



# Riverlands

## A Prized Trout Stream Flows Year-Round Again



RUSS SCHNITZER

WRC's pioneering efforts to rewater this stretch of the Little Cimarron River will ensure this trout stream flows top to bottom all year long. The project sets a new precedent for keeping water in stream while meeting the needs of local agriculture.

### Little Cimarron River

#### Colorado

In Colorado's Southern Rocky Mountains, Western Rivers Conservancy just completed a groundbreaking effort to return much-needed water to the Little Cimarron River, one of the Centennial State's top-notch trout streams.

Beloved by fly anglers, the Little Cimarron tumbles from the Uncompahgre Wilderness, an alpine wonderland of jagged peaks and wildflower-dotted tundra in the San Juan Mountains. Leaving public land, the river flows north through a high agricultural valley where farms and ranches draw the stream down, sometimes to nothing, before it joins the Cimarron River. The main Cimarron then meets the Gunnison River in the spectac-

ular Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

The Little Cimarron's forested upper reaches contain superb habitat for brook and cutthroat trout. Downstream, though, the Little Cimarron encounters irrigation ditches that pull water from the stream for hay and cattle. In the summer, this can leave the Little Cimarron River running low and warm—or dried up altogether—cutting off access to the colder, healthier habitat of the upper river for downstream fish.

To keep the river running cold all year, Western Rivers Conservancy bought a former dairy farm in 2012 that diverts substantial water from the Little Cimarron. Targeted for development, the farm had

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## This Issue:

### Little Cimarron River, CO

WRC completes a landmark project that returns perennial flows to an outstanding Colorado trout stream

### Panther Creek, ID

New effort to conserve a critical stretch of this important Salmon River tributary

### McDermitt Creek, OR & NV

The last, best chance to save Lahontan cutthroat trout from extinction in the Great Basin

### South Fork Salmon River, ID

WRC makes critical headway in its effort to protect the South Fork Wilderness Ranch

### John Day River, OR

Expanding public lands and protecting habitat along a wild and scenic river in eastern Oregon



KRISTA SCHLYER

# Conservation Headway at Wilderness' Edge

Idaho's remote South Fork Salmon River roars down from the Salmon River Mountains, through Payette National Forest and the Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness, and into the Main Salmon River at Mackay Bar. It's a swift 86-mile descent through a rugged river canyon which is every bit as beautiful as the famed Middle Fork, yet even more remote.

Roughly 16 miles upstream from the South Fork's confluence with the Salmon, Western Rivers Conservancy is working to conserve one of the last major private inholdings along the river: South Fork Wilderness Ranch. WRC has been working with the landowners and the Payette Land Trust to protect part of the 234-acre property through a conservation easement, which the family generously donated to the land trust this month. We are now working to purchase the remaining 134 acres with the goal of conveying the lands to the Payette National Forest later this year.

The second largest tributary to the Salmon River, The South Fork is a remarkable river in every regard. Because of its remoteness, it is one of the few rivers in the Columbia Basin that still has reasonably intact assemblages of native fish, including bull trout, spring Chinook, summer steelhead and westslope cutthroat trout. An astonishing 20 percent of the Columbia Basin's Chinook salmon come from the South Fork. From a recreation perspective, the South Fork Salmon is exceptional, especially for its whitewater boating, hunting and fishing.

WRC's efforts will permanently conserve a critical piece of land along a river that is otherwise protected nearly in its entirety. And this is one of those rivers where every piece of riverland matters. ■



TOM AND PAT LEESON



DR. RALPH MAUGHAN

Panther Creek is one of the largest tributaries flowing out of the Salmon River Mountains and into the Main Salmon River. WRC is working to protect a key property along the stream, midway up the river.

