



WESTERN RIVERS
CONSERVANCY

Riverlands

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In Wine Country, a Boon for Salmon and Steelhead



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In Sonoma County, California, Western Rivers Conservancy has launched a new effort to conserve a 4,344-acre ranch, a project that will protect a prime reach of the Wheatfield Fork Gualala River (pictured) and over 40 acres of old growth redwoods.

Gualala River

California

At the edge of Northern California's wine country, Western Rivers Conservancy has launched an effort to protect a rare swath of old-growth redwood forest and rolling oak woodlands along the Wheatfield Fork Gualala River. The Wheatfield Fork is the largest of three major tributaries of the main-stem Gualala, one of the state's most important and still-viable salmon and steelhead rivers.

The Wheatfield Fork, which meets the South Fork Gualala near the coastal town of Gualala, provides cold water and vital habitat for winter steelhead and coho salmon,

populations that are dwindling throughout California. Like all forks of the Gualala, the Wheatfield Fork also supports abundant wildlife in an area that is threatened by vineyard and residential development.

Upstream from the town of Gualala, we are working to place a conservation easement on an extraordinary property—the 4,344-acre Silva Ranch. Conservation of the ranch will protect an important reach of the Wheatfield Fork as well as a series of cold tributary streams that flow through the property—more than six miles of fish-bearing streams in all.

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New effort to conserve the Silva Ranch on the Wheatfield Fork Gualala River

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Second property now protected forever on an outstanding trout stream in Colorado

SF Antelope Creek, CA

Effort to protect this salmon stronghold now underway

Mojave River, CA

WRC successfully protects the Palisades Ranch, an oasis in the Mojave Desert



TYLER ROEMER



The Chewuch River is a major tributary to Washington's Methow River and provides crucial habitat for salmon, steelhead and bull trout. WRC is working to conserve a historic ranch that includes 1.5 miles of Chewuch river frontage.

Protecting Open Space and Salmon Streams in Washington's Methow Valley

Methow River

Washington

In the rugged North Cascade Mountains, the Methow Valley is a spectacular notch of ice-cold streams, rolling foothills, pristine wilderness and tiny, historic towns. Flowing through the heart of the valley is the Methow River, a critical salmon and steelhead stream fed by smaller tributaries that tumble cold and clear from the high Cascades. The largest of these tributaries is the Chewuch River, which provides healthy, unspoiled habitat for imperiled Chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout.

North of the town of Winthrop, WRC has purchased the historic 328-acre Wagner Ranch, which spans 1.6 miles of the Chewuch River and abuts the 14,800-acre Methow Unit of Washington's Methow Wildlife Area. The ranch presents a tremendous opportunity to protect one of the largest blocks of privately owned riverfront remaining in the Methow Valley.

WRC jumped on the opportunity to conserve the ranch and purchased the property this fall. We plan to convey it to the Yakama Nation for permanent stewardship. Now, instead of being lost to subdivision and development—the likely outcome if the ranch were left on the market—the property will be managed for fish and wildlife and retain its scenic charm. WRC's purchase of the ranch gives the Yakama a rare chance to restore a key stretch of the river, where biologists have identified more than

a dozen projects that would improve salmon habitat if they were carried out. This includes reconnecting side-channels and wetlands, restoring flood plains and improving stream-side habitat critical to fish and wildlife. Protecting the ranch's riparian areas will also benefit neotropical migrating birds, white-tailed and mule deer, black bear, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, mink, otter and beaver. Other documented sensitive species that use the property include Columbia sharp-tailed grouse, western gray squirrel, wolverine and golden eagle.

On top of its many benefits for fish and wildlife, the project will be great for people, too. Our efforts will safeguard the natural character of this part of the valley, a setting that is cherished by countless hikers, cross-country skiers, hunters, birders, paddlers and anglers who visit and live there.

The Wagner Ranch is woven into the cultural fabric of the valley, formerly owned by the family who led the charge to turn Winthrop into an Old West town, and later by the family who developed the famed Sun Mountain Lodge. In the hands of the Yakama Nation, the ranch's prized open space and riparian habitat will be permanently protected for the benefit of fish, wildlife and the many people who treasure this beautiful slice of the Pacific Northwest. ■

A Second Success on a First Rate Trout Stream

Rio de Los Pinos

Colorado

Completing our efforts on the Rio de Los Pinos, Western Rivers Conservancy has permanently protected some of the finest trout water in Colorado. In October, we conveyed our second property on the Los Pinos to the Rio Grande National Forest, protecting an additional 268 acres of prime open space and securing public access to a stunning stretch fly fishing water. Combined with the adjacent parcel we conserved last year, the land traces more than a mile of the Rio de Los Pinos along some its most accessible reaches, just off Highway 17, northeast of Chama, New Mexico.

The Los Pinos is a gem of a trout stream, with healthy populations of brown and rainbow trout. Native Rio Grande cutthroat once thrived here, and the river's excellent cold-water habitat—including the reach that flows through these two properties—provides hope that these imperiled fish may one day be reintroduced.

Flowing from a series of alpine lakes in the San Juan Mountains, the Los Pinos tumbles through conifer forests, lush meadows and granite canyons over its 40-mile course. It loops into New Mexico before crossing back into Colorado and



WRC's efforts on the Rio de Los Pinos opened new access to a superb trout stream in Colorado's San Luis Valley.

eventually feeds into the San Luis Valley of the Rio Grande.

Near Cumbres Pass, the Los Pinos enters a small, perched valley and slows to a broad meander, hemmed by open meadows and forests of spruce and fir, and an 1880s-era narrow-gauge train—the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad—carries sightseers up and down the valley.

