

A large elk with impressive antlers is shown in profile, standing in a body of water. The elk's fur is a rich brown, and its antlers are large and multi-tined. The background is a soft-focus forest with green foliage. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**FEATURING:
WILDLIFE
ON THE MOVE**

**INTRODUCING A NEW FELLOW
RESTORATION IN THE WET MOUNTAINS
AND MORE!**



**FALL 2022
NEWSLETTER**

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A NEW PLAN TO RESTORE LANDSCAPES

Watch our Restoration Program Manager Dirk Rasmussen as he outlines our vision for a new restoration program. The 20-minute video will take you through the need for this work, the philosophy behind it, and what we can hope to achieve with an active restoration program.



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NATIONAL PRESS ON SAN LUIS VALLEY WATER WORK

Colorado Open Lands is pioneering a first-in-the-nation tool and applying it to protect groundwater in the San Luis Valley. See (or listen to) the coverage from National Public Radio that explains how COL has been able to adapt a tool that traditionally protects land to now also protect water in a vulnerable area.



SCAN CODE WITH YOUR
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Dear friend of Colorado Open Lands,

This issue of our newsletter highlights Coloradans on the move.

We all know that as the beautiful fall colors peak and ski season ramps up, there are a lot of people out and about enjoying the outdoors. But those aren't the Coloradans we are talking about here.

We are talking about our furry and feathered fellow residents.

This time of year we witness a great deal of movement out there on the open lands of Colorado. From sandhill cranes and waterfowl heading south through the San Luis Valley, to elk migrating from the mountains down into winter habitat, to black bears looking for a suitable winter den, or even tarantulas on the move on the Eastern Plains – fall is a time of great movement and migration in Colorado.

Here at Colorado Open Lands, we think a lot about this movement as we consider new conservation projects. Much of our work revolves around making sure Colorado wildlife has sufficient places to live and roam. Whether on working farms and ranches or high-country wilderness, nearly all the 657,000 acres that we have worked to conserve provide important places for wildlife at one point or another on their journeys.

Today, Colorado is experiencing remarkable population growth. This can offer great opportunity for people but can also put increased stress and pressure on our wildlife. That's why Colorado Open Lands has intentionally doubled down on our pace of work, and that's why your support and partnership are more important than ever.

Enjoy these stories about some of the wildlife corridors that you help support, plus eight new conservation projects that you made possible this year. And as always, thank you on behalf of the many wildlife species for which you help provide a home.

Sincerely,



Tony Caligiuri

President and CEO



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WILDLIFE ON THE MOVE

The transition from summer to winter in Colorado brings many changes. Leaves change from green to gold. Peaks change from green to white. Bike and fly rod racks change to ski racks. Socializing moves from summer patios to evening fireplaces.

But it's not just the people in Colorado who experience change this time of year. Colorado's wildlife is also on the move as the seasons change. Elk and deer move from high elevation summer habitat to lower winter-feeding grounds. Bears look for hibernation dens. Sandhill cranes and waterfowl journey south. Trout go deep.

It's this movement of wildlife that drives much of the work of Colorado Open Lands. Much like we need roads and highways to move about, wildlife needs open and protected corridors so it can move as well. Some species follow ancient paths that they have used for thousands of years. When these are blocked by development or human impact, it stresses animals and impedes their ability to survive the winter. Some wildlife depend on specific areas to rest in long migrations, and those pockets of protected habitat are crucial to their journey. Even animals that don't migrate with the seasons, like black bear, can require 50 square miles to roam as they forage for food. Or others, like the mountain lion, require territory as large as hundreds of square miles to live and breed.

