

DROUGHT

**WHY IT MATTERS
HOW CONSERVATION CAN HELP**

**SPRING 2026
NEWSLETTER**



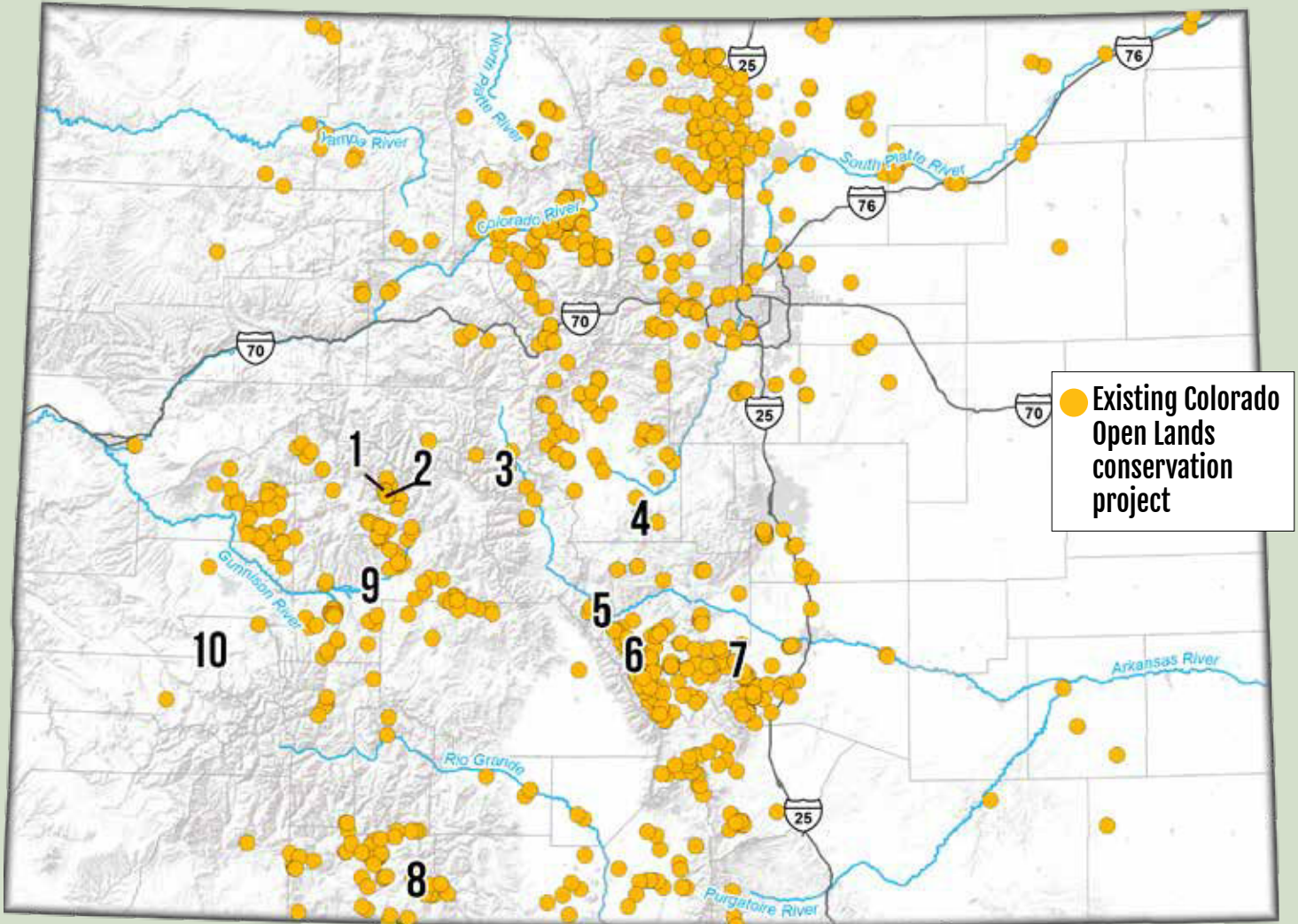
**ALSO FEATURING:
10 NEW CONSERVATION PROJECTS
EVENTS TO DEEPEN YOUR CONNECTION TO COLORADO**

Ten new conservation projects!

