FEATURING:

PROTECTING CRANE HABITAT IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY
NEW CONSERVATION SUCCESSES!
IMPROVING AND RESTORING THE LAND
AN INTERVIEW WITH RUTH AND KEN WRIGHT
COLORADO’S WATER: FINDING NEW WAYS TO SHARE
JOIN US FOR THESE UPCOMING EVENTS ON THE LAND!

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Dear Friend of Colorado Open Lands,

For those of us inspired by the land, it almost goes without saying that much of what makes a place special is the water that shapes the land. Whether the irrigation that simultaneously nourishes a crop and provides critical wildlife benefits, our favorite stream that supports trout populations, or the wetlands that support migrating birds and recharge our groundwater – over and over the stories of our water, wildlife and open lands continue to intersect.

Nowhere is that intersection more obvious than in the San Luis Valley where the role of water, wildlife and open space meet to support one of Colorado’s most iconic species – the Greater Sandhill Crane. For centuries this magnificent species has depended on the land and water of this valley as an important stopover for spring and fall migration. The condition of the land and water in the San Luis Valley, which determines the quality and quantity of food for this species, literally impacts the health of the Crane population from southern New Mexico to the Canadian border. For this reason, we are proud to be building a partnership with San Luis Valley farmers to ensure sufficient water and open land for these Cranes, while working to support sustainable agriculture in this community.

As you will read, the story of water and wildlife in our land conservation work transects our efforts around the state. From projects in Northern Colorado to the Southern Plains, and Southern Colorado to Denver Metro – water, wildlife and working agriculture are core values in the work we do.

Land conservation is a mission that benefits all Coloradans, from the protection of our iconic vistas and the places where we play, to providing land and plentiful water for local food production and the preservation of our economic prosperity. Colorado Open Lands is proud to play a role in protecting what is special about Colorado, and we are deeply grateful for your support of that work.

With gratitude,

Tony Caligiuri
President and CEO, Colorado Open Lands

LOOKING AHEAD?
CONSIDER INCLUDING COLORADO OPEN LANDS IN YOUR FAMILY’S ESTATE PLANS.
YOUR DESIGNATION TODAY WILL ENSURE A LEGACY OF CONSERVED LAND FOR THE FUTURE.

TO LEARN MORE, CONTACT BRANDY BERTRAM AT 303.988.2373 EXT. 222 OR BBERTRAM@COLORADOOPENLANDS.ORG
You’re shivering in your coat and hat, huddling with your friends to keep warm. The small crowd around you is as quiet as possible, aside from an occasional cough or shifting of weight. It’s dark, but your eyes have adjusted – you’ve been here for hours. You’re sipping your coffee and waiting. Daybreak grows closer, the light a little brighter, and then you hear it – what you’ve been waiting for. Thousands – or even tens of thousands - of Sandhill Cranes have finally arrived in Colorado, as they have every spring for centuries.

The Sandhill Crane is an impressive specimen, standing almost five feet tall, with a wingspan up to six-and-a-half feet. They have relatively bulky, slate-grey bodies atop dark legs and feet, with long, elegant necks and straight beaks, with a tip of red coloring on the crowns of their heads. The birds like to eat cultivated foods such as grain and nest in marshy open wetlands.
Born romantics, Sandhill Cranes mate for life, having selected their partners based on how impressively the males dance. The males leap, bow, and stretch their wings to exhibit virility. Once a juvenile crane hatches, the family unit stays together until the following spring, gathering with other families into enormous communities. During winter and migration times, the families congregate into flocks sometimes numbering into the tens of thousands.

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Specifically, more than 20,000 Sandhill Cranes visit Colorado’s San Luis Valley every year, in the spring and fall. The Valley is an important place for feeding and respite for the birds, as it is home to the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. Perhaps even more importantly, the surrounding area is ripe with farmland and shallow water wetlands. The birds avail themselves of leftover grain left in fields by farmers after their harvest. Without it, the birds may not have the energy to make the trip from their winter habitat in New Mexico and Texas to their summer habitat in the northern U.S. and Canada.

As agricultural markets, practices and land uses change, there has been a possible decline in the availability of grain in the San Luis Valley (SLV) during migration that may have an adverse effect on the birds. The potential loss of critical roost sites due to the new rules and regulations regarding water use in the SLV could affect the historic distribution of wetlands in the valley. The loss of wetlands, combined with the fragmentation and loss of grain production along with the increase of distance between roost sites and feeding sites, could be putting more strain on the birds as they continue their flight northward in the spring and southward in the fall.