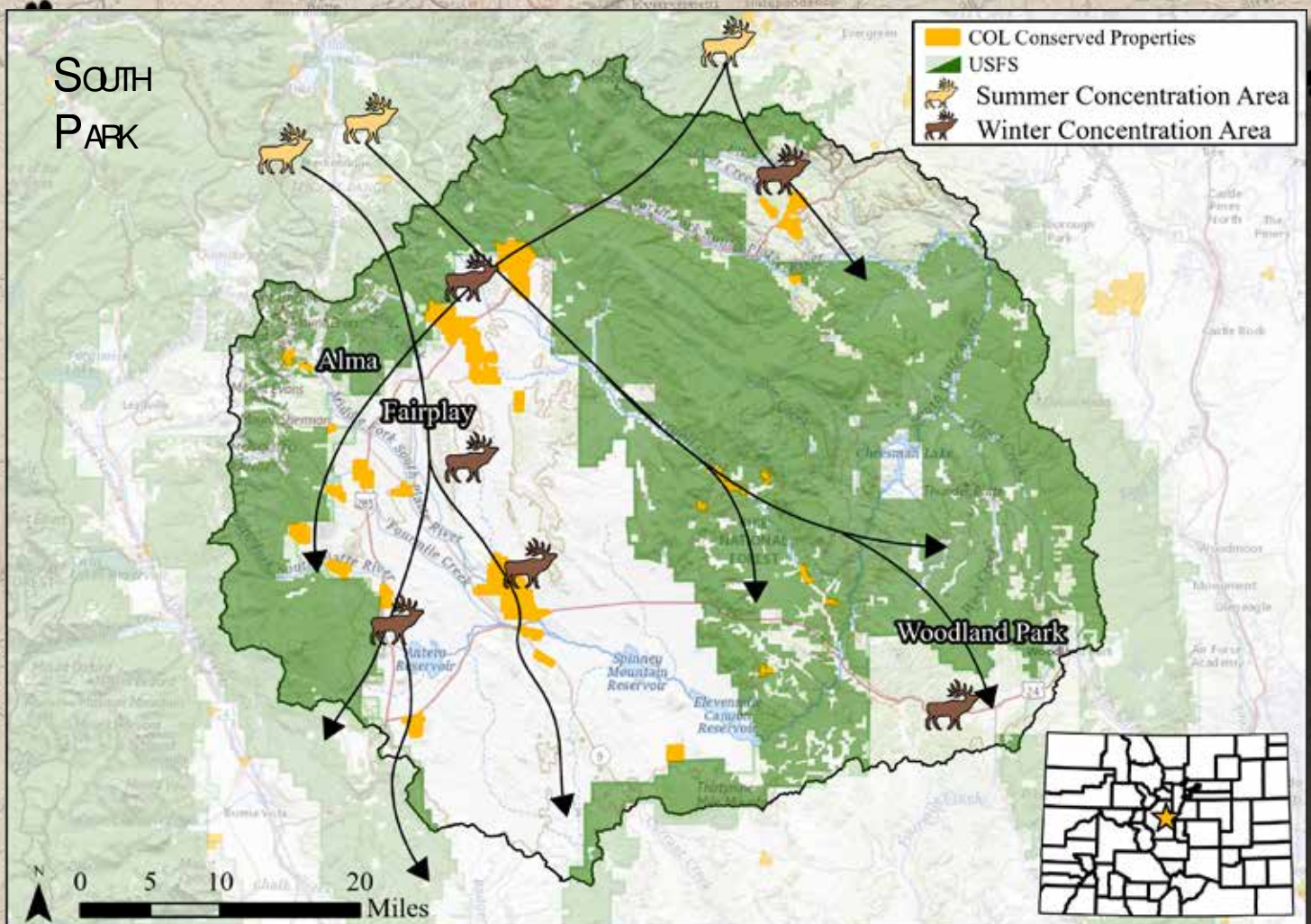
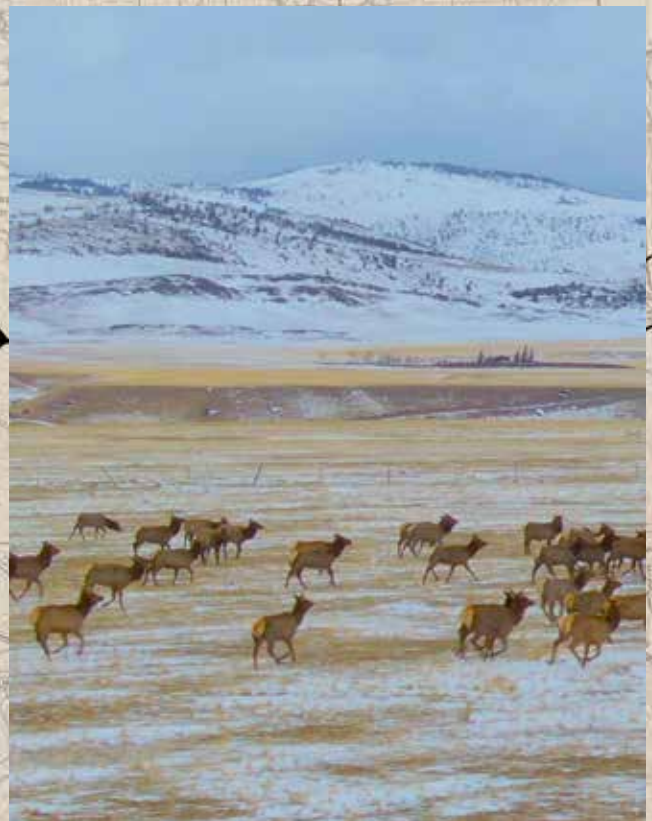
When we at Colorado Open Lands consider new land and water conservation projects, one of the first considerations we make is how impacts on the land affect the ability for wildlife to move and migrate.