This issue features projects with plentiful water rights, public access for recreation, rare plants and important habitat, and productive conservation partnerships.

The 10 projects total more than 5,000 new acres permanently conserved!

See the map below for a guide to the newest conservation projects, and on what pages you can learn more.



1. Long Lake Recreation Area p.10
2. Slate River Wetlands Preserve p.11
3. Clear Creek Ranch p.12
4. Thirtynine Mile Mountain Ranch p.12
5. Vallie Ranch p.13

6. Fleur Creek Farm p.13
7. Bears Head Ranch p.14
8. Waterman Property p.14
9. Willow Creek p.15
10. Vogelaar Ranch p.15

COLORADO OPEN LANDS IS PROUD TO HAVE PERMANENTLY JOINED FORCES WITH THE ORGANIZATIONS BELOW TO ADVANCE THE PACE AND QUALITY OF CONSERVATION IN COLORADO.



PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Friend of Colorado Open Lands,

Water, or the lack of it, is at the top of everyone's mind in Colorado these days. Coming out of one of the driest winters ever recorded in our state, people are rightly concerned.

A historically low snowpack in the winter reverberates through our entire year. Diminished runoff and drier soils stress forests, fields and wildlife, and increases the threat of wildfire.

Even for an arid region like ours, water is still essential for all of the things that we love about Colorado. Whether it's the water that feeds our favorite trout streams, fresh powder that covers our winter slopes, or the irrigation that makes local food production possible, we depend on this precious resource for our way of life.

At Colorado Open Lands, we work hard to find innovative solutions to community problems through the lens of conservation. For years, we have been working to craft tools to help address issues around water scarcity. Innovations in conservation easements like creative water sharing agreements between municipalities and agricultural producers and new conservation tools to help replenish aquifers are some of the successes we have seen in the past few years.

There are many benefits from conservation and restoration that address water scarcity. Protecting and restoring wetlands that store water naturally, improving stream and riparian habitat for fish and other wildlife, and reducing development in areas especially susceptible to wildfire are all benefits derived from thoughtful land and water conservation.

With prolonged drought becoming not an anomaly but a new reality, it's going to be even more important in the coming years to think creatively about how organizations like Colorado Open Lands can help address these concerns.

Your support for our work is what makes these innovative solutions possible. We are grateful for your partnership in helping to protect those things we love about Colorado.

Sincerely,



Tony Caligiuri
President





DROUGHT

IN COLORADO

Water scarcity is the persistent topic of conversation in the American West this year. A historically low snowpack, an unusually warm spring, and the pressure this puts on Colorado for drinking water, agriculture, and wildfire threats are sounding alarm bells across the state. Water is the common thread that drives so much of our conservation work at Colorado Open Lands. A dependable water supply underpins nearly all of the conservation values that we strive to uphold.

Land conservation has always played a critical role in preserving natural ecosystems, supporting agriculture, and maintaining the character of local communities. But in an era defined by intensifying drought and growing water scarcity—especially across the American West—its importance has taken on new urgency. In Colorado, where snowpack, rivers, and aquifers sustain both people and landscapes, organizations like Colorado Open Lands are doing essential work to help the state manage and maintain water effectively.

At its core, land conservation is about protecting the natural systems that make life possible. Healthy soils, intact forests, and undisturbed wetlands all function as part of a larger hydrological cycle. When land is conserved rather than developed, it retains its ability to absorb, store, and slowly release water. This becomes critically important during drought conditions, when every drop counts and the timing of water availability can make or break ecosystems and agricultural operations.

