

Riverlands

SUMMER 2020 NEWS FROM WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY ISSUE 46

In Big Sur, a Big Win for Fish, Wildlife and the Esselen People



GREAT AMERICAN
OUTDOORS ACT

Here to Stay!

In August, the Great American Outdoors Act was signed into law! This permanently authorizes the Land and Water Conservation Fund at its full funding level—\$900 million annually—for the first time ever. This is great news for WRC and our rivers. LWCF is a critical funding source for many WRC projects, including McDonald's Ferry Ranch (p3) and South Fork Antelope Creek (p4).



DOUG STANKLEY

This summer, Western Rivers Conservancy and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County permanently protected the 1,199-acre Adler Ranch and a mile of the Little Sur River, a pristine steelhead stream on California's Central Coast, in the heart of Big Sur.

Little Sur River

California

The majestic Big Sur Coast has a new sanctuary for fish and wildlife along a mile of the Little Sur River, the result of our recent accomplishment in partnership with the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County.

In July, Western Rivers Conservancy transferred 1,199 acres of old-growth redwoods, rolling oak woodlands, chaparral forest and redwood-shaded riverbanks to the Esselen Tribe. Located just beyond earshot of Big Sur's crashing waves, and with sweeping views of the sea, the property is the first land returned to the Esselen people since the Spanish displaced their ancestors 250 years ago.

Our efforts protected a critical stretch of the Little Sur River, which is considered one of the most important summer steelhead streams remaining on California's Central Coast. Historically, steelhead returns on the Central Coast numbered in the tens of thousands, but today it is likely that fewer than 100 fish return to the Little Sur River each year. Protecting healthy, functioning streams like the Little Sur, which are the last real refuges for these powerful, ocean-going fish, is critical to their long-term survival as a species.

The ranch also has ideal terrain for endangered California condors, which were recently reintroduced to

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TYLER ROEMER

PROTECTED! Nisqually River

Just 20 miles southeast of Olympia, Washington, WRC and the Nisqually Land Trust have completed an effort to conserve a beautiful and critically important stretch of the Nisqually River.

The Nisqually is a vital salmon and steelhead river and one of the least-developed streams flowing into the south Puget Sound. Bookended by two federally protected areas—Mount Rainier National Park at its headwaters and the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge at its mouth—the Nisqually supports an impressive seven native salmon species, including threatened fall Chinook, winter steelhead and bull trout, runs that all remain very fragile.

While the Nisqually is protected along much of its length, the lower river is pressured on all sides by residential growth. When one of the largest private reaches of the lower river was listed for sale in 2019, WRC negotiated its purchase and eliminated the risk of 34 homes being built along the river.

The Nisqually Tribe, which has lead salmon recovery efforts throughout the basin, and the Nisqually Land Trust, which owns land upstream and downstream of the property, have sought to conserve this parcel for years. It's one of the most extensive intact stretches of river bank along the lower river and features side channels for rearing salmon and a healthy riverside forest. In late August, that vision became a reality when we successfully transferred the land to the trust for permanent protection.

That the Nisqually remains largely intact is a testament to the tribe and generations of river guardians, like tribal activist Billy Frank Jr. himself, who have stood up for the river and its salmon. WRC is proud to build on that legacy of stewardship with the completion of this effort. ■



WRC expanded the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, adding vital wetlands and river habitat to the refuge and improving water quality in the marsh—all outcomes that will benefit the Williamson River and Klamath system.

Major Boost for Fish and Birds in the Klamath's Headwaters

Williamson River

Oregon

In southern Oregon, Western Rivers Conservancy has successfully conserved three miles of the famed Williamson River and expanded the globally important Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge!

In April, WRC conveyed the 2,200-acre Timmerman Ranch along the upper Williamson to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As a result, the ranch is protected forever within the national wildlife refuge, and the property's key water rights will be managed for the benefit of fish, wildlife and the Klamath River system as a whole. The Williamson provides critical cold water to the Klamath Marsh and eventually feeds Upper Klamath Lake, the headwaters of the Klamath River.

The property's rich wetlands, and the superb reach of the Williamson that flows through the ranch, lie at the heart of some of the finest migratory bird habitat in the West. Tens of thousands of birds rely on the area each year as they migrate north and south along the Pacific Flyway, including northern pintail, cinnamon teal, sandhill crane, trumpeter swan, American white pelican, the rare yellow rail, and huge concentrations of wintering bald eagles.

While the refuge is famed for its bird life, the Williamson itself is legendary for its scale-tipping rainbow trout, which will benefit from the improved water conditions this effort delivers. So will two endangered sucker fish and the state-sensitive Miller Lake lamprey. In the property's uplands, ponderosa pine forests support elk, pronghorn and the state-sensitive American fisher.