As you take in a beautiful Colorado landscape, it's easy to see no more than the stillness of a hillside cloaked in golden aspen or the quiet of a snowy mountain range. But a closer look will reveal a system of wildlife on the move. Thanks to the support of people like you, their journey – and the very survival of wildlife in Colorado – is made a little easier.

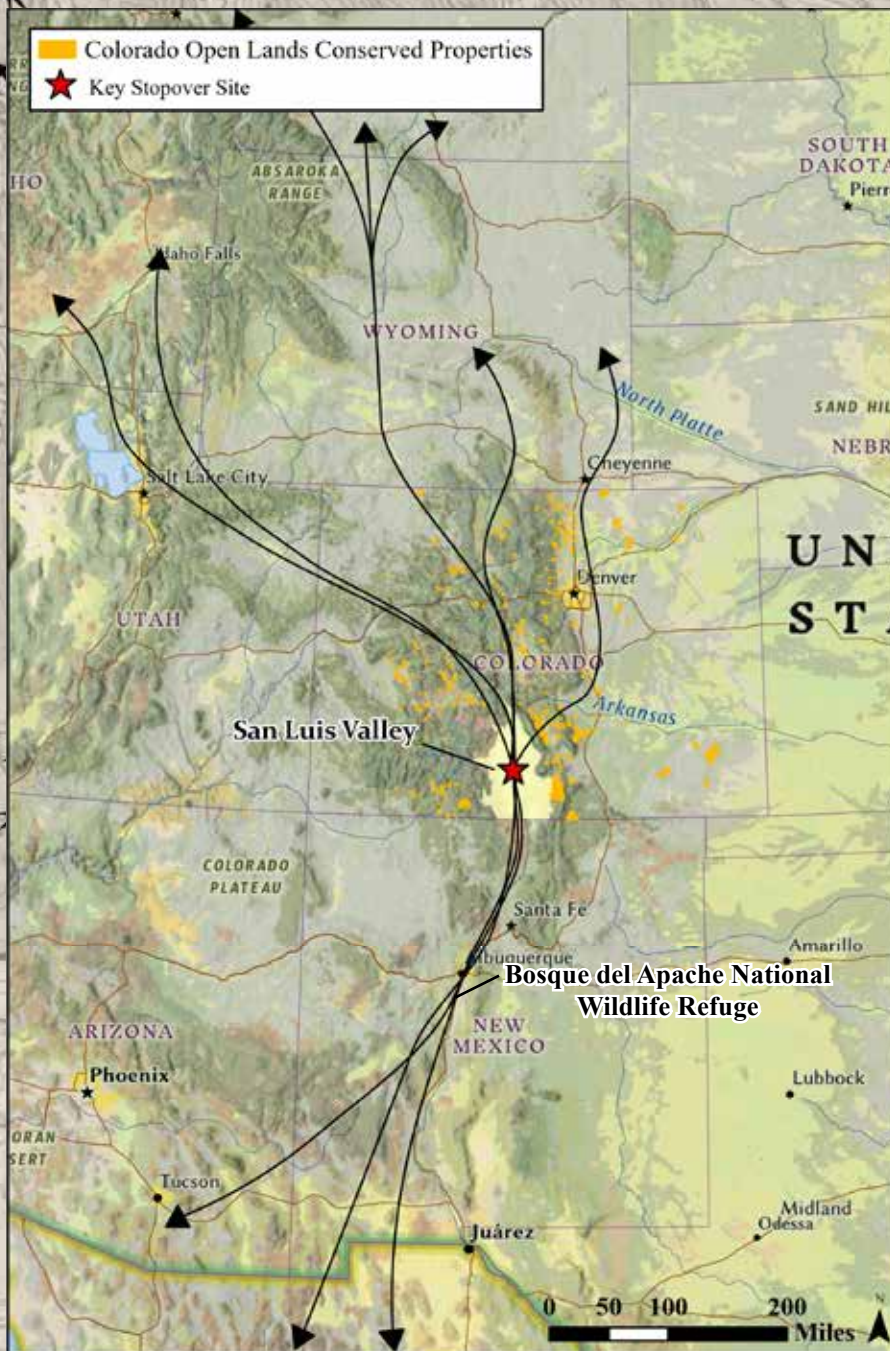
PROTECTING PATHWAYS FOR ELK IN SOUTH PARK

When Colorado Open Lands considers a new conservation project, one of the biggest considerations is how that land fits into the migration corridors for species like elk and mule deer. Many migration corridors have been used by elk for thousands of years, so developing and subdividing these places can often disrupt an elk herd's seasonal migration, reproduction, or ability to find sufficient food in the winter.

