

Riverlands

WINTER 2020 NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY ISSUE 47

Nursery Grounds Protected for Hells Canyon Bighorns



On the Idaho side of the Snake River, downstream from Hells Canyon, WRC has successfully conserved Ten Mile Creek Ranch, which provides some of the Pacific Northwest's best lambing habitat for bighorn sheep.

Snake River

Idaho

Stately and sure-footed, bighorn sheep are a sight to behold in river canyons across the western United States. Yet their survival depends on the West's ability to preserve what remains of the region's outstanding sheep habitat, and in eradicating disease that has taken a toll on bighorns for decades. To address both of these challenges, Western Rivers Conservancy just completed a two-year conservation effort on Idaho's Snake River that will preserve some of the finest nursery grounds and range habitat for bighorns in the Pacific Northwest.

Downstream of Hells Canyon, near Lewiston, Idaho, WRC has permanently conserved the 2,920-

acre Ten Mile Creek Ranch, an intact property that is critical to the survival of Idaho's northern Hells Canyon herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns.

Once ubiquitous in Hells Canyon, bighorns have seen steady declines since the mid-1800s, and today the Idaho Hells Canyon herd numbers only about 150 head. That's where Ten Mile Creek Ranch comes in. With its steep breaks and rugged cliffs, the property offers sheep protection from predators and ideal lambing grounds for birthing and raising their young.

Remarkably, over half of the lambs on the Idaho side of the herd are born on this property. The ranch also provides an expanse of habitat that helps keep

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This Issue:

Snake River, ID

WRC completes its effort to conserve critical nursery grounds for Idaho's Hells Canyon herd of bighorn sheep.

Antoine Creek, WA

In Okanogan County, WRC and the Colville Tribes launched an effort to recover a critical steelhead stream.

McDermitt Creek, OR & NV

At Disaster Peak Ranch, WRC is working to conserve a key stronghold for Lahontan cutthroat in the Great Basin.

Gunnison River, CO

Another mile of the Gunnison River is now protected forever within the Dominguez-Escalante NCA.

South Fork Salmon River, ID

WRC secures a remote access point into the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.



PROTECTED! Gunnison River

WRC has protected another prized mile of Colorado’s lower Gunnison River by adding 150 acres to the Bureau of Land Management’s Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area!

The lower Gunnison is one of the West’s great geologic sculptors, carving dramatic sandstone formations and deep river canyons before meandering down to its confluence with the Colorado River at Grand Junction.

A haven for rare desert fish, the lower Gunnison is protected along much of its length, including within the Dominguez-Escalante NCA. Yet even within the boundaries of the NCA, 16 miles of the river remained undesignated and therefore vulnerable to development.

To help fill that gap, WRC has been working to purchase strategic Gunnison River frontage for over a decade. Our first success came in 2012, when we conserved 400 acres at the entrance to the NCA and prevented a gravel mine on the banks of the river. A year later, we purchased 150 acres directly across the river, including another critical mile of Gunnison frontage and prime campsites for boaters. In September, we successfully added this property to the NCA, utilizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund to convey it to the BLM. The cooperation of the Colorado West Land Trust was crucial to the success of the project.

In all, we have conserved more than 8 miles of river frontage along the lower Gunnison within both the NCA and the Bangs Canyon Special Recreation Management Area, downstream. Our efforts are helping to secure a healthy future for four rare species of Colorado Basin warm-water fish, including razorback sucker and Colorado pikeminnow. The projects also benefit desert bighorn sheep, river otter, bald eagle and Rocky Mountain elk, not to mention the many human visitors who have the opportunity to canoe, camp and otherwise explore this spectacular slice of the Colorado Plateau. ■



WILLBOUCHER, CALIFORNIA SEA GRANT

Antoine Creek is a tributary to the Okanogan River and is one of Washington’s highest priorities for recovering Upper Columbia River steelhead. WRC’s efforts will rewater the stream, which is currently drained nearly dry every year.

Resurrecting a Critical Steelhead Stream with the Colville Tribes

Antoine Creek

Washington

To reach their home waters in Washington, Upper Columbia River steelhead swim 500-plus miles, overcome ten Columbia River dams and finally enter the tributary streams of the state’s arid interior. East of Lake Chelan, they reach the Okanogan river valley, which stretches out like a broad welcome mat of winding rivers, sagebrush-covered slopes and lofty peaks extending clear into Canada.

Here, steelhead face a new challenge: water. In fertile Okanogan County, farms draw heavily from tributary streams like Antoine Creek, leaving flows too low and warm for steelhead to spawn. Today, Upper Columbia River steelhead, including a distinct population unit on the Okanogan River, are federally endangered.

