

Riverlands

FALL 2017 NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY ISSUE 39

New Access to Hidden Gem in Southern Colorado



This summer, in partnership with the Rio Grande National Forest, Western Rivers Conservancy permanently conserved 368 acres along Colorado's Rio de los Piños, a tributary to the Rio Grande and an outstanding Rocky Mountain trout stream.

Rio de los Piños

Colorado

Nestled in the eastern foothills of the South San Juan Mountains, just a dozen miles from Chama, New Mexico, the Rio de los Piños is often overshadowed by the nearby Conejos River when it comes to fishing. This is partially due to the fact that accessing the river's most attractive fly water is a challenge along most of its length. That changed this summer when Western Rivers Conservancy acquired 368 acres along the

Los Piños, just off Highway 17, near Cumbres Pass. WRC then conveyed the land to the Rio Grande National Forest, creating new access to an angler's paradise and ensuring permanent protection of this important stretch of the Los Piños River.

Born at 10,000 feet in a series of pristine, alpine lakes near the Continental Divide, the Rio de Los Piños tumbles several thousand feet over a stretch of 40 miles, crossing the

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This Issue:

Rio de los Piños, CO

368 acres forever conserved along a prime Colorado trout stream

Blue Creek & the Klamath, CA

WRC raises \$5M for Blue Creek through carbon offsets sales

Chehalis River, WA

New project will complete the Chehalis River Surge Plain Natural Area Preserve

John Day River, OR

WRC launches new effort to protect five more miles along critical John Day tributary

Sandy River, OR

Another success for fish, wildlife and people on a tributary to Oregon's Sandy River



Another Win for the John Day

Forty-four miles upstream from Cottonwood Canyon State Park, Thirtymile Creek enters the John Day River at the heart of a spectacular river canyon. As the largest tributary to the lower river, the creek provides reliable, cold water and crucial spawning and rearing habitat for wild summer steelhead, producing more of these threatened fish than all other tributaries to the lower river combined. Simply put, without Thirtymile Creek, lower John Day steelhead—a unique Columbia Basin run—would be hard pressed to survive.

Thirtymile Creek is a key component of Western Rivers Conservancy's long-term commitment to the John Day River. In 2014, we acquired the creek's lower four miles when we purchased the Rattray Ranch. We are now working with the BLM to conserve this reach of the stream and secure a rare public access road to the spectacular and largely inaccessible river canyon. Last month, we expanded our efforts when we signed a contract to acquire 3,093 acres of the Campbell Ranch, which spans five additional miles of the creek, immediately upstream.

Like the Rattray Ranch, this property will be the site of extensive habitat restoration to benefit the John Day's imperiled fish and wildlife, and it includes riparian stands, native grasslands and excellent sagebrush steppe habitat. More than 2,000 acres of upland agricultural lands will remain with the Campbell family, who will continue to work the land.

Together, the Rattray and Campbell properties will allow for meaningful protection and restoration of the lower nine miles of Thirtymile Creek—a big win not just for the John Day's steelhead, but for everyone.



WRC is working to improve the integrity of the Chehalis River Surge Plain Natural Area Preserve, the largest and best tidal surge plain wetland in Washington, with crucial habitat for multiple species of salmon and steelhead.

WRC to Help Complete Preserve at Mouth of the Chehalis River

Chehalis River Surge Plain

Washington

The Chehalis River drains a massive area of western Washington, forming the largest river basin in the state, after the Columbia. Fed by rivers and streams that flow from the Cascade foothills, Willapa Hills and Olympic Mountains, the Chehalis eventually drains into Grays Harbor on the Pacific, where it forms the largest, highest-quality tidal surge plain in Washington. Here, where salt water from the Pacific surges inland with the tide to meet the freshwater of the Chehalis River, a diverse and highly productive wetland ecosystem is formed.