An illustration of this focus is Colorado Open Lands' work to secure a significant elk migration corridor through the heart of South Park. Each year, thousands of elk move down from the mountains around Boreas Pass to spend the winter on privately owned lands in the valleys of South Park. In partnership with a network of ranchers and landowners, COL has worked to conserve more than 25,000 acres in South Park to provide a safe migration corridor and winter-feeding grounds for these elk.



Data Source: Colorado Parks & Wildlife Species Mapping, 2022



Data Source: Derived from USFWS, <https://sonoranjv.org/cranes-in-the-arid-southwest/m> Dan Collins, 05/2020

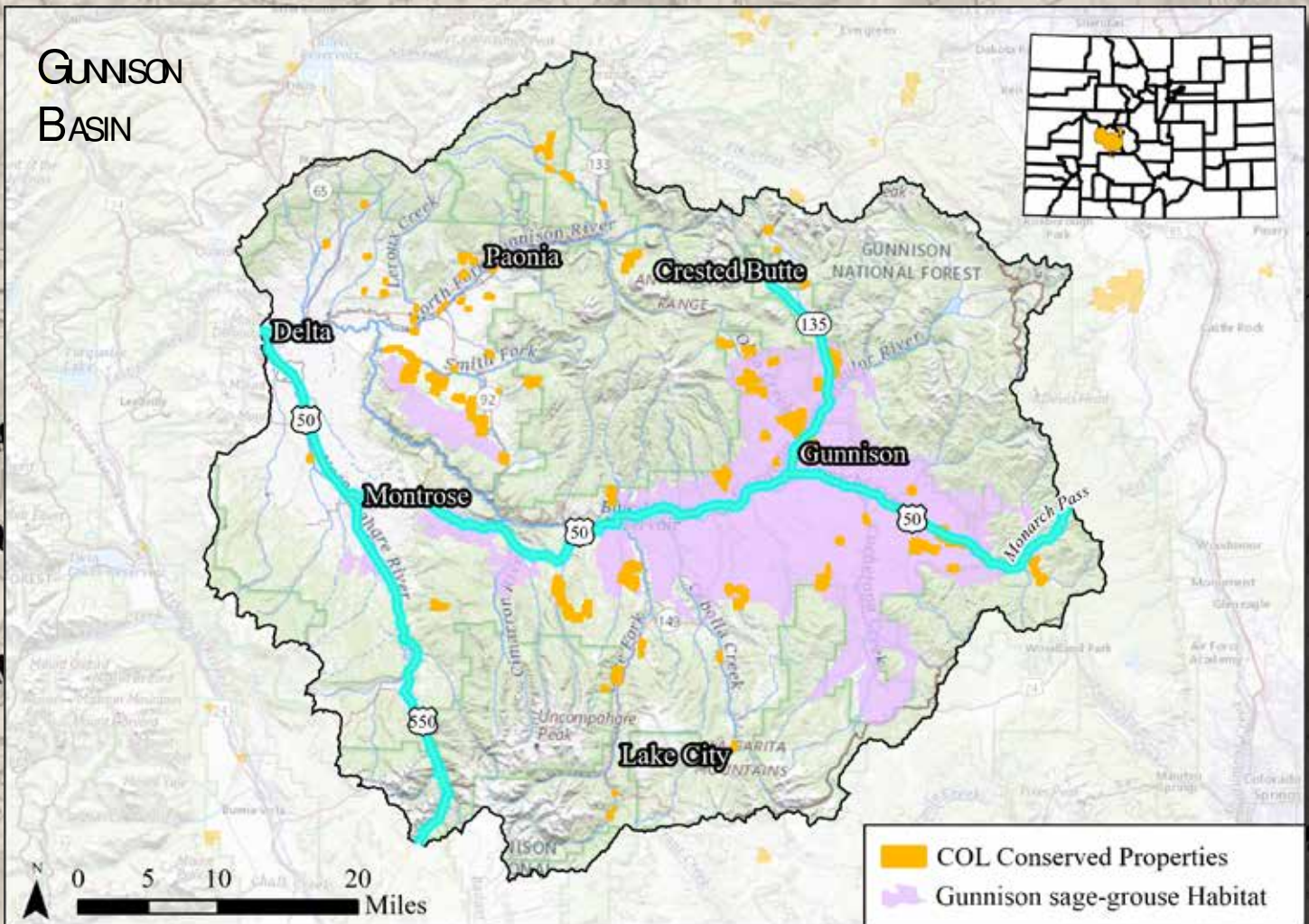
PROTECTING FEEDING GROUNDS FOR MIGRATING SANDHILL CRANES

Sandhill cranes are an iconic species of the San Luis Valley of Colorado. Over 20,000 cranes spend part of their spring and fall each year in this valley. After wintering in the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico, they begin to arrive in the San Luis Valley in early February. While there, the cranes depend on privately owned agricultural lands to feast on leftover grains and build up energy to continue their journey north. They leave Colorado by late March for the northern U.S. and Canada where they raise their young. In the fall, the cranes begin to arrive back in the San Luis Valley in late September and leave again by late November for their journey south. This migration and the health and reproduction of these majestic birds is only possible if they have adequate open feeding grounds.

In 2016, Colorado Open Lands launched an initiative called “Grain for Cranes” which sought to identify and protect the most important privately owned feeding grounds for these birds. In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and local farmers and landowners and with the support of private donors, COL works to protect the open spaces on these farms and ranches, which not only benefit the migrating cranes, but also help support the local agricultural economy.



GUNNISON BASIN



Data Source: Colorado Parks & Wildlife Species Mapping, 2022

CONSERVING SAGE GROUSE HABITAT IN THE GUNNISON VALLEY

Found almost exclusively in southwestern Colorado, the Gunnison sage-grouse has disappeared from about 90% of its historic range, owing to loss and degradation of habitat. The current population is in the low thousands and likely still declining. Gunnison sage-grouse are dependent on sagebrush-dominated habitats. Sagebrush is a crucial component of the adult bird's diet year-round, and they select sagebrush almost exclusively for cover.