Now that we've conveyed the ranch to the national wildlife refuge, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners can begin restoration work along this stretch of the Williamson, sending more and higher-quality water into the marsh, which ultimately helps heal the Klamath system from the top down.

In a region fraught with water challenges, this project is a win-win for all who depend on a healthy Klamath River: the Klamath Tribes, the agricultural community, anglers, birders, hunters and others. Most of all, this effort will improve conditions for the fish and wildlife of this remarkable river system, which sustains some of the most abundant bird life in the West and some of the greatest salmon runs on Earth. ■



Preserving History, Habitat and Public Access on the John Day River

John Day River

Oregon

History, habitat and recreational access converge in our latest effort on the lower John Day River.

This summer, WRC purchased the 4,100-acre McDonald's Ferry Ranch, located at the historic site where the Oregon Trail crossed the John Day. We are now working to convey the ranch to the Bureau of Land Management for inclusion within the Wild and Scenic John Day River corridor. The effort will permanently protect thousands of acres of wide-open sagebrush country, three miles of John Day River frontage and the lowest viable boating take-out on the John Day.

Steeped in history, McDonald's Ferry Ranch is named for an old ferry that carried Oregon Trail pioneers across the shallow river ford of the John Day. Even today, old wheel ruts are visible on the ground, carved into the desert floor by the countless wagons that carried people west to the Willamette Valley in the 1800s.

The native grasslands and sagebrush remaining on the property are part of a larger landscape that is disappearing across the West, one that supports an array of animals facing significant habitat loss. They include burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, grasshopper sparrow, loggerhead shrike, sagebrush lizard,



Western Rivers Conservancy's most recent acquisition on the John Day River will safeguard the last viable boating take-out on the lower river while conserving over three miles of the mainstem John Day.

pronghorn, mule deer and Oregon's largest herd of bighorn sheep.

The project will secure permanent access to the last viable boater take-out on the lower John Day, which makes the 10-mile float from the northern edge of Cottonwood Canyon State Park possible. Below the ranch, the river winds into a long roadless reach and then careens over the un-runnable Tumwater Falls. People will also have access to the property's gentle three-mile reach of the John Day and the arid, rolling uplands above the river.

Conserving McDonald's Ferry Ranch provides a unique opportunity to breathe new life into a once-productive steelhead tributary called Grass Valley Canyon Creek, which flows for two-plus

miles through the property. Decades ago, the creek's lower channel was completely relocated, limiting steelhead spawning in the creek. Now WRC, the BLM and our local partners are in the position to restore the original channel, replant native vegetation and enhance in-stream habitat for these imperiled fish.

Once complete, McDonald's Ferry will be the fifth ranch on the Lower John Day that WRC will have conserved since 2013, protecting over 31 miles of the mainstem and 67 square miles of land, all of it now accessible to the public. As at Thirtymile Creek and Cottonwood Canyon upstream, protecting these lands will benefit the fish and wildlife of eastern Oregon for generations to come. ■



Once WRC's efforts at McDonald's Ferry are complete, hikers, anglers, hunters, birders and others will have new recreational access to the lower John Day.



Little Sur River
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Big Sur and depend on ridgetop grasslands and old-growth redwoods for feeding and nesting.

Located just beyond earshot of Big Sur's crashing waves, and with sweeping views of the sea, the property is the first land returned to the Esselen people since the Spanish displaced their ancestors 250 years ago.

As throughout Big Sur, the redwoods on the property are some of the southernmost stands on Earth. These resilient trees are uniquely adapted to Big Sur's warmer, arid climate and, in the face of climate change, may hold the genetic key to sustaining groves up north, where redwoods are more vulnerable to hotter, drier weather. At the landscape scale, the property fills a significant

habitat link between protected U.S. Forest Service land on the coast and the main body of Los Padres National Forest inland.

With the completion of the project, the Esselen people now have nearly two square miles of Big Sur, at the heart of the tribe's ancestral homeland, to call their own. Although this is a fraction of the tribe's former territory, it is enough to allow the Esselen to rebuild a traditional village site, reinvigorate tribal culture, conduct traditional ceremonies, provide educational opportunities to tribal members, and host events to teach visitors about tribal culture and history. The property faces Pico Blanco, a mountain in the Santa Lucia Range that the tribe holds sacred.