## WRC Launches New Effort on a Prime Salmon River Tributary

### Panther Creek

Idaho

If there's a river redemption story out there, it's Idaho's Panther Creek. This spectacular Salmon River tributary has much in common with the better-known Middle Fork and South Fork Salmon rivers, but was decimated by decades of cobalt and copper mining. Toxic runoff left the lower river lifeless, and no salmon or steelhead could make it into the upper river. Lower Panther Creek was just a scenic shell of a once-great stream.

In the 1990s, that began to change when federal agencies, mining companies and the state of Idaho began a massive \$50-million restoration effort to clean up the mine and recover Panther Creek. Over three decades later, the stream is nearly as healthy as it was before the mine. The aquatic insects are rebounding, the salmon are back, and the trout are thriving. Today, the most visible legacy of Panther Creek's mining history is the road that runs alongside it. Panther Creek is even part of the Idaho Birding Trail, which traces the best birding sites in the state.

While Panther Creek has come a long way, there's still work to be done.

Functional salmon habitat is limited in the river due to road proximity and private land management. So, about midway up the river, Western Rivers Conservancy has launched an effort to conserve one of the last private properties along the stream, a rare inholding within the Salmon-Challis National Forest. The mile of Panther Creek that runs through the property has some of the best potential spawning and rearing habitat for salmon and steelhead in the stream. It's a stretch of the river that both the National Forest and the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes consider a top priority for habitat recovery.

WRC plans to buy the property and transfer it to the Salmon-Challis National Forest. Once this happens, habitat restoration will begin in earnest, and the entire 109-acre property, which could otherwise be subdivided and developed, will be permanently protected. Mountain lion, gray wolf, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, a plethora of bird species and a wealth of other wildlife inhabit the area, and this special stretch will remain undeveloped, protected as habitat, forever. ■

# Last Chance for Great Basin Lahontan Cutthroat

## McDermitt Creek

### Oregon and Nevada

In the arid, far reaches of southeast Oregon and northern Nevada, Western Rivers Conservancy has embarked on a game-changing effort to recover one of the West's most endangered fish: the Lahontan cutthroat trout.

Lahontan cutthroat, the state fish of Nevada, is a large, bright-orange species of cutthroat that were once abundant across thousands of miles of streams in the Great Basin. Today, the fish are on the brink of extinction because the cold-water river habitat they depend on has been rapidly disappearing. Within their shrinking territory, they must also compete with non-native fish.

The primary hope for Lahontan cutthroat lies with the increasingly rare streams that flow cold and clear year-round through the dry expanses of the Great Basin. Chief among these streams is McDermitt Creek, which drains the south slope of Oregon's Trout Creek Mountains and crosses into Nevada's Great Basin.

To protect 15 miles of McDermitt Creek and key tributaries, WRC is working to purchase a lynchpin property, Disaster Peak Ranch. The property, a cattle ranch for generations, owes its superb condition to the current owners, who have prioritized healthy habitat alongside ranching since the 1950s.

Building on that stewardship legacy, WRC is seizing the rare opportunity to



Lahontan cutthroat trout are on the verge of extinction in the Great Basin. WRC's efforts on McDermitt Creek are the best hope of keeping these fish from disappearing for good.

conserve the ranch, setting the stage for restoration, permanent protection of the ranch and the reconnection of 55 miles of stream habitat on and around the property. This will double the number of stream miles available to Lahontan cutthroat across the fish's northwest range and give the species a fighting chance at survival. WRC's efforts will also allow biologists to remove non-native trout from McDermitt Creek and then reintroduce genetically pure populations of Lahontan cutthroat to the full length of the stream, where they once thrived.

Meanwhile, the ranch will remain in operation, contributing to the local economy as it has for decades. Disaster Peak Ranch adjoins seven BLM wilderness study areas, and the landscape supports greater sage-grouse

(the colorfully-plumed bird that indicates healthy sagebrush grasslands), as well as Columbia spotted frog, pygmy rabbit, mule deer, California bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain elk, bobcat, great horned owl, mountain lion, muskrat, beaver, golden eagle and sandhill crane.