For more than 20 years, Colorado Open Lands has been working with local landowners and partners such as Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy to protect critical sage-grouse habitat in the Gunnison Valley. With the generous support of private donors across Colorado, COL has completed 56 conservation projects protecting 34,000 acres of Gunnison sage-grouse habitat. These conservation successes not only protect important wildlife habitat, but they also provide open scenic vistas for visitors and residents as they drive between Gunnison and Crested Butte.



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GIFTS OF STOCK

Gifts of appreciated stock and/or mutual funds can be a wonderful way to support Colorado Open Lands, while realizing savings on long-term capital gains taxes!



ESTATE PLANNING

By including Colorado Open Lands in your estate and retirement planning, you are making a legacy gift that supports our promise of perpetual land conservation. You may also consider listing COL as a beneficiary on your life insurance policy.

Learn more about ways to give at ColoradoOpenLands.org/Ways-To-Give or contact Alyssa Acosta at 303.988.2373 ext. 216

or AAcosta@ColoradoOpenLands.org with questions or for routing and account information.

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Meet Griselda Landa-Posas!

Griselda joined COL this year as a Morgridge Family Foundation Land Stewardship Fellow



Griselda earned her B.S. in Wildlife & Conservation Biology along with a minor in Ethnic Studies. She has worked for the National Park Service in Alaska and Florida and most recently worked for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Oregon and for Environment for the Americas, a non-profit based in Boulder, CO. She is excited to be a part of the COL stewardship team! Read on for our interview.

How did you decide to pursue a career in conservation?

My parents grew up in a rural part of Mexico, at the southernmost point of monarch butterfly habitat. They grew up with a very close connection to the land. Then they emigrated to Colorado. One of my fondest memories was going with them to natural areas. We're a really big family – six kids – and going to natural areas was affordable for us. That sparked my interest in this field. My dad is a naturalist himself, even though he doesn't have a scientific degree. He's always been so knowledgeable about the outdoors and that's something I've always admired him for. He could describe plants in Colorado, even though he didn't grow up here. He does construction – the outdoors isn't his field – but he cared enough to learn. When we're in Mexico, that's his stomping grounds and he's even more knowledgeable. That's how I got inspired to do this work. It is something my parents loved, but it wasn't an option for them to study nature in school and make a living in this field.

What's the best part of working at Colorado Open Lands?