Colorado Open Lands focuses on conserving agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, and natural areas through voluntary agreements with landowners. This ensures that land remains undeveloped while still allowing it to be used productively. In times of water scarcity, this approach offers a powerful advantage: it keeps working lands working in ways that are often more sustainable than lands not protected.

Development typically brings impermeable surfaces like roads, rooftops, and parking lots, which prevent water from soaking into the ground naturally. Instead, water runs off quickly, often carrying pollutants and reducing groundwater recharge. In contrast, conserved lands act like natural sponges. Grasslands, for example, promote infiltration and help recharge aquifers, while also reducing erosion—a key factor in maintaining water quality in rivers and reservoirs.

Protected agricultural lands can also contribute to more sustainable water use. Many ranchers and farmers in Colorado are deeply invested in stewardship practices that improve soil health, increase water retention, and reduce waste. Healthy soils rich in organic matter can hold significantly more water, making farms more resilient during dry periods. By keeping these lands intact, Colorado Open Lands helps preserve not just open space, but a knowledge base and culture of land stewardship that is increasingly vital in a changing climate.

Wildlife, too, depend on conserved land for survival, especially during drought. Fragmented landscapes make it harder for animals to migrate in search of water and food. By protecting large, connected areas, conservation efforts ensure that species have the space and flexibility they need to adapt to shifting conditions. Riparian zones, those green edges and corridors along rivers and streams, are particularly important. When protected and restored, they provide critical habitat while also stabilizing stream banks, filtering runoff, and maintaining cooler water temperatures that benefit fish and other aquatic life.

Our Riparian Reconnect program is another way the work of Colorado Open Lands helps mitigate drought conditions and complications. At its core, Riparian Reconnect aims to mimic natural processes on waterways and wetlands that have been degraded over time by human interventions. By installing extremely low-tech treatments like planting native trees and shrubs and installing structures that beavers naturally construct, we can slow down water moving through rivers and streams, allowing it to recharge groundwater and help prevent fire and the flooding that can result when a sudden rainfall does occur.

In Colorado, where water rights, population growth, and climate pressures intersect, the work of Colorado Open Lands represents a practical and forward-thinking approach. Rather than reacting to crises after they occur, land conservation helps prevent them by maintaining the natural systems that regulate water and support life.

As drought conditions become more frequent and severe, the question is no longer whether land conservation is important. The question becomes how quickly and effectively we can expand it. Protecting open land is not just about preserving scenic views or wildlife; it is about safeguarding the water resources that everything else depends on. In that sense, the work being done today is an investment not only in the land itself, but in the long-term resilience of entire communities.

We are grateful for your partnership and support for this important work. Together we can continue to make an impact on Colorado's future that will last far beyond our lifetimes.



Meet our Morgridge Family Foundation Land Stewardship Fellow – Ellie Roshak!

The Morgridge Family Foundation invests in organizations that reimagine solutions to some of today's most significant challenges. We're grateful to the Morgridge Family Foundation for supporting our land stewardship work through funding fellowships at Colorado Open Lands since 2021!

Ellie Roshak, our current Morgridge Family Foundation Land Stewardship Fellow, is a recent graduate of Colorado State University, where she earned a B.S. in Restoration Ecology and a B.A. in English. Through her studies, she gained a deep appreciation for interdisciplinary collaboration, scientific communication, and plant identification, spending her previous summer conducting ecological research in the Fraser Experimental Forest. In her free time, Ellie loves to hike, fish, rock climb, canoe, and most especially, expand her ever increasing repertoire of outdoor hobbies. We interviewed Ellie below.

Why did you decide to pursue a career in conservation?

As a kid, I was always reading and writing. Pursuing an English degree felt like an obvious trajectory. So I decided to enroll as an English major at CSU. However, just prior to graduating high school, my family's home burned down in the East Troublesome Fire. As a result, I became fascinated with fire science and ecosystem recovery, and I began to watch closely for changes in the landscape post-fire. This new area of interest led me to pursue a second major in Restoration Ecology. The field of conservation, specifically conservation stewardship, turned out to be an amazing opportunity for me to combine both my passion for writing, communication, and outreach, as well as my love for ecology and commitment to conserving the land.