There is a lack of baseline data that documents the wetland changes and distribution of cranes feeding in the SLV during both fall and spring migration. Understanding where grain is
available in the SLV, how much, and if different agricultural practices are affecting the carrying capacity of the valley for Sandhill Cranes are questions that are simple to answer and would yield important changes to benefit Sandhill Cranes and the farmers who provide extra food for them.

Colorado Open Lands is piloting a program called Grain for Cranes to take advantage of an opportunity to benefit cranes in the SLV while also recognizing and rewarding the agricultural producers creating this valuable habitat. The program will build upon the past successes of the agricultural community working with government agencies and non-profis to accomplish goals that benefit agriculture, wildlife and natural resources. This project is designed as an incentive program for farmers to leave small portions of their barley crop standing throughout the cranes’ spring and fall migrations. Farmers who keep their barley standing through the fall, winter, and during spring migration from February to March, will be compensated at market rates for the value of the unharvested crop. The success of the program will be determined from baseline data that will be collected and analyzed to show if the birds are visiting the unharvested barley and how many birds do so. Effective use of unharvested grain and high-priority grain fields within ten miles of Monte Vista Wildlife Refuge will be mapped as will the abundance and distribution of grain fields and roosting sites throughout the SLV. The amount and distribution of roosting habitat outside of the Monte Vista Refuge as it relates to feeding sites will be determined as well.

In order to accomplish the goals of the program, a COL Conservation Leaders Fellow will be hired and trained. This Fellow will work to implement the Grain for Cranes project and receive mentoring from all partners involved, producing a trained resource manager in the San Luis Valley that is skilled in the community collaboration model and recognizes the value of diverse partnerships that involve public, private, and non-profit organizations.

The project will be done in partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, MillerCoors, and landowners in the San Luis Valley. We hope to begin this important work in the autumn of 2018.

interested in finding out more or supporting this project?

Call Mari Johnson at 303.988.2373 ext. 212 or mjohnson@coloradoopenlands.org
Colorado Open Lands has partnered with Southern Plains Land Trust (SPLT) to conserve 17,840 acres of the Heartland Ranch located in Bent County, about 25 miles southeast of Las Animas. Heartland Ranch is predominantly covered by shortgrass prairie, an ecosystem recognized as a conservation priority by a multitude of governmental and non-governmental entities, including Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

This vast property provides critical habitat for an assortment of wildlife and plant species, while simultaneously providing passive recreational and educational opportunities for underserved populations in the southeastern part of Colorado. Currently, about 80 bison, 50 longhorn, golden eagles, burrowing owls, badgers, elk, mule deer, pronghorn and many other wildlife species reside on the property. The land is also part of Southern Colorado’s annual tarantula migration. Great Outdoors Colorado awarded a grant to cover a portion of the transaction expenses.

Southern Plains Land Trust owns and manages the land, and Colorado Open Lands holds the easements on Heartland Ranch.
BROWN RANCH - PERMANENTLY PROTECTED!

We're proud to work with partners like Reeves and Betsy Brown, 2010 winners of Palmer Land Trust's Friends of Open Space Award. The Browns are strong local advocates for conservation and have recently added an additional 5,000 acres to the 6,250 acres of their Ranch already under easement with Colorado Open Lands.

3R Ranch is located southwest of Pueblo, on the east side of the Wet Mountains near Beulah. In an area experiencing subdivision development as weekend getaways for Front Range dwellers, this 11,250 acre working ranch is a unique gem. The ranch is used primarily for cattle production and guided hunting, and the Browns are celebrated for their holistic practices to improve the rangeland and habitat. The ranch contains 2.5 miles of the St. Charles River and 2.2 miles of Spring Branch, all supporting surrounding wetlands. Black bear, elk, deer, and wild turkey make their home here.

KINGFISHER POINT - ACREAGE ADDED!