The best part of Colorado Open Lands is the culture. To have this job where what I'm doing is really impactful and

meaningful and the career I love, and at the same time to have an awesome community and work environment. It's the first time those things have all aligned for me. It is also so special to get the opportunity to explore so much of Colorado's beautiful and varied wide open spaces and have that be part of my job! To get paid to do that is truly special.

What's your vision for the future of Colorado?

I know there's a lot of people moving in, but I'd like to see a large portion of Colorado maintained as open lands and beautiful places people can go and enjoy. I'm hoping we can develop sustainably because I know the population will keep growing as well. Finding that balance where we can allow people to move in and keep it affordable but still also plan for lots of beautiful open space.

I'd also like to see larger plots of land affordable to a wider variety of people. Conservation easements can help allow for a more diverse background of people to be able to afford to farm if that's the lifestyle they want. A lot of people have been kept out of farming. I'm glad we're working towards changing that.

Anything else you'd like to share?

I'm grateful for having this community and the fact that we all play such an important role in different ways. It's important to see such a variety of people with really different backgrounds all coming together for a common purpose. It's really inspiring. I think we should all be proud of ourselves!

Engaging Youth in Fire Restoration

Karen Foley couldn't stop thinking about the 2016 Junkins Fire, which grew to over 18,000 acres before it was extinguished, and the damage it had done. Karen is one of Colorado Open Lands' Land and Water Stewards and joined the COL staff as part of the merger with San Isabel Land Protection Trust. Karen saw how slowly the forest was recovering and how prolific noxious weeds and debris had become on properties affected by that fire, prompting her to use her position at COL to help Custer County landowners.

Lonesome Valley Ranch on Highway 165 outside of Wetmore is a 138-acre idyll tucked between high mountain peaks and dotted with historic barns and sheds. The Junkins Fire burned much of the land across the highway from the ranch, and at one point, the fire had jumped to the Lonesome Valley side before firefighters were able to save the ranch. However, the nearby damage was done and would lead to many post-fire challenges.

A large burn scar on the opposite towering mountain is visible to this day. Worse than that sight are the lingering effects on the ranch. With no underbrush left on the burned mountain, rainfall causes flood waters to gush onto Lonesome Valley. The flooding brings with it soil and woody debris, which piles up on the ranch's meadows. Even worse, the flooding also brings heavy metals dredged up from nearby historic mining operations. The metals in the soil attract invasive weeds and inhibit nutrients that help native plants grow.

Karen saw these effects on Lonesome Valley and other Wet Mountain conservation easements and thought that something must be done. She applied for funding through Great Outdoors Colorado's and Colorado Youth Corps Association's Conservation Service Corps program to hire the Mile High Youth Corps, an AmeriCorps program that brings trained young adults to undertake restoration and improvements on sites just like Lonesome Valley. Under Karen's and the landowners' guidance, the work crew planted trees to act as a break for flowing debris, removed hundreds of pounds of invasive weeds, and applied a natural treatment to the soil recommended by a rangeland specialist to help the heavy metals release their hold on crucial nutrients for native plants.

Isabelle Huhn of the Youth Corps told COL, "Just being outside has been really calming for me. I appreciate how alive everything is outside. I got this job because I wanted to



The work crew with Karen

not feel the stress and isolation from working indoors. The peace is what brings me to nature." Her colleague Scarlett Johnson added, "There's always something new to learn and see and skills to pick up when you're working in an outdoor setting. Out here there's so much to see and you get a sense of fulfillment actively improving the environment you live on."

The work crew also helped remove "ladder fuels," which are smaller trees that help fire climb from the ground to the canopy of larger, more mature trees. Once the fire gets to the top of mature trees, wind helps it jump rapidly across the top of the forest and grow in intensity, sometimes so much that seed banks and aspen roots in the soil are destroyed. By removing the ladder fuel, the crew helped prevent small blazes that are healthy for forest regeneration from becoming larger, more destructive fires. While at work, the crew does extensive safety and equipment checks, and then spreads out into the forest with their chainsaws. Yells of "saw!" and "coming down!" pierce the air.

Karen and the crew members applied these same restoration treatments to two other conservation easement properties impacted by the Junkins Fire. Searching for opportunities for available funding and work crews like these is a key part of Colorado Open Lands' stewardship and restoration programs. Applying these treatments helps the conservation easements that we steward become more resilient to the next wildfire or flood.

Isabelle says of the fire mitigation work, "It's super tough but I'm glad we're working away on it. It means a lot to help protect the forests here without completely getting rid of them. It's fulfilling knowing that you're working on this land and helping preserve the history of it. It's very rewarding."



