

# Riverlands

SUMMER 2021 NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY ISSUE 48

## Returning Water to the Wise for the Big Hole's Grayling



Western Rivers Conservancy is working to return water to Montana's Wise River, a tributary to the Lower 48's last remaining stronghold for fluvial Arctic grayling, the Big Hole River.

### Wise River

#### Montana

At the heart of Montana's Big Hole Valley, Western Rivers Conservancy has launched an effort to return critically needed water to the Wise River by conserving a 200-acre ranch on the banks of this legendary trout stream.

The Wise is a major tributary to the Big Hole River, one of Montana's renowned fly fishing streams, and the Lower 48's last remaining stronghold for fluvial Arctic grayling. These river-dwelling grayling rear in the cold waters of just five Big Hole tributaries, one of which is the Wise. But these cold streams

have been increasingly vulnerable to water withdrawals, development and a warming climate, which threaten grayling populations throughout the Big Hole system.

For years, Arctic grayling were candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act, which spurred local ranchers, farmers, conservationists and others to voluntarily pull together and improve conditions for the imperiled fish. The effort was largely successful. Now, protecting Big Hole tributaries and ensuring they remain clean and cold is critical to keeping these grayling

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*WRC launches effort to return water to Montana's Wise River to benefit imperiled fluvial Arctic grayling.*

### Umatilla River, OR

*WRC and the Umatilla Tribes partner to restore a critical salmon and steelhead stream.*

### Elk Creek, OR

*In eastern Oregon, WRC works to conserve crucial headwater streams of the Grande Ronde and Snake rivers.*

### South Fork Scott River, CA

*Critical water returned to the lifeline of California's most important wild coho stream.*

### Panther Creek, ID

*A river redemption story continues with WRC's conservation of a key Panther Creek property.*





# Upping the Odds for the Umatilla's Fish

Oregon's Umatilla River has faced a myriad of challenges. It was drained dry along its lower reaches for half of the last century and is now heavily de-watered throughout much of its 89-mile run from the Blue Mountains to the Columbia River. But there are new hopes for this critical salmon stream, which flows year-round once again and sustains Chinook, coho, summer steelhead and bull trout.

In recent years, the river has been slowly recovering, thanks largely to the efforts of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, which have led the way in fisheries recovery with federal, state and local partners. Western Rivers Conservancy is now partnering with the tribes to conserve a critical property at the confluence of the Umatilla and Birch Creek, roughly four miles downstream of the city of Pendleton.

WRC set its sights on conserving the 978-acre property for several reasons. Above all, the ranch contains the largest floodplain restoration potential in the entire Umatilla Basin. WRC's protection of the property with a conservation easement in partnership with the Umatilla Tribes will allow the tribes to restore 317 acres of agricultural land to functioning floodplain and to dedicate the ranch's water rights permanently in-stream for fish. Our efforts will also conserve two miles of the Umatilla River and a mile of lower Birch Creek, the Umatilla's top producer of steelhead.

In all, the project will be an important win for mid-Columbia salmon and steelhead, while bolstering the Umatilla Tribes' efforts to restore these imperiled fish runs. Our work on the Umatilla River builds on our past partnership with the tribes, when we conserved a ranch on a stream called Catherine Creek, laying the groundwork for a massive salmon restoration project on that vital Grande Ronde/Snake River tributary. ■



In eastern Oregon, Western Rivers Conservancy is working with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest to permanently protect 453 acres along Elk Creek (above) and Crow Creek, two critical streams for Snake River steelhead.

## New Effort Launched on Vital Snake River Tributaries

### Elk Creek

#### Oregon

In a remote and rugged river canyon in eastern Oregon, Western Rivers Conservancy has purchased 453 acres along Elk and Crow creeks, crucial headwater streams for two of Oregon's wild and scenic rivers: Joseph Creek and the Grande Ronde.

The property lies roughly 13 miles west of Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and 11 miles northwest of the Zumwalt Prairie Preserve, one of the most intact native grasslands left in the West. To the south lies the Eagle Cap Wilderness, the crown jewel of the Wallowa Mountains.

The wild character of this landscape, and the clean, cold water that these streams provide, make for prime habitat for fish and wildlife. The stretches of Elk and Crow creeks that flow through the property are designated Critical Habitat for threatened Snake River summer steelhead, and both streams are home to native redband rainbow trout. The area is considered priority habitat for Rocky Mountain elk.

The entire area is also important to the Nez Perce Tribe. The confluence of Crow and Elk creeks marks the start of Joseph Creek, which was named for

Chief Joseph, the iconic leader of the Wallowa band of the Nez Perce. The Wallowa band used the Joseph Creek canyon as a travel corridor.

WRC purchased the property in March, and we are now working to transfer the lands to the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest to ensure they remain permanently intact for the benefit of fish and wildlife.

Our efforts will also guarantee continued public access to major portions of the Wallowa Valley Ranger District and Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. Forest Service Road 4620 crosses part of the property and provides the primary access to four established campgrounds, several dispersed campgrounds, over 15 trails and a popular overlook. Conveying these lands to the U.S. Forest Service will ensure this cherished access point stays permanently open to all.

WRC plans to convey the property to the national forest in late 2021. Once that happens, the steelhead spawning habitat in Elk and Crow creeks, along with the property's rich wildlife habitat and public access opportunities, will be protected in perpetuity. ■





# Big Gains for California Coho Stronghold

## South Fork Scott River

### California

In Northern California, Western Rivers Conservancy has returned critically needed water flows to the South Fork Scott River by protecting the 1,596-acre Bouvier Ranch in the scenic Scott Valley. Our efforts permanently conserved 2.5 miles of Critical Habitat for imperiled coho salmon, building on our work throughout the Klamath River basin.