In this magnificent place, where condors soar over ancient redwoods and some of the last pristine steelhead streams still flow freely to the sea, WRC's and the Esselen's partnership is a landmark accomplishment. The completion of this project will benefit wild steelhead, Big Sur's imperiled wildlife and the tribe's own cultural resurgence for generations to come. ■

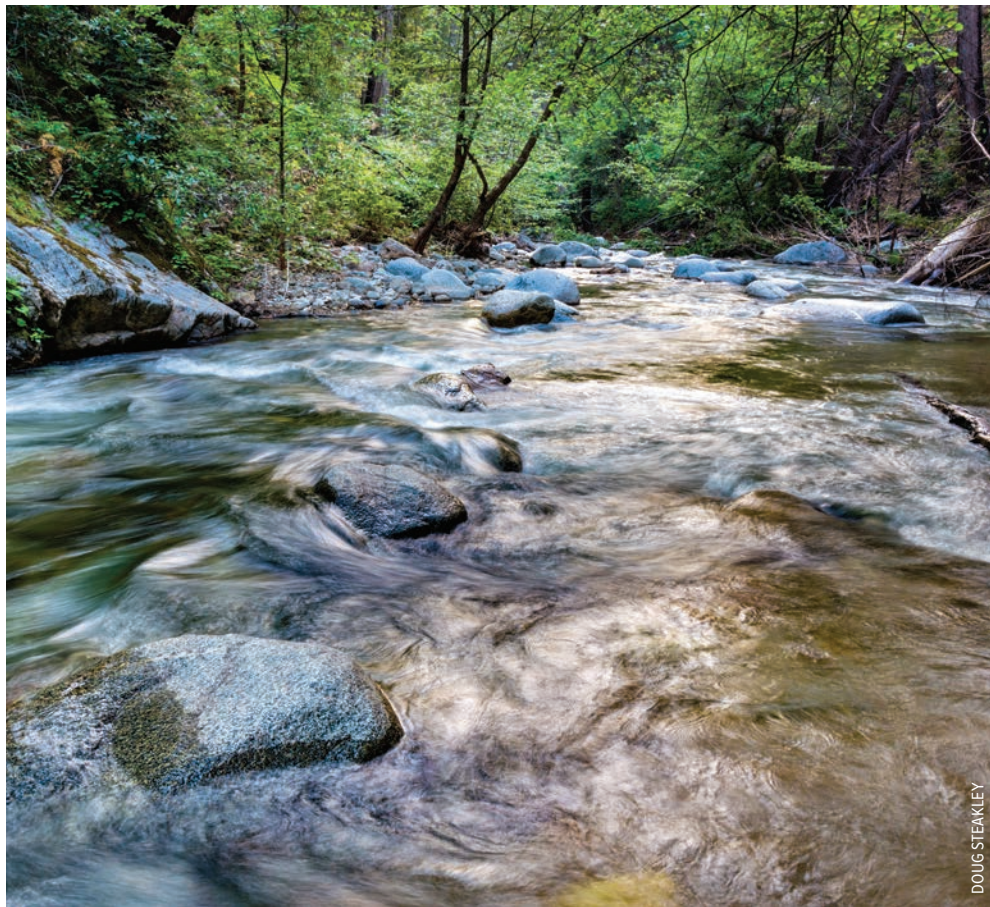
SUCCESS! South Fork Antelope Creek

On the western flanks of Mount Lassen, WRC has notched a key victory for native fish in California's Sacramento River system. In June, we conveyed 1,150 acres to the Lassen National Forest and preserved two vulnerable miles of South Fork Antelope Creek, a top-tier nursery for wild salmon and steelhead.

Flowing from Mount Lassen, the near-pristine South Fork feeds Antelope Creek, which joins the Sacramento River near the city of Red Bluff. Antelope Creek is one of six streams designated within the Sacramento Salmon Stronghold, a suite of rivers that offer the best hope for the survival of spring Chinook, winter steelhead (both threatened) and fall Chinook within the Sacramento system.

Located near the Ishi Wilderness, the newly conserved property supports more species of wildlife than just about any area of the Lassen National Forest, and its habitats range from old-growth ponderosa pine woodlands to live oak savannas and grasslands. As a testament to the property's habitat, a wolf called OR-7 (above)—the first wolf documented in California in decades—foraged for an entire winter there. Along with the Tehama Wildlife Area downstream, the property also provides a home for the giant Tehama herd of migratory black-tailed deer, black bear, peregrine falcon, western pond turtle and many other animals.

An accomplishment four years in the making, the project will help ensure that South Fork Antelope Creek continues to give new life to native fish runs. There may even be an opportunity to extend a trail from the Tehama Wildlife Area and improve recreational access for hikers, equestrians and kayakers into the national forest. ■



The Little Sur River is considered the Central Coast's most important spawning stream for threatened South-Central California Coast steelhead, which once returned to this stretch of the California coastline by the tens of thousands.

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