New Conservation Projects



Photo courtesy of Lauren McCain/Southern Plains Land Trust

1 - Heartland Ranch - conserved acres added!

COL partnered with Southern Plains Land Trust to expand Heartland Ranch by protecting an additional 17,899 acres of shortgrass prairie in Bent County! Southern Plains Land Trust owns and manages the property as a wildlife refuge focused on five priorities: American bison, black-footed ferret, prairie elk, grassland breeding birds, and beaver and prairie streams.

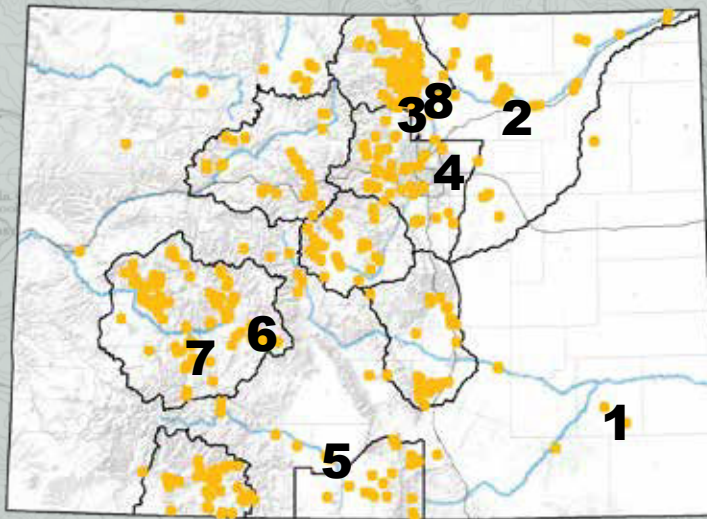
This addition of protected land creates a contiguous area of nearly 43,000 acres of conserved habitat for the flora and fauna that thrive within it. In addition to shortgrass prairie, the property also features dramatic rock-covered mesas, lush canyons, juniper woodlands, and miles of streams. Habitat is provided for many Colorado Species of Concern including ferruginous hawk, swift fox, plains leopard frogs, as well as the burrowing owl, which is designated Threatened by Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Elk, mule deer, and pronghorn traverse the property as well.

Heartland is home to a herd of bison, pictured above with babies. American bison were on the brink of extinction in the past, and to combat that, were often bred with cattle to help the species survive. The herd on Heartland Ranch includes bison with the same genes as their wild ancestors.

2 - Front Range Mitigation Bank

COL and Westervelt Ecological Services have finalized the Front Range Mitigation Bank conservation easement in Morgan County. This 104-acre parcel lies just east of Fort Morgan and adjacent to I-76, and features a channel of the South Platte River. It provides a mix of historic wetlands which support local and migratory waterfowl, including bald eagle, wild turkey, and red-tailed hawk. Due to past management practices, the riparian corridor has become channelized and disconnected from the flood plain, resulting in the loss of wetlands. Now that the easement has closed and the permits have been approved, restoration can begin. The landowner will improve the health of the wetlands, remove noxious weeds, reconnect the river corridor for flood attenuation, and provide greater scenic enjoyment for motorists along I-76.





CONTEXT MAP OF NEW PROJECTS

- 1 - Heartland Ranch
- 2 - Front Range Mitigation Bank
- 3 - Waggener Farm
- 4 - Box Elder Creek
- 5 - Caldron Base Ranch
- 6 - Big Bend Pasture
- 7 - Flying W Ranch
- 8 - Uhrich Farm

3 - Waggener Farm -conserved acres added!

Waggener Farm is an irrigated family farm located in Weld County just outside the town of Berthoud. With senior water rights and unobstructed views of Rocky Mountain National Park and Longs Peak (see photo at right), Waggener Farm frames the iconic gateway into Berthoud. The farm is leased to the nearby Olander family, which founded Root Shoot Malting in Loveland and farms malt and grain for local craft breweries and distilleries.

This new easement adds 154 acres to the existing conservation easement on the farm, bringing the total to 307 acres. The easement was completely donated by the Waggener Family Trust. With the additional acreage comes the permanent protection of some of the most senior water rights in Colorado!