In the surge plain, sheltered sloughs provide crucial habitat for spring and fall Chinook, coho, chum, steelhead, river otter, beaver and the endemic Olympic mudminnow. Dense stands of Sitka spruce and western red cedar, draped with mosses and lichens, are home to bald eagle, osprey and other birdlife. And throughout the year, hikers and paddlers visit the area to explore the tidal channels by foot, canoe and kayak.

In 1989, Washington Department of Natural Resources created the Chehalis River Surge Plain Natural Area Preserve to protect this important

ecosystem. Yet, for nearly 30 years, the preserve has been incomplete, with 1,500 acres at the heart of it privately owned and unprotected. Western Rivers Conservancy, in partnership with Weyerhaeuser, has taken the first steps toward completing the preserve and ensuring the lasting integrity of this extraordinary place. This summer, WRC signed an agreement to purchase 1,472 acres of Weyerhaeuser forestlands, which will be permanently protected when conveyed to WDNR to complete the Natural Area Preserve.

WRC's efforts will benefit the river, its wildlife and the thousands of people who visit each year by completing the original vision for the preserve and eliminating the threats of development and timber harvest. The project will conserve more than six miles of river frontage, including exceptional water-trail systems through three separate sloughs. Canoe and water trails will be joined to upland parcels, and both scientific and educational activities will be enhanced. And once WDNR acquires these lands, the Chehalis River Surge Plain will be protected not in fragments, but in its entirety. ■

Sequestering Carbon Helps Save Blue Creek

Blue Creek & the Klamath River

California

In an era of waning funding for land conservation, Western Rivers Conservancy has added a unique tool to its conservation finance repertoire: carbon offsets. In September, on the cusp of fully protecting the most important cold-water tributary to California's lower Klamath River, WRC brought its first carbon offsets to market. The sale generated over \$5 million to help protect more than 47,000 acres of land along Blue Creek and the Klamath River, while keeping the very forest that produces those offsets standing and healthy. That is precisely what is needed to ensure Blue Creek stays cold and clean for the Klamath River and the remarkable fish and wildlife it sustains.

When WRC set out to create a salmon sanctuary at Blue Creek in partnership with the Yurok people, we knew we had a long road ahead. Looking at a price tag of more than \$60 million, WRC began raising funds from multiple sources, including foundations, individuals, state programs and nontraditional private

In September, on the cusp of fully conserving the most important cold-water tributary to the lower Klamath River, WRC will bring its first carbon offsets to market.

sources like New Markets Tax Credits. In 2013, we set out to generate additional project funding by selling carbon offsets through California's Cap and Trade Program. Because trees absorb carbon, WRC and the Yurok can sequester carbon credits by keeping forests standing. We can then sell the credits on California's carbon market, raising money for our conservation efforts at Blue Creek while rejuvenating old-growth forest habitat in the process.

For WRC—and our rivers—the beauty of selling carbon offsets lies in its layered benefits. At Blue Creek, it delivers capital for WRC's conservation work, invigorates

the Yurok economy and ensures the permanence of mature, healthy forests that rivers need. And because California's offset program was created to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and slow climate change, rivers benefit yet again.

Creating a sanctuary at Blue Creek will protect an all-important, cold-water refuge for salmon and steelhead, which need the stream's cool water to complete their migration up the Klamath to spawn. Our work to protect Blue Creek is part of—and crucial to—a much larger effort to improve the health of the greater Klamath River and ensure its salmon survive. There is much to be done, yet even in light of the challenges this river faces, there is hope. It lies with the countless people working to save the Klamath, and it lies with Blue Creek, the cold-water lifeline to the entire system. By preserving the forests that are so vital to Blue Creek, and generating capital in the process, WRC is ensuring this crucial stream is protected in its entirety, forever. ■



WRC, in partnership with the Yurok Tribe, is selling carbon offsets to help finance our effort to fully conserve Blue Creek, the most important cold-water tributary to the lower Klamath River.