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

The best part of working for Colorado Open Lands is the relationships. Inside the office, my coworkers are incredibly hardworking, yet they are always happy to take the time to answer my questions and grow my understanding of the conservation world. Outside of the office, I have the opportunity to meet and talk with landowners, many of whom



have lived on their land for generations. There is such a unique mode of understanding that is possible through living in one place for a prolonged period of time, and I am a grateful beneficiary of these knowledge-systems by means of thoughtful and in-depth conversations with landowners. So, I appreciate the relationships at COL, and the opportunity to learn that comes out of every newfound connection.

What have you learned on the job that you couldn't have learned in the classroom?

I learn so much every day! I already mentioned how much I learn through my relationships here at COL, but another piece of education this job has provided me with that would not be possible in the classroom is a broader understanding of the organizational structures that allow an organization such as COL to be successful. I have gained insight into work flows, hiring processes, and collaborative systems that keep the gears turning. This growing understanding has already enabled me to find new areas in which I can take initiative and further contribute as a team player.

Anything else you'd like to share?

I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity, to the Morgridge Family Foundation for funding my position, and for COL as an organization. I get to see the inner workings of COL, and I can attest to the level of care and passion every individual here has for what they are doing. It's an amazing opportunity to begin my career in such a supportive and enthusiastic environment, and for that I am truly appreciative.

At Colorado Open Lands, we love what we do and we want to share it with our community!

Join us for a variety of events and experiences in 2026 and deepen your connection to Colorado.



Lessons from the Land Series – Open to Everyone!

Join us on a journey to discover the values that COL protects! Each event in the series is designed to cover unique content for you to learn about why land and water protection is so important and how the work gets done. Join us for an upcoming hike, property visit, or webinar to deepen your understanding of conservation and expand your own love for Colorado.

Although designed as a series, we welcome you to any or all events. These events are:

- Free to attend
- Informative and engaging
- Designed for folks new to conservation, and folks wanting to learn more
- And most importantly, fun!

June 12 | Views from the Trail, Frisco

July 28 | Conservation 201: Agriculture Webinar

July 31 | South Park: From History to Restoration Hike, Kenosha Pass

August 15 | Volunteer Day at Santa Maria Ranch, Hartsel

September 23 | Mapping Conservation Webinar

October 17 | Conservation Exploration: Family-Friendly Event, Wheat Ridge

Scan here to learn more and register for a Lessons from the Land event



Appreciation Experiences for all Donors

Join us for any of the Donor Appreciation Events below. Each event is designed to cover unique content to help you learn and experience the many ways your support impacts our work.

- July 24** | Grand County Conservation Update Lunch, Grand Lake
- July 29** | Guanella Pass Restoration Tour and Picnic, South Park
- August 7** | Beer 'N Brats Community Picnic, Westcliffe
- October 2** | Sacramento Creek Ranch Fall Hike, Fairplay
- October 22** | Juniper Women's Cocktail Party, Denver metro
- October 28** | Northern Colorado Conservation Update Brunch, Fort Collins



Exclusive Experiences for Giving Society Members

In addition to the Donor Appreciation Experiences listed above, the exclusive events below are available to donors that are members of our giving circles. To learn more about the Conservator Society, the Centennial Society, and the Evergreen Society, contact Elizabeth Silverman at ESilverman@ColoradoOpenLands.org or 303.988.2373 ext. 216. Members of these societies can expect personal invitations in advance of each event.

- June 4** | Evergreen and Centennial Societies Appreciation Dinner, Westcliffe
- June 24** | Evergreen and Centennial Societies Appreciation Lunch, Fort Collins
- June 25** | Evergreen and Centennial Societies Appreciation Lunch, Cherry Creek
- July 