In October 2017, Colorado Open Lands worked with the City of Fort Collins to add 46 acres to the conservation easement protecting the Kingfisher Point Natural Area. This publicly accessible land in the heart of Fort Collins is available for recreation opportunities like hiking, angling, and birding. The new acreage includes multiple ponds which provide connectivity to the Cache la Poudre River and habitat for wildlife. Kingfisher Point now spans 71 contiguous acres of protected land for residents and visitors of Fort Collins.
In December, COL protected 290 acres of Aspenwood Evans Ranch, located in the heart of the Front Range mountains of southeast Clear Creek County, close to the base of Mt. Evans. The land includes summer and winter range for elk, mule deer, wild turkey, mountain lion, black bear, and moose. Colorado Parks and Wildlife reports that it is also potential habitat for lynx, which are classified as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. It also contains over a half mile of two creeks and over ten acres of wetlands. The property is the historical ranch of John Evans, the second territorial governor of Colorado.

Also in December, COL permanently protected an additional 270 acres of Barr Farm, a working cattle ranch in Pueblo County, for a total of nearly 850 conserved acres on this ranch. The property is highly visible from I-25, making it a great example of how conserved lands can provide a scenic buffer in an area with high development pressure. The land is habitat to bald eagle, elk, pronghorn, mule deer, mountain lion, and fox.
IMPROVING AND RESTORING THE LAND

As longtime friends of Colorado Open Lands know well, helping landowners put conservation easements on their property is just the beginning of our work. Each property needs to be visited by COL staff every year to talk with the owners, monitor the land, and make sure that the terms of the easement are being upheld.

But our commitment to the land goes even deeper than that. Our Stewardship team also helps landowners improve the quality of their land for agriculture and wildlife. Last year, we completed two improvement projects, and this coming year we will launch our most ambitious restoration project ever!

SWIFT PONDS

In December, Great Outdoors Colorado funding helped a volunteer crew eradicate Russian olive and other invasive plant species on more than 160 acres of Swift Ponds in Larimer County, the home of Colorado Youth Outdoors. The project also reduced the likelihood of the trees reseeding downstream by removing an upstream stand of Russian olive. Removing Russian olive and other invasive plant species on the property helps the native plant population recover, protect the water supply, and improve habitat and water access for wildlife. The project received a $41,700 Youth Corps grant and a $24,890 restoration grant from GOCO.

PREWITT RESERVOIR

The southern shore of Prewitt Reservoir in northeast Colorado is visited by thousands of waterfowl during annual migrations. However, the shallow areas, which are the most attractive to birds, were being cut off by naturally-occurring dams, discouraging the birds from stopping. In partnership with Ducks Unlimited, COL carefully excavated the material damming the reservoir, creating a natural back-flooding of shallow basins to provide quality habitat for birds and wetland wildlife. Other improvements gave water managers increased flexibility to meet users’ demands without negatively impacting local ranchers or wildlife. This project was made possible by Great Outdoors Colorado and Playa Lakes Joint Venture.

“This project is something we had looked at doing for a long time as we tried to decide how to make Prewitt Reservoir a better bird area. Colorado Open Lands’ hard work made this actually happen.”

– Matt Reddy, Biologist with Ducks Unlimited
RIPARIAN RECONNECT:
RESTORING STREAM BANKS IN SOUTH PARK

Colorado Open Lands has brought together a team of multiple partners and landowners to restore and improve the rivers and streams of the South Platte Headwaters. Our aim is to recover the hydrological, ecological, and habitat benefits of functioning wetlands that have been lost over time due to human influences. Our goal is to restore and enhance 170 acres of wetlands in Park County along the South Fork of the South Platte River and its associated creeks and other waterways.

A total of ten potential project sites have been identified for the first three-year phase of the Riparian Reconnect project. Project planning has begun, with the goal of completing two to three on-the-ground restoration projects each in 2018, 2019, and 2020.

COL carefully selected landowners for this project based on their enthusiasm for open space and restoration and their ability to be effective stewards of newly-improved properties. Each landowner has made some financial contribution toward the work and benefiting landowners are also required to develop and abide by a land management plan with COL staff that will add enforceable restrictions on the property to protect the restoration work.

COL has raised over $600,000 from various partners, including Great Outdoors Colorado, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Park County Land and Water Trust Fund, the Colorado Water Conservation Board and private landowners to implement these projects. This represents our largest and most ambitious restoration project in Colorado Open Lands’ history!

COL recently hosted an outing to Prewitt Reservoir. Pictured are COL staff and friends, along with representatives from Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Great Outdoors Colorado, Ducks Unlimited, and Bird Conservancy of the Rockies.
HONORING RUTH AND KEN WRIGHT
RECIPIENTS OF COLORADO OPEN LANDS’ 2018 GEORGE E. CRANMER AWARD

Individually and collectively Ruth and Ken Wright have shaped the way people understand and value their natural surroundings – both here in Colorado, and far beyond.

