

Riverlands

FALL 2019 NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY ISSUE 44

Expanding a Premier National Wildlife Refuge



WRC is working to add 2,200 acres to the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. The project will benefit hundreds of species of birds and improve water quality in Klamath Marsh and the famed Williamson River, the headwaters of the Klamath River.

Williamson River

Oregon

Every year, millions of birds—ducks and geese, songbirds and swans, herons, grebes and others—take to the skies along the Pacific Flyway, an aerial super-highway stretching from Patagonia to Alaska. Along the way, fully two-thirds of them descend on the upper Klamath Basin, where six national wildlife refuges protect a freshwater mosaic of lakes and meadows that draw more than 350 bird species throughout the year.

Western Rivers Conservancy has the rare opportunity to expand one of these refuges—the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge—

with vital wetlands and stream flows that will rejuvenate a watery paradise for birds and bird-lovers.

Our new effort centers on the Williamson River, a renowned trout stream that winds through the 40,000-acre Klamath Marsh and then provides much of the inflows to Upper Klamath Lake, the source of the Klamath River.

Where the Williamson enters the wildlife refuge, WRC purchased the 2,200-acre Timmerman Ranch, which holds significant water rights along the river. Three miles of the Williamson meander through the property and feed

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New effort to expand the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge on the Williamson River

Upper Rio Grande, CO

Alamosa Riparian Park successfully created and now open to all

John Day River, OR

WRC protects prime fish habitat and creates new public access on the lower John Day River

SF Antelope Creek, CA

WRC poised to conserve a key salmon and steelhead stream

Knapp and Marsh Creeks, ID

WRC breathes new life into the headwaters of the Middle Fork Salmon River





CHRISTI BODE

In partnership with the city of Alamosa, WRC created Alamosa Riparian Park by transferring two properties to the city for permanent recreation and conservation management. Bike and pedestrian trails will be integrated into the city's existing trail system, and the community will have easy access to the river that runs through Alamosa's backyard.

New Wellness Park for the City of Alamosa on the Banks of the Upper Rio Grande

Upper Rio Grande

Colorado

On the banks of the upper Rio Grande, we've added a stunning new riverfront park to the city of Alamosa.

In October, we cut the ribbon on Alamosa Riparian Park, which now protects more than a mile of open space along the Rio Grande. Long-anticipated by the community, the park joins the city's growing green-space offerings, which connect residents to their backyard river. The park itself adds more than five miles of nature trails where people can stay active and reconnect with the outdoors.

Beneath the shade of tall cottonwoods (or *alamosas*, in Spanish), visitors can walk, run, bike and view birds and wildlife year-round. The park is also a de facto sanctuary for creatures like endangered southwestern willow flycatcher, river otter and bald eagle.

Before October, access to the Rio Grande was limited, even though the river winds along the edge of town. The community has wanted better access to the river for years and, in 2017, we partnered with the city to make this a reality. WRC purchased two adjacent properties from families who, like WRC, wanted to keep the land undeveloped as public open space. This fall, we

conveyed the land to the city, and now Alamosa Riparian Park is open for all.

Creation of this outstanding public resource inspired broad local support, including from the city, Alamosa County, San Luis Valley Great Outdoors, Gates Family Foundation, The Outcalt Foundation, Rio Grande Watershed Conservation and Education Initiative, Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and many others. Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), which is funded by the Colorado Lottery, ranked Alamosa Riparian Park as its top Open Space Project in 2018 and awarded a major grant to the project so the city could buy the land.

WRC's efforts in Alamosa are part of our broader work in the San Luis Valley, where we are conserving tens of thousands of acres of key habitats and providing new public access to the Rio Grande and its tributaries. In 2015, we established the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund together with the LOR Foundation, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust and Colorado Open Lands, with the goal of accelerating conservation efforts in the valley and enhancing community livability. ■

Historic Success at Thirtymile Creek

John Day River

Oregon

On Oregon's Wild and Scenic John Day River, WRC has wrapped up a major accomplishment at Thirtymile Creek that will benefit the river's critical run of wild steelhead, conserve prime habitat for wildlife and improve public river access at the heart of a spectacular river canyon.

After a five-year effort, we completed transfer of the Rattray and Campbell ranches to the Bureau of Land Management, forever protecting the lower nine miles of Thirtymile Creek, right where it flows into the John Day. The effort protected 10 miles of the main-stem John Day and 22,032 acres of prime wildlife habitat. At the same time, we secured prized public boating access to a prime stretch of the river and created a new recreational gateway to 78,000 acres of rugged sagebrush country—public land that was previously impossible to reach without a boat. Now open to the public, these lands deliver the only public river access on a remote, 70-mile stretch of the John Day. Boating this reach—one of the most scenic multi-day wilderness floats in the Pacific Northwest—previously required a five-day float from the upstream put-in at Clarno Bridge, unless



WRC conserved 10 miles of the John Day River and nine miles of Thirtymile Creek where it flows into the John Day.

you paid to put your boat in (or take it out) at Rattray Ranch. Now, this mid-way access point is open to all, free of charge.

Beneath brick-red cliffs, Thirtymile Creek feeds the lower John Day with its largest source of cold water. When the John Day runs low and warm in summer and fall, Thirtymile Creek comes through with reliable, cold flows just when wild salmon and steelhead need them most. The creek contains key spawning and rearing habitat that will keep lower-river steelhead—one of the healthiest wild populations in the Columbia system—going strong. Thirtymile Creek is also vital for Chinook salmon and for the John Day's diverse wildlife, including Oregon's

largest herd of California bighorn sheep.

