



# Riverlands

SUMMER 2016 NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY ISSUE 36

## Effort Launched to Save a Puget Sound Salmon Run



JOSH HUMBERT

Each fall, tens of thousands of chum salmon return to Washington's Kennedy Creek, a small but important Puget Sound stream that WRC is working to conserve.

### Kennedy Creek

#### Washington

In the first days of November, when the chum salmon return to Washington's south Puget Sound, another migration arrives at the mouth of Kennedy Creek. This one, however, arrives in yellow school buses. Tumbling out in galoshes and raincoats, visiting schoolchildren run up the half-mile long Kennedy Creek Salmon Trail, gaping at the spawning chum that return to the stream by the tens of thousands to spawn.

Only ten miles west of Olympia, Kennedy Creek is one of the most productive chum salmon

spawning streams in Washington, with average fall runs topping 30,000 fish. Each November, thousands of visitors, including more than 2,500 local school children, visit the interpretive sites along the trail to witness this incredible spectacle of nature.

Western Rivers Conservancy has launched an effort to acquire and protect nearly all of the Kennedy Creek stream corridor, from its Summit Lake headwaters in Capitol State Forest, to its mouth at Totten Inlet. In doing so, we can ensure

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DANIEL D'AURIA

## Preserving Bird Habitat on the Rio Grande

At the western edge of the Central Flyway, Colorado's high San Luis Valley is home to more than 200 bird species, including raptors, shorebirds, songbirds and waterfowl. While the valley is most famous for its sandhill cranes (above), which return to the valley by the tens of thousands each year, two species stand out for WRC: the southwestern willow flycatcher (below) and yellow billed cuckoo. Both are listed under the Endangered Species Act, due primarily to loss of habitat. WRC's conservation efforts on the upper Rio Grande and tributaries like the Conejos River (see Rio Grande story inside) will conserve vital habitat for both species, helping ensure these birds remain part of Colorado's landscape forever.



PAUL HIGGINS

# We Did It! A Decade-Long Effort on Oregon's Hood River

Over 100 years in the making, Punchbowl Falls Park, on Oregon's Hood River, finally opened to the public this summer when Western Rivers Conservancy conveyed 102 acres of riverland to Hood River County. WRC and the county created the park to protect Punchbowl Falls and the confluence of the East and West Forks of the Hood River and to ensure public access to this scenic stretch of the Hood.

The Hood River is a rare Columbia Basin stream, with more anadromous and native fish species than any other river in the basin. With headwaters flowing from the shaded north-facing glaciers of Mount Hood, the river is ice-cold and, in the face of climate change, a critical cold-water refuge for salmonids.

WRC began purchasing property along the Hood more than a decade ago and held the lands while raising the funds needed to convey them to the county. The final piece fell into place last year, when Oregon Parks and Recreation Department awarded a \$470,000 grant to the county. Thanks to support from The Collins Foundation, M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, the Pacific Power Foundation and others, WRC was able to donate half of the property value. The remainder was raised by Hood River County, the Hood River Valley Parks and Recreation District and local individuals.

Today, the park is open to all, and this important stretch of the Hood River will be forever managed for the Hood River's cold water, unique fish and wildlife and outstanding recreation.



Flowing from high in the Siskiyou Mountains, Blue Creek is the most important cold-water tributary to the Klamath River and a lifeline for salmon and steelhead.

## First Salmon Sanctuary Lands Transfer to Yurok Tribe

### Klamath River

#### California

This summer, Western Rivers Conservancy took exciting steps forward in its effort to create a salmon sanctuary at Blue Creek, the most important cold-water tributary to California's Klamath River. Those steps came with our successful purchase of another 748 acres within the Blue Creek watershed and our subsequent conveyance of the lands to our partner, the Yurok Tribe.

The transfer marks significant progress in our effort to conserve over 47,000 acres of temperate rainforest and safeguard Blue Creek, a rare refuge for the Klamath River's imperiled runs of salmon and steelhead. The project will also conserve vast swaths of forest—habitat that is vital to the long-term survival of the Klamath-Siskiyou ecoregion's rare and imperiled wildlife.

The 748 acres we protected this summer are the first lands to pass into tribal ownership since we helped the Yurok purchase 22,237 acres in 2011. Since then, we have been working to acquire the remaining 24,860 acres and are now closing in on the finish line of this

historic project. The lands we conveyed to the Yurok this month fall entirely within the Blue Creek salmon sanctuary, meaning they will be carefully stewarded to enhance salmon and steelhead recovery and to ensure this incredibly important source of cold water remains healthy forever.

WRC's purchase and transfer of these lands was made possible by a \$1 million dollar grant from the California Natural Resources Agency's Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program. WRC received the grant in July and conveyed the lands to the Yurok this month. The purchase leaves just over 8,500 acres to go.