Ruth, an environmentalist for years, became a Colorado State Representative in 1980, eventually serving as our second-ever female House Minority Leader. Through her storied career she has served in leadership roles with the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission, the State Health Board, Great Outdoors Colorado, and the Colorado Water Trust.

Ken founded Wright Water Engineers in 1961 and has dedicated his career to the statewide, national, and international study and improvement of water resources in our society. That passion for water quantity, quality, and management has led him and Ruth on an intensive study of water use in ancient civilizations, particularly at the Mesa Verde Cliff Dwellings, and at Machu Picchu in Peru.

Ruth has been a member of the Colorado Open Lands Board of Directors since 2003, and the Wrights have supported COL since 1987. In addition to the numerous honors bestowed upon them by the Republic of Peru, their joint honorary Doctor of Science degrees from the University of Wisconsin, and the Explorers Club’s Lowell Thomas Award in 2011, Colorado Open Lands is pleased to present them with the 27th George E. Cranmer award this coming June at Cheers for Conservation.

Recently, we caught up with Ruth and Ken at Wright Water Engineers where we discussed a wide range of topics centered on their love of the land and water.

How have you seen Colorado change since the 1950s?
Ruth: Enormous growth. We moved to Boulder when the population was 25,000, including the students at the University of Colorado, and now it is more than 100,000. It’s one of the reasons I got involved in protecting our beautiful environment.
Ken: Colorado has become more vibrant and challenging, and we experienced the “Golden Age of Environmental Legislation,” nationally and statewide. In those early years, we saw The Wilderness Act, The Endangered Species Act, and the Water Quality Act. They were passed with bipartisan effort, with both Democratic and Republican Presidents, and the Congress. Generally speaking, it’s been a positive experience, even though downsides exist in terms of traffic, crowding, and density.

What does being a conservationist mean to you?
Ruth: You start out with a love of the land and then really appreciate its flora and fauna. These special places renew our spirit and are good for the soul. They include the truly natural areas, but also the ranches and the farmlands with their vistas of agricultural fields and grazing animals. And then you become passionate about protecting them.
Ken: Conservation is synonymous with good resource management. Conservation includes riparian areas and creeks, and water supply and how it relates to natural surroundings, forest, and grazing lands.
Ruth: Water rights must be included when we think about preserving ranches. Why save the farmland if you can’t
farm it, and it just dries up and becomes a weedy dust bowl? Why save the natural areas if you lose the healthy habitat?

How can an everyday person make a difference in the problems they see in their environment?

Ruth: Well, we’re still a democracy where we elect the decision makers. So it is important to vote for those who share your passions—county commissioners, city council members, boards of water districts, and on up. And then contact them directly or show up at public hearings and speak your mind.

Ken: In simple terms, get involved. By getting involved and you can make a difference. Even on state and federal legislation.

What can ancient Peruvian water management and use teach us in Colorado?

Ken: It teaches us conservation, and that we can get along with little. They would preserve water quality by not inter-mingling the water supply for domestic uses with storm runoff. They kept them separate, which was advanced for the pre-Columbian period. At times, they had relatively little water so they were willing and able to put a lot of time and effort into managing the water supplies.

Ruth: In Peru, water was either scarce or too abundant. They learned to conserve, and on the other hand, they were brilliant in handling storm water. They built sloped terraces and channels, and their drainage systems were marvels of engineering. In America, we still have to learn to develop the Inca way by respecting Mother Nature.

The George E. Cranmer Award was named for a man who sought to accomplish open space goals through vision, tenacity, and force of personality. What have you accomplished that way?

Ruth: At the local level, in 1967 when I was chair of the local environmental group in Boulder, we passed the first sales tax in the nation to buy open space. Later in 1992, I helped implement Governor Roy Romer’s Great Outdoors (GOCO) initiative and was appointed by him to its first Board of Directors. We worked diligently and creatively to implement its vision and goals. With millions of dollars from lottery, it is one of the best programs in the country. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of acres have been protected by grants to land trusts like Colorado Open Lands. However, there have been, and always will be, efforts to divert those funds and hamper the program. Only an alert citizenry, now and in future, can prevent this.

Ken: We admire George Cranmer and his legacy. We need more “Cranmers” to continue in his footsteps.

