state parks officials hope to have at least some of the pieces needed to open the area as a state park, Havel says.

But for now, the state lands are public and the conservancy is allowing public access to other areas of Murtha Ranch.

The thought of hiking through fields that have been closed to the public for decades has Campbell interested in a trip to his old fishing grounds, as well as to previously closed reaches along the lower John Day off Starvation Lane.

"Anything you can do down there where you can open land to the public is going to be great," Campbell says.

Most of Oregon's 230 other state parks — sprawled over about 100,000 acres — are small holdings that serve more as entry points to beaches or public waterways.

Cottonwood Canyon State Park is more a destination, Havel says.

"All that wildlife and the John Day running through it," Havel says. "I don't want to gush all day, but given the size and the landscape, this is going to be an important place for a long time."

So much so, Havel says, that you can smell it.

"It will be great for people of Oregon to realize this is part of our landscape," Havel says. "And I tell you, every sense came alive when I was on that property."

Reach reporter Mark Freeman at 776-4470, or e-mail [mfreeman@mailtribune.com](mailto:mfreeman@mailtribune.com).