The South Fork Scott River is the lifeline of the state's most important wild coho stream: the mainstem Scott River. The Scott is, in turn, the largest, cleanest and coldest tributary to the Klamath. With its clear water, abundant spawning beds and no mainstem dams impeding fish migration, the Scott produces more native coho than any stream in California. But the Scott and its fish face countless challenges, from water diversion and diking to deforestation and drought. Frequently, there is simply too little water in the river and its tributaries to sustain healthy populations of spawning, holding and rearing fish.

Coho are threatened or endangered throughout California and Oregon, and although the Scott is a major producer of wild coho, many fear the species could still become extinct within the river barring meaningful, ongoing recovery work. With the goal of strengthening populations in the Scott River, state and federal agencies



**In December, WRC completed a project on the South Fork Scott River that will guarantee more water for fish in the lifeline of the state's most important wild coho stream, the mainstem Scott River.**

have invested heavily in improving habitat within the South Fork and mainstem Scott rivers. This work has been crucial for the Scott and its fish, but the long-term success of these efforts hinges upon one very key ingredient: water.

WRC's conservation of Bouvier Ranch delivers this critical component. In December, we permanently protected the ranch's fish and wildlife habitat by placing a conservation easement on the property and transferring it—and management of the ranch's water rights—to the Siskiyou Land Trust. We then sold the land to a neighboring rancher who shares WRC's

long-term vision for the property and who plans to continue stream restoration work in partnership with CalTrout.

By conserving riverland properties with associated water rights, such as Bouvier Ranch, WRC has a lasting impact on river systems, especially when they are strained by summer heat, water withdrawals and low flows. We've now ensured water will stay in the South Fork Scott when the river and fish need it most, increasing summertime flows by up to 20 percent. That's a major win for fish like coho, Chinook and steelhead and a game-changer for the entire river ecosystem. ■



**Coho are threatened or endangered throughout California and Oregon, and WRC's conservation of Bouvier Ranch will ensure more water for spawning and rearing fish in the South Fork Scott River.**



## Progress on Panther Creek

Last fall, WRC purchased a 110-acre property along Idaho's Panther Creek, one of the Salmon River's most important tributaries for imperiled salmon and steelhead. This spring, we successfully secured funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to convey the parcel to the Salmon-Challis National Forest for permanent protection. The effort will protect a mile of Panther Creek, including some of the river's best potential spawning and rearing habitat for salmon and steelhead, while setting the stage for restoration that will benefit fish and wildlife alike.

Panther Creek is a river redemption story through and through. Once one of the Salmon River's top producers of Chinook, the stream was decimated by mining for decades. In the 1990s, a massive restoration effort resulted in dramatic improvements to the river's water quality, which brought insects and fish back to the upper river. But high-functioning spawning and rearing habitat remains limited. Anytime land along a low-gradient, slower-moving stretch of the river becomes available, protecting and restoring it is critical.

The parcel that WRC acquired includes one of these rare stretches of river with excellent spawning habitat, and both the U.S. Forest Service and Shoshone-Bannock Tribes consider it a top priority for fish recovery. By transferring the property to the national forest, WRC will set the stage for restoration and ensure it remains intact and undeveloped forever. The property also includes 1.09 CFS of water rights, which WRC intends to convey to the Idaho Department of Water Resources to permanently supplement instream flow.

Placing this stretch of Panther Creek into public ownership will improve river access for anglers, birders, hikers and others. More importantly, wildlife like mountain lions, gray wolf, Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer, which are all found throughout the area, can now find refuge along this stretch of Panther Creek. ■

populations alive. WRC's efforts on the Wise River will help do exactly that.

This summer, WRC will purchase a 200-acre ranch that controls the upper-most water rights on the Wise River. Once we secure funding, we intend to convey the property to the

***This will allow us to permanently return 11 CFS of water to the Wise River, a significant amount of water for a stream this size.***

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest and ultimately dedicate the ranch's water in-stream in partnership with Trout Unlimited's Western Water Project. This will allow us to permanently return 11 CFS of water to the Wise River, a significant amount of water for a stream this size. The increased flows will benefit not just grayling, but westslope cutthroat trout and mountain whitefish, as well as

the non-native rainbow and brown trout for which the Big Hole is famous among fly anglers.

In addition to being the West's only stronghold for Arctic grayling, the Big Hole Valley is also a land of birds. Upstream of the Wise River confluence, the meandering nature of the Big Hole River creates extensive wetlands that support everything from sandhill crane and long-billed curlew (a migratory shorebird) to sage grouse, American kestrel, killdeer and golden and bald eagle. These and other species rely on the open country of the Big Hole Valley, including places like the ranch that WRC is working to protect.

Once we transfer the property to the U.S. Forest Service, this rare, unprotected inholding within the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest will be permanently conserved. Instead of being subdivided, the ranch will now remain intact forever, and its water will be returned to the Wise for the Big Hole's Arctic grayling and other fish, which need every drop of clean, cold water they can get. ■



WRC's efforts in the Big Hole River basin will return over 11 CFS of water to the Wise River, a tremendous benefit for imperiled fluvial Arctic grayling, as well as westslope cutthroat trout and mountain whitefish.