No one knows the challenges these fish face better than the Colville Tribes, which have inhabited Okanogan Country for millennia. For a decade, the tribes have set their sights on buying a large ranch along Antoine Creek, a tributary of the Okanogan River. With cold water and critical steelhead habitat, Antoine Creek presents a tremendous opportunity to restore a lifeline for Upper Columbia steelhead.

To usher this vision forward, Western Rivers Conservancy has purchased the 2,524-acre Antoine Valley Ranch with a grant from the Washington Streamflow Restoration Program and support from The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. We are transferring half of the ranch to the tribes now and are actively working to raise funds to transfer the second half. The

tribes can then increase flows in Antoine Creek by up to 95% and revive spawning habitat that has been choked off by water withdrawals for decades. Trout Unlimited’s support has also been pivotal in our effort to conserve the ranch.

The beauty of the project lies in the rare opportunity to place such significant stream-flows back into the creek. The ranch, which spans nearly three miles of the stream, includes an earthen dam that diverts nearly all the water from the stream, severely limiting downstream spawning habitat for steelhead. Once the Colville Tribes regain the land and have control of the dam, they will increase flows into Antoine Creek during the critical spawning season, a game-changer for this threatened run of steelhead. The dam itself lies on a separate upper segment of the property, upstream of natural barriers for steelhead.

The Colville Tribes also plan to reconnect side channel habitat along three miles of the creek and improve steelhead spawning and rearing areas. Elsewhere on the property, the goal is to replant the ranch’s farm fields with native vegetation and restore extensive sagebrush grasslands, while keeping some of the non-riparian lands in grazing. This new management regime will benefit threatened Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, migratory birds, mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, and animals that rely on the land as a migratory corridor between the Cascade Range to the west and the Kettle Crest to the east. ■



RICHARD DURMAN

Recovering a Stronghold for Lahontan Cutthroat

McDermitt Creek

Oregon & Nevada

If there's hope for the Great Basin's endangered Lahontan cutthroat—the largest species of cutthroat trout and Nevada's state fish—it hinges on the ability to protect the basin's imperiled cold-water streams. To that end, Western Rivers Conservancy has just acquired a linchpin property on McDermitt Creek in Oregon and Nevada, a stream that just might give this fish a fighting chance.

The property, called Disaster Peak Ranch, controls 11 miles of McDermitt Creek and over seven miles of key tributary streams—all reaches that biologists regard as imperative for recovering the West's most endangered trout.

Pouring from Oregon's Trout Creek Mountains, McDermitt Creek meanders across the state line into the Great Basin of Nevada, where it feeds the Quinn River system. A rare, perennial stream in an arid expanse of sagebrush, McDermitt Creek offers a last-chance opportunity to reestablish a healthy population of Lahontan cutthroat in the northern Great Basin.

With the ranch in WRC hands, we are now setting the stage to reconnect 55 miles of viable habitat upstream and downstream of the property, effectively doubling the number of stream miles available to Lahontan cutthroat across the fish's northwest range. Our efforts



WRC is working to conserve Disaster Peak Ranch in an effort to preserve a crucial reach of McDermitt Creek, one of the Great Basin's best strongholds for endangered Lahontan cutthroat trout.

also give our partners critical access to remove non-native fishes from McDermitt Creek, and then reintroduce genetically pure populations of Lahontan cutthroat from isolated tributaries on the property, where they still thrive.

As we search for a permanent conservation steward to own the property in perpetuity, we are working closely with partners, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nevada Department of Wildlife and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, to position the ranch for long-term habitat conservation while continuing the previous owners' legacy of responsible grazing.