As we work to secure the ideal long-term steward for the land, we are partnering with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Nevada Department of Wildlife and other organizations, each of which regard Disaster Peak Ranch as imperative to Lahontan cutthroat recovery. Together we are moving toward a shared vision of thriving runs of Lahontan cutthroat along the full length of McDermitt Creek to ensure this beautiful and important fish survives into the future. ■



WRC is working to conserve Disaster Peak Ranch at McDermitt Creek to reconnect and restore 55 miles of stream habitat for endangered Lahontan cutthroat.

NATIVE TROUT ADDICT

ZACH SPECTOR



PETER MARBACH

**Little Cimarron River**  
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gone into foreclosure but remained a valued piece of the valley’s agricultural heritage. WRC purchased the property, along with its water rights, and, in partnership with Colorado Water Trust, spearheaded a community solution that would allow water for fish and farms both.

*The farm can now remain a productive part of the local economy, while the stream remains connected year-round for the sake of the Little Cimarron’s fish.*

While holding the land, we conveyed the water rights to Colorado Water Trust in 2014. Working alongside the trust, we established a split-season irrigation agreement that helps ensure adequate flows for fish during the driest summer months, while allowing the farm to draw water at other times.

With the water-sharing regime firmly

established, WRC sold the land in March 2020 to a neighboring farmer, who has embraced the irrigation arrangement to demonstrate that agriculture and rivers can coexist in Colorado. The farm can now remain a productive part of the local economy, while the stream remains connected year-round for the sake of the Little Cimarron’s fish. Consistent flows will help decrease water temperatures in the lower river and allow trout and other native fish to reestablish the de-watered reach of the stream.

The project’s innovative split-season approach is the first of its kind in Colorado. WRC and the new landowner are demonstrating the viability of cutting-edge solutions like this—solutions that will be critical to meeting the goals laid out in Colorado’s Water Plan. A unique collaboration of agricultural and conservation partners made this possible, including WRC, Colorado Water Trust, local farmers and ranchers, and the Colorado Water Conservation Board. We hope this groundbreaking effort paves the way for similar solutions to Colorado’s water challenges, keeping rivers, fish and local farming economies healthy for the long run. ■

# Heritage and Access on the John Day River

Deepening our work on Oregon’s John Day River, Western Rivers Conservancy is poised to acquire a critical three-mile stretch of the lower John Day, at McDonald’s Ferry. The effort will protect a key boater take out, create new river access, preserve a historic segment of the Oregon Trail and improve crucial spawning and rearing habitat for John Day steelhead.

This summer, WRC hopes to purchase the 4,100-acre McDonald’s Ferry property, named for the historic ferry that settlers used to cross the John Day River on their journey west. Wagon ruts from the 1800s can still be seen on the ranch, carved into the desert floor by the thousands of wagons heading west to the Willamette Valley. Today, the property is critical for boaters as the last take-out before the river winds into a 10-mile roadless reach and then careens over the un-runnable Tumwater Falls.

Until now, public access to the John Day River at McDonald’s Ferry has been uncertain. To guarantee permanent river access, WRC plans to purchase the property and convey it to the BLM for protection within the John Day Wild and Scenic River corridor. Our efforts will also create new access to three miles of the John Day River.

Conservation of the ranch presents an exciting opportunity to restore a stretch of Grass Valley Canyon Creek, a tributary to the John Day that flows through the property. The stream once provided prime spawning habitat for summer steelhead, but years ago its confluence with the John Day was moved to make way for cultivation. This and water withdraws upstream severely limit fish passage. Habitat restoration on the property would be a significant step toward making this crucial tributary a viable spawning stream for steelhead once again. ■



RICHARD DURMAN

The upper reaches of the Little Cimarron (above) are home to native westslope cutthroat trout, while the lower reaches of the stream are home to wild producing brook and brown trout, sculpin and other species.