4 - Box Elder Creek Mitigation Bank

The Box Elder Creek conservation easement, located in Adams County, is Colorado Open Lands' fourth wetlands mitigation bank conservation easement. The property is located near Denver International Airport and consists of 147 acres of the riparian corridor along Box Elder Creek. The State Land Board owns the property and will be able to sell wetland and stream mitigation credits as part of the conservation easement. In addition to conserving the property, restoration and enhancement work will begin on the protected corridor. Situated on the Great Plains, the property provides an important ecosystem consisting of the stream bed, adjacent forest, shrub-scrub, and emergent-herbaceous wetlands. Upland of the stream is a well-established black-tailed prairie dog town, which serves as a major food source for raptors, foxes, coyotes, and badgers. An occupied bald eagle nest is also located within the easement area.



5 -Caldon Base Ranch

The Caldon Base Ranch conservation easement lies in Conejos County, just north of the town of Manassa. Nearly 75% of the 529-acre ranch consists of prime agricultural soils, and approximately 30% of the ranch is classified as wetlands. The property provides habitat for numerous species of raptors, including the bald eagle, golden eagle, and American peregrine falcon. In addition to raptor habitat, the ranch lies within the migratory flyway of the

entire population of Rocky Mountain greater sandhill cranes, which often visit the meadows of the property during their spring and fall migrations.

Caldon Base Ranch is irrigated by one of the most senior water rights on the Conejos River, a tributary to the Rio Grande. These water rights support the wetlands and allow for future agricultural viability of the property, which supports the economy and the heritage of the region. Eighty percent of all wetlands in the San Luis Valley are found on private lands and are sustained by irrigation for agriculture.

This project was supported by funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the LOR Foundation, and Great Outdoors Colorado. It is part of the Conejos Ranchland Initiative – a partnership between COL, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, and the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust - to conserve critical working lands along the Conejos River corridor.

6 - Big Bend Pasture

Located in the upper Tomichi Creek Valley, 30 miles east of Gunnison outside of Sargents, the Big Bend Pasture property is part of the Irby Ranch cattle and hay operation. The Irby family has now conserved 1,506 acres of ranchland with COL through four easements beginning in 2003. The property provides summer and fall grazing ground for the family's cattle.

The Big Bend Pasture property consists of irrigated meadows, sagebrush shrublands, subalpine forest, 0.75 mile of frontage along Big Bend Creek, and 1.75 miles of frontage along Marshall Creek. Habitat is provided for bald eagle, ferruginous hawk, greater sandhill crane, northern leopard frog, bighorn sheep, black bear, elk, moose, mountain lion, and mule deer. Marshall Pass Road, a backcountry route that connects the Tomichi Creek Valley to Salida, provides scenic views of the property. Gunnison National Forest lands and an existing COL easement completely surround the property. The Big Bend Pasture property was the largest previously unprotected private property in the Marshall Creek drainage.

This project was completed in partnership with Trust for Public Land, which also provided the photography of this project.





7 - Flying W Ranch

COL completed a conservation easement on 1,545 acres of the Flying W Ranch, southwest of the City of Gunnison. Twenty years earlier, the owners had protected the other 2,433 acres of the property with The Nature Conservancy, and now protection of the entire property is complete. The ranch contains over two miles of frontage along Willow Creek and is managed for live-stock grazing. It provides habitat for Gunnison Sage-grouse, as well as bald eagle, ferruginous hawk, American peregrine falcon, black bear, elk, moose, mountain lion, mule deer, and northern leopard frog.

The ranch is nearly surrounded by land owned by the Bureau of Land Management that connects with US Forest Service land, meaning that this easement adds to millions of contiguous acres of protected open space! Funding was provided by Natural Resources Conservation Service and Gunnison Valley Land Preservation Fund. COL partnered with Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy to conserve this property.

8 - Uhrich Farm

Uhrich Farm is located in Larimer County on the Big Thompson River, just outside the Town of Johnstown. Consisting of 119 acres, the farm has prime soils and valuable senior water rights. Just two miles east of I-25, the farm lies right in the crosshairs of a rapidly growing Johnstown and the greater I-25 corridor. In addition to being a highly productive farm, the property provides important habitat along the riparian corridor and astounding views of Rocky Mountain National Park and Longs Peak in the background.

The farm is flood irrigated with Colorado Big Thompson water units ("CBT"). Because CBT water rights are decreed for multiple uses (agriculture, municipal and industrial), they are extremely valuable water rights that are sought by developers and municipalities. Much of the farmland in Northern Colorado that was historically irrigated with CBT water has now been converted to municipal use, leaving a long trail of dried-up farms scattered throughout the landscape. The conservation of Uhrich Farm ensures that the CBT water rights associated with this farm remain predominantly in agricultural use in perpetuity.

The easement was completed with funding from the Natural Resource Conservation Service through their Agricultural Land Easement program.



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