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GET YOUR TICKETS NOW

for a farm-fresh dinner, auction, and celebration as we present the 27th annual George E. Cranmer Award to Ruth and Ken Wright, for their legacy of protecting Colorado’s land and water!

JUNE 7TH

FIVE FRIDGES FARM, WHEAT RIDGE

More information at ColoradoOpenLands.org/Cheers

Cheers for Conservation

HONORING RUTH AND KEN WRIGHT

Spring 2018 Newsletter 13
Everyone in Colorado knows how precious a resource our water is. Colorado Open Lands is studying new ways for farmers and ranchers to share it with municipal users while still maintaining their land.

When Colorado Open Lands protects a piece of land in partnership with the landowner, the water rights are often also protected in the easement. We do this because the water is essential to protecting the conservation values that make the land worth saving in the first place - whether the water is there to provide habitat for wildlife or to irrigate the land for farming or cattle grazing.

The Colorado Water Plan, published in 2016, makes it clear that to provide enough water for municipal users - what comes out of your tap, showerhead, and hose - some of that water will likely need to come from current agricultural users, primarily in eastern Colorado. Otherwise there simply isn't enough.

The practice is colloquially referred to as “buy-and-dry.” A municipality, usually along the Front Range, purchases a farm or ranch and permanently dries up the land in order to procure that water for its residents. For example, the Colorado Water Conservation Board estimates that the South Platte River basin could lose nearly 50% of its 830,000 irrigated acres by 2050 from buy-and-dry. These water transfers currently occur most often in the South Platte and Arkansas River basins because of the regulatory challenge associated with moving any more water across the Continental Divide.

This type of permanent water transfer can be disastrous for entire rural communities if several farms or ranches are dried in an area because the land often becomes less productive and may no longer support the farm family, who can then not afford new equipment. The ripple effect continues within that local economy.

The first large buy-and-drys occurred in South Park in the 1920s, when Denver Water purchased most of the irrigation water rights for its customers. Then, the cities of Colorado Springs, Pueblo, and Aurora began purchasing senior irrigation rights in the 1950s. When the City of Thornton similarly bought over 100 farms served by the Water Supply and Storage Company along the Cache la Poudre in the 1990s, buy-and-dry became an issue for the South Platte.

Eventually, the practice of buy-and-dry started to raise alarm bells with forward-thinking members of the agricultural community and state water regulators. The rate of water loss on currently irrigated lands could not
only radically and irreparably shift rural communities and economies, but it also has a significant impact on the conservation values that conservation easements are designed to protect.

Well-managed, working agricultural lands contribute to watershed health, and conservation of these private lands and their associated water rights is critical to the maintenance of many native species of Colorado wildlife. Working agricultural lands also help maintain the open spaces and scenic vistas that citizens of, and visitors to, Colorado know and love.

Enter Alternative Transfer Mechanisms (ATMs). These innovative water-sharing agreements are gaining traction as a potential solution to keep productive lands in irrigated agriculture. In its simplest form, an ATM could be a lease agreement between an owner of water rights and a municipality. In drought years, when it may be less productive for a farmer to grow a full crop, the municipality can lease water from the landowner to ensure municipal demand is met. In wetter years, the landowners keep the water and irrigate their land as normal. When coupled with a conservation easement, the lease can provide the flexibility of water use, while the easement provides the certainty that there can never be permanent buy-and-dry.

Colorado Open Lands saw an opportunity for land trusts to play a larger role in facilitating these agreements and so, together with water lawyers and experts, embarked on an ATM guide for the conservation community. The guide is a tool for land trusts to evaluate water-sharing agreements with conservation easements so that important conservation values are upheld, while Colorado’s citizens also get the water they need.

A permanent supply of irrigation water for productive agriculture, even if it is less water, is infinitely more beneficial to conservation than the large-scale complete drying up of irrigated land. ATMs can be the key to that permanence. Coupling conservation easements and ATMs can help the state achieve this balancing act.

This project was completed with support from the Grant Family, the South Platte Basin Roundtable, and the Colorado Water Conservation Board. Co-authors include: Sarah Parmar, Peter Nichols, Jessica Jay, Kevin McCarty, and Todd Doherty. Full report soon available at ColoradoOpenLands.org/Publications

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POTENTIAL CHANGES IN IRRIGATED ACRES BY 2050 - COLORADO WATER PLAN
(numbers represent range of loss)
FARMERS MARKET SEASON IS UPON US!

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