Throughout the project, we worked with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, BLM and Gilliam County Soil and Water Conservation District to remove four fish-passage barriers in Thirtymile Creek and transform two former cattle ranches into thriving fish and wildlife habitat. With the land in BLM hands, the restoration work will continue with a number of local partners.

While this chapter is complete, WRC continues its efforts to improve the health of the Wild and Scenic John Day River—and to keep its water flowing for fish and wildlife and its unique outdoor adventures open to all. ■

South Fork Antelope Creek, California

Gaining Ground for Sacramento River Salmon

On the flanks of Mount Lassen, in Northern California, WRC is about to notch a small but critical victory for Sacramento River salmon and steelhead. This month, we will protect two miles of South Fork Antelope Creek and some of the area's most intact fish and wildlife habitat by conveying an exceptional property to the Lassen National Forest.

South Fork Antelope Creek pours cold and clear from the snowy heights of Mount Lassen and flows into Antelope Creek, which eventually flows to the Sacramento. With superb spawning and rearing habitat for Chinook and winter steelhead, Antelope Creek is one of only six streams designated within the Sacramento River Salmon Stronghold. These streams are some of the finest wild fish nurseries left in California, and they offer the best hope for the future of these runs.

The South Fork traverses a crucial wildlife corridor that connects the mountains to the valley floor. At the heart of it, WRC purchased a pristine, 1,150-acre property where the creek cuts a deep canyon beneath towering ponderosa pine and incense cedar trees. Above the canyon, a live oak savanna gives way to rolling grasslands with abundant wildlife.



The property's most famous occupant was a wolf called OR-7, California's first documented wolf in decades, which spent a winter here—a testament to the property's excellent habitat. Combined with the Tehama Wildlife Area downstream, the property also provides a critical winter home for Tehama black-tailed deer as well as mountain lion, black bear, peregrine falcon and western pond turtle.

Once we complete the project, the land will be permanently conserved within the national forest, and a key stretch of South Fork Antelope Creek will be forever protected for its native fish. What's more, WRC's efforts may soon result in a new hiking trail connecting the property to the Tehama State Wildlife Area, which will allow hikers, equestrians and kayakers to explore this rugged, scenic area. ■



KIRK ANDERSON

SUCCESS on the Middle Fork Salmon

Some of the West's best salmon runs have gained newly protected habitat and desperately needed water for spawning and rearing fish, thanks to WRC's recent success at the source of the Middle Fork Salmon River. In September, WRC transferred the 158-acre Cape Horn Ranch to the Salmon-Challis National Forest. The ranch is tucked between the Sawtooth and Frank Church/River of No Return wilderness areas, and the property's streams and wetlands are prime cold-water fish nurseries at the Middle Fork's headwaters. The ranch controls water rights along a half-mile of Knapp Creek, which feeds Marsh Creek. Below the property Marsh Creek flows into Bear Creek, and there, the famed Middle Fork begins.

The project is of special importance when it comes to water and fish. Cape Horn Ranch historically used up to 75 percent of Knapp Creek's water, severely limiting habitat for salmon, steelhead and bull trout. WRC was able to transfer those rights to the state of Idaho, ensuring this water stays permanently in-stream for fish.

Both streams contain Critical Habitat for Snake River Chinook salmon and steelhead, as well as sockeye, westslope cutthroat and bull trout. The property's forests and grasslands are home to Rocky Mountain elk (which calve on the property), mule deer and pronghorn, and its wet meadows draw multitudes of Rocky Mountain sandhill cranes in the spring.

We were also able to guarantee permanent recreational and management access to the Cape Horn Guard Station, a popular destination for hikers and cross-country skiers. ■

a series of wet meadows that provide excellent feeding and nesting habitat for waterfowl and crucial water for the adjacent refuge. We plan to convey the land, along with the ranch's water rights, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to expand the wildlife refuge.

Run as a cattle ranch since the 1900s, the property was largely drained for pasture, and the river was channelized and diverted. Once we transfer the property to the Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency can recreate the river's natural meanders along this reach and ensure that the Williamson's consistent, spring-fed flows help sustain these vast wetlands.

Each season, tens of thousands of birds arrive on the property, including sandhill crane, Foster's tern, dowitchers, sandpipers, trumpeter swans, gadwall, cinnamon teal and dozens of others. Some 200 pairs (roughly half of the West's breeding population) of the secretive, rarely-seen yellow rail, a tiny marsh bird, nest in the Klamath Marsh. Deer, elk, antelope and the state-sensitive American fisher all rely on the property's ponderosa pine forests. The project will also benefit the Williamson's scale-tipping native redband and rainbow trout, as well as two endangered sucker fish and the

state-sensitive Miller Lake lamprey.

Our efforts at Timmerman Ranch will improve water conditions in the upper Williamson and Klamath Marsh, benefiting the Klamath River system as a whole. By delivering increased headwater flows and better water quality, this project will bolster the efforts of all who depend on a

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healthy Klamath River: the Klamath Tribes, the agricultural community and recreationists alike. Most of all, we'll improve conditions for the fish and wildlife of this remarkable river system, which sustains some of the most diverse bird life and greatest salmon runs in the West. ■



TOM AND PAT LEESON

By conserving the Timmerman Ranch, WRC will protect more than 2,000 acres of prime habitat for fish and wildlife, including some of the best wetland habitat for migrating and resident birds in the West. Cinnamon teal (pictured) depend on the area's wetlands to survive.