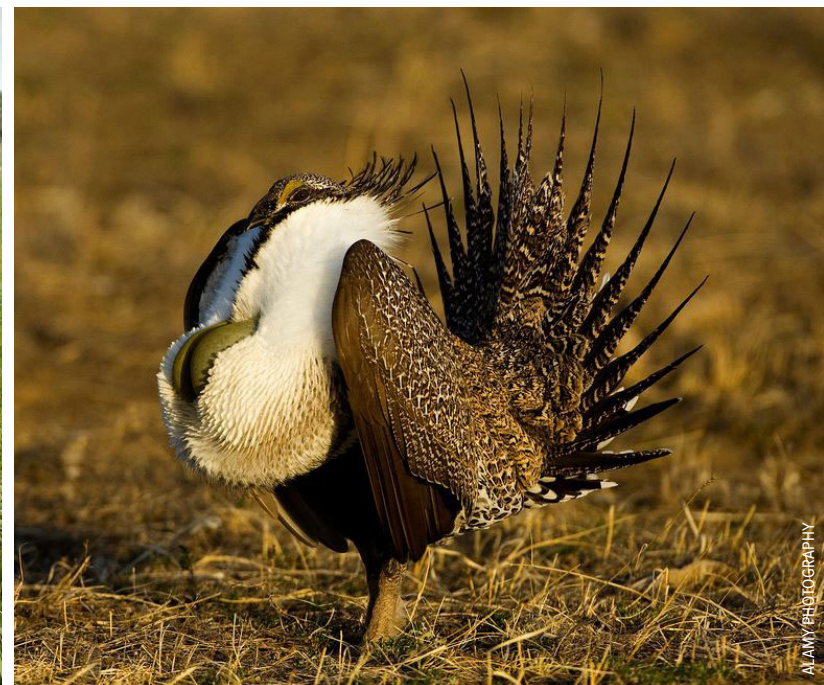
On top of its importance for fish, the Disaster Peak Ranch and its surrounding

landscape—including seven BLM-managed wilderness study areas—will continue to support important wildlife species like greater sage-grouse (the colorfully-plumed bird that indicates healthy sagebrush grasslands), Columbia spotted frog, pygmy rabbit, California bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain elk, great horned owl, sandhill crane and many other animals.

In a region where sagebrush habitat is disappearing quickly, and cold-flowing streams are as imperiled as the native trout they support, our efforts represent a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the fate of Lahontan cutthroat for generations to come. ■



Disaster Peak Ranch is home to McDermitt Creek (pictured), a stronghold for Lahontan cutthroat, and it provides important habitat for imperiled greater sage-grouse (right).



ALAMY PHOTOGRAPHY



PETE WALLSTROM

SUCCESS! South Fork Salmon River

In the remote backcountry of central Idaho, WRC has completed an effort to conserve a gem of a property along the South Fork Salmon River. As a result, outdoor enthusiasts have a key new access point into the largest roadless wilderness in the Lower 48, the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.

To protect the entire 234-acre South Fork Wilderness Ranch—one of the last private reaches of the near-pristine South Fork—we worked in two phases. Earlier this year, we facilitated a conservation easement over the western half of the ranch in partnership with the former owner and the Payette Land Trust. Then, in September, we transferred the eastern half of the ranch to the Payette National Forest using funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to permanently conserve the property for fish, wildlife and recreational access.

The South Fork Salmon River rivals the world-famous Middle Fork for its scenic wonders and rugged adventure, but the South Fork is far more isolated. The project delivers rare public access via one of just a few roads that descend some 4,000 feet into the river canyon. Now backpackers, equestrians and hunters have a new gateway to roughly 10,000 acres of public lands in the northwestern portion of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, with its spectacular scenery, big-game hunting and outstanding wildlife-viewing.

In terms of salmon habitat, the South Fork is as pristine as it gets. With reasonably intact assemblages of native fish, it produces a whopping one-fifth of the entire Columbia Basin's spring Chinook salmon.

With the completion of this effort, the wild jewel that is the South Fork Salmon River is one step closer to being protected along its entire length. ■

bighorns distanced from domestic sheep and goats, which can spread infectious disease.

Once ubiquitous in Hells Canyon, bighorns have seen steady declines since the mid-1800s, and today the Idaho Hells Canyon herd numbers only about 150 head. That's where Ten Mile Creek Ranch comes in.

To remove the potential of a 24-lot subdivision and protect this critical property, WRC purchased Ten Mile Creek Ranch in 2018. While we held the land, we worked with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to place

a conservation easement on it. Once the ranch was protected, we sold the land to a private conservation buyer, who will partner with the state to keep the land forever wild and unbroken for the sake of its sheep and other wildlife.

In addition to its bighorn habitat, the ranch spans four miles of the Snake River, a reach that includes Chinook salmon spawning redds and migration habitat for sockeye salmon, Chinook and steelhead. With its proximity to Hells Gate State Park to the north and the 78,000-acre Craig Mountain Wildlife Management Area to the south, the property will help unify a block of wild lands along the lower Snake River where bighorns, bears, elk and other wildlife still roam free, and where more than 100 species of birds are found.

With victories like this one at Ten Mile Creek, we hope the mighty bighorn will forever roam the river canyons of the West. They're a great reminder that rivers are critical not just for fish, but for wildlife everywhere. ■



TOM AND PAT LEESON

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep rely on the steep breaks and rugged terrain of Ten Mile Creek Ranch for protection from predators, which lack the agility that bighorns possess.

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