STEVE TERRILL

Rio de los Piños
CONTINUED FROM COVER

Colorado-New Mexico Border twice before meeting the Rio Grande in the scenic San Luis Valley. Below Cumbres Pass, the river's rapid descent slows to a meander across the valley floor, hemmed by lush, open meadows and forests of spruce and fir. A historic narrow-gauge steam train trundles along the river, offering passengers picture-perfect views and adding to the valley's charm.

Like many near-pristine slices of the West, portions of the valley have been subdivided for second home development. However, the majority of Los Piños frontage remains undeveloped. WRC is buying this land to preserve the remainder of the valley's unbroken, natural beauty while ensuring that its tremendous recreational opportunities remain a public resource for all.

WRC purchased the 368-acre property from a family with deep, multi-generational ties to the San Luis Valley who wished to see their former summer pasture lands permanently preserved as open space. The family found a solution working with WRC, which will ensure the lands are protected in perpetuity. Directly to the north, WRC is also negotiating purchase of a second parcel from the family. Together, these holdings will protect nearly 650 acres and more than a mile of the Rio de los Piños, including one of the most accessible reaches of the river. The properties include high-altitude wetlands and a natural pond, which host migratory waterfowl in the

San Luis Valley Conservation Fund

In 2015, WRC, the LOR Foundation, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust and Colorado Open Lands created the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund. The Fund is a collaborative effort to bolster local conservation efforts in Colorado's scenic San Luis Valley and to preserve the region's rich cultural heritage, all while enhancing livability for Valley communities. Our work on the Rio de los Piños is part of this effort.

SUCCESS on the Sandy

Western Rivers Conservancy's most recent victory on Oregon's Sandy River has delivered more riverland conservation and outdoor adventure on the flanks of Mount Hood. Near the town of Brightwood, we preserved 186 acres along North Boulder Creek, including some of the most important habitat in the entire basin for coho salmon and winter steelhead. Both coho and steelhead are threatened species, and habitat preservation is vital to their long-term survival.

The property also features the only public access to the Sandy Ridge Trail System, one of the best mountain biking trail systems ever designed on public lands. The project will ensure upwards of 150,000 annual visitors can continue to enjoy this "roller coaster in the woods," which has become a model for ecosystem-compatible mountain biking trail design.

WRC purchased the property and conveyed it to the Bureau of Land Management in September. The land adjoins other protected BLM lands, including WRC's recent acquisition along Little Joe Creek, another important fish-bearing tributary. Together these two projects protect over 300 acres, more than a mile of critical salmon habitat, and significant portions of the expanding Sandy Ridge Trail System. The bike trails, located away from the river, feature innovative designs that limit erosion and sedimentation, reduce pooling and ruts and minimize impact on the ecosystem.

Protection of the North Boulder Creek property comes at a celebratory moment. This year marks a decade since the Sandy became wild and free once again, after Portland General Electric (PGE) blew Marmot Dam into a cloud of dust and rubble. In partnership with PGE, WRC committed to conserving 4,500 acres of habitat—a goal we have now exceeded. The result is a conservation corridor tracing 14 miles of the Sandy and its tributaries, protecting salmon, steelhead and wildlife habitat and ensuring public access to one of the Northwest's favorite wild river playgrounds. ■

spring and fall. The land is also home to Rocky Mountain elk, black bear, mule deer and mountain lion.

While some anglers know the Los Piños for its abundant brown and rainbow trout, the river also has excellent habitat for native Rio Grande cutthroat, which once thrived here. Several of the Los Piños' remote tributaries serve as refuges for populations of these native fish. Conservation efforts provide new hope that this endemic cold-water species may once again inhabit the Rio de los Piños.

Our work on the Los Piños is part of WRC's larger strategy in the San Luis Valley, where we are preserving thousands of acres of meadows, oxbows, riparian corridors and prime habitat for several imperiled fish species and more than 200 species of birds. Taken together, these efforts will preserve important tributaries to the Rio Grande in areas where precious little riverfront is accessible to the public. ■



RUSS SCHNITZER

A WRC supporter and her son waded through a stretch of the Rio de los Piños that was formerly closed to the public. The river teems with trout, and this reach is now open to all.

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