Once our efforts are complete, Blue Creek will be protected in its entirety, and the Yurok people will have regained the crown jewel of their spiritual homeland. Then, the most important cold-water tributary to the Klamath River will be forever safeguarded by a community with a deep interest in healthy forests, healthy habitat and strong returns of salmon and steelhead. ■



# Success on Arizona's Scenic Fossil Creek

## Fossil Creek

Arizona

This summer, Fossil Creek, one of only two Wild and Scenic Rivers in Arizona, will at last be protected along its entire length. Western Rivers Conservancy is set to convey the final unprotected stretch of this unique stream to the Coconino National Forest Service for permanent protection within the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River corridor.

The project area is a small but critical cap on a much larger effort to restore Fossil Creek after it was dewatered by a hydroelectric project for nearly a century. Beginning in 1999, state and federal agencies and restoration groups embarked on what would become the largest river restoration effort in the Southwest. Since then, Fossil Creek has returned to the exquisite stream it once

***Nine species of imperiled native warm-water fish inhabit the stream, and river otters, bats, frogs, beavers and a plethora of bird species all rely on its life-giving waters.***

was, a delicate ribbon of crystal-clear, aquamarine mineral water flowing through the parched landscape of the Sonoran Desert.

Descending from a series of mineral springs in the Mogollon Rim, Fossil Creek hovers around 70 degrees Fahrenheit year round. The river's high calcium content creates surreal limestone

formations and the beautiful blue-green travertine pools for which the stream is known. An oasis in every sense of the word, Fossil Creek is a true haven for fish and wildlife. Nine species of imperiled native warm-water fish inhabit the stream, and river otters, bats, frogs, beavers and a plethora of bird species all rely on its life-giving waters.

People have also come to rely on Fossil Creek. It offers cool respite from the desert heat and has become a popular destination for swimmers, sunbathers, hikers, bird watchers and anglers. The lands that WRC is conveying to the U.S. Forest Service will be crucial in helping the agency manage recreation and reduce human impact on this sensitive desert ecosystem. ■



WRC successfully conserved the last remaining unprotected reach of Fossil Creek, one of only two Wild and Scenic Rivers in Arizona.

## Kennedy Creek

Washington

that this special stream stays healthy for salmon and remains a vibrant outdoor classroom for school communities throughout the south Puget Sound.

Our efforts at Kennedy Creek are crucial. Chum salmon once returned to Puget Sound by the millions. By the mid-20th century, runs in Kennedy Creek had been reduced to an average of 100 fish a year. Thanks to local recovery and conservation efforts, those numbers were dramatically improved. WRC's acquisition will ensure this vital stream is protected and that these gains are permanent.

Kennedy Creek also supports runs of coho and pink salmon, coastal and resident cutthroat trout and winter steelhead, as well as diverse wildlife. Salmon carcasses provide important marine-derived nutrients to the surrounding riparian and estuarine ecosystems, including 120 animal species, from northern river otter and bobcat to red-tailed hawk.

By conserving Kennedy Creek, WRC will preserve not just a great salmon run, but an entire ecosystem that depends on the health of its fish. In the process, we can help guarantee that children are always able to experience this outdoor classroom, where they can learn the importance of rivers and salmon not just to the Puget Sound, but to the world. ■



From a footbridge over a Kennedy Creek tributary, children experience firsthand the life cycle of chum salmon, which return each fall to spawn, die and return vital nutrients to the stream and forest.

# WRC to Conserve More Bird Habitat in the San Luis Valley



The upper Rio Grande in Colorado provides vital habitat for a diverse array of wildlife. WRC is working in the San Luis Valley to conserve this iconic stream and its principal tributaries.

## Upper Rio Grande

Colorado

Teeming with wild trout in its upper reaches, the Conejos River flows 93 miles from the San Juan Mountains to the San Luis Valley, where it flows into the Rio Grande, roughly 11 miles downstream from the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge. The Conejos is the largest and most important tributary to the Rio Grande in Colorado, providing vital inflows and crucial riparian habitat for waterfowl, migratory birds and other wildlife. This summer, Western Rivers Conservancy purchased a 1,300-acre ranch at the confluence of the two rivers, directly across the Rio Grande from a larger property we purchased earlier this year. The acquisition is a key component of WRC's broader effort to conserve the upper Rio Grande and its finest tributaries.

The property we acquired this summer, known as the Olguin Ranch, includes reaches of both rivers and supports great numbers of waterfowl, including teal, mallard and Canada goose, as well as bald eagle and a wide variety of other birds. The ranch possesses exceptional

wetlands and provides key habitat for imperiled birds like the endangered south-western willow flycatcher and threatened yellow billed cuckoo.

Now that WRC has purchased the ranch, we are working with our local partner, the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RIGHT), to place a conservation easement on the property. This will ensure the riparian areas are protected for fish and wildlife, while allowing agricultural practices to continue as they have for over five generations. Small, working ranches and farms are the base of the region's agricultural economy and the cornerstone of the valley's heritage.

Our efforts to conserve the Conejos and Rio Grande were recently bolstered by a major grant from Great Outdoors Colorado, which awarded \$2.8 million to WRC and RIGHT. Thanks to GOCO's support, we will be able to conserve over 28 square miles of fish and wildlife habitat in the San Luis Valley and provide passive public access to the Rio Grande in an area where there is almost no river access to speak of. ■

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