The valley's unbroken natural beauty is highly desirable for subdivision and home construction. One of the largest blocks of private frontage near Cumbres Pass was owned by a family with deep, multi-generational ties to the San Luis Valley. The family wished to see their former summer pasture lands, which

include wetlands and other features that attract migratory birds in spring and fall, permanently conserved as open space. WRC committed to protecting the properties, helping the family ensure these lands were permanently conserved.

We purchased both parcels, and with funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, conveyed the lands to the adjacent Rio Grande National Forest. Rather than being subdivided and developed, the properties will now remain intact, providing habitat for fish and wildlife and sustaining the hope that Rio Grande cutthroat can one day be reintroduced to the Rio de Los Pinos. ■

South Fork Antelope Creek, California

Saving a Salmon Stronghold

On California's South Fork Antelope Creek, WRC has acquired a property with some of the best fish and wildlife habitat in and around the Lassen National Forest. The stream, which flows from the forested heights of Mount Lassen, is a tributary of Antelope Creek, one of the healthiest remaining salmon streams in the Sacramento River system.

With excellent spawning and rearing habitat for spring Chinook and steelhead, Antelope Creek is one of just six streams that are part of the designated Sacramento Salmon Stronghold. Without these streams—which also include Deer and Mill Creeks, two streams WRC has worked to conserve—these wild fish runs would be hard-pressed to survive.

Because South Fork Antelope Creek is situated in a transition zone between high elevations and the valley floor, it also supports some of the highest species diversity in the Lassen National Forest. In the heart of this transition zone, WRC purchased a 1,150-acre property along 2.5 miles of the South Fork, where the stream cuts a deep canyon lined with old-growth ponderosa pine and incense cedar. Above the canyon, a live oak savanna gives way to rolling grasslands with abundant wildlife.

The property's most famous recent occupant was a wolf called OR-7, California's first documented wolf in decades, which spent an entire

South Fork Antelope Creek is a critical stream for imperiled Chinook salmon.



winter foraging here—a testament to the property's superb habitat. Combined with the Tehama Wildlife Area downstream, the property provides a winter home for an important migratory population of Tehama black-tailed deer as well as mountain lion, black bear, prairie falcon, peregrine falcon and western pond turtle.

We plan to convey the land to the Lassen National Forest next year. In addition to conserving the property, the project will provide the opportunity to extend a trail from the nearby Tehama Wildlife Area to the Lassen National Forest to allow hikers, equestrians and kayakers to explore this remote, wild and highly scenic area. ■



SUCCESS on the Mojave

A rare, perennial stretch of California's Mojave River is forever protected! In October, Western Rivers Conservancy safeguarded the 1,647-acre Palisades Ranch along 3.5 miles of the river, including some of the richest wildlife habitat in the entire Mojave Desert.

Most of the Mojave River flows below ground, but along one 15-mile reach, the bedrock pushes the river to the surface, sustaining a lush river corridor lined with cottonwoods and black willows. Known as the Transition Zone, this stretch nourishes a diverse plant community and 39 federally and state-listed wildlife species, including southwestern pond turtle, Mojave River vole and the endangered arroyo toad.

Brimming with life, the Palisades Ranch features the healthiest riparian stands in the Transition Zone, with 800 acres of willows and cottonwoods that rise out of the desert. WRC bought the ranch in 2015, and this fall we conveyed it to the Mojave Desert Land Trust, which will ensure the land remains a perpetual haven for fish and wildlife, safe from the threat of encroaching residential development.

The project will aid the recovery of imperiled birds like the southwestern willow flycatcher and least Bell's vireo (both endangered), as well as the threatened western yellow-billed cuckoo. The ranch's upland habitat supports several listed species including threatened desert tortoise (above), Mohave ground squirrel and burrowing owl.

The California Wildlife Conservation Board, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service generously funded this opportunity to safeguard what is truly an oasis of life in the harsh Mojave Desert. ■

Our efforts will also protect 41 acres of majestic old-growth redwood trees and a landscape of rolling oak woodlands, grasslands and mixed conifer forest.

With its prime location and potential for more than 20 home sites, the ranch is highly vulnerable to both building development and intensive grape production. Instead, the conservation easement will forever protect the property's ancient redwoods, its burbling fresh-water streams and rare oak-studded chaparral that are so important to the region's fish and wildlife. At the same time, roughly five percent of the ranch will be reserved for limited development or small-scale agriculture so the family can continue to earn a living, making the project viable and a true win-win for all.

The Silva Ranch is especially important because it lies next to 75,000 acres of already protected lands. Adding it to this assemblage will connect key habitats and multiply the benefits for fish and wildlife on a scale far greater than the property itself.

The future of coho and steelhead in California depends on rivers like the Gualala. The river harbors one of the southernmost runs of Northern California Steelhead, a threatened population. The Gualala River is also critical to the state's recovery strategy for Central California Coast Coho, a distinct unit of endangered salmon. The Gualala Roach, a small

minnow endemic to its namesake river, will also benefit from our conservation of the Silva Ranch.

Additionally, the property's old-growth redwoods provide superb habitat for threatened northern spotted owl. Bald eagles, red-legged frogs,

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tiger salamanders and a host of other animals that define Northern California all inhabit the ranch. Given the tremendous biological value of the property, our effort enjoys strong local and state support, and the state of California has dedicated funding to ensure the project's success.

WRC anticipates placing the conservation easement on the ranch next year. Once we do, California's redwood coast will have another critical refuge for native fish and wildlife, an outcome that meets the needs of conservation, a great river, family agriculture and California alike. ■



WRC's efforts to conserve the Silva Ranch will forever protect an iconic northern California landscape and six miles of cold, fish-bearing streams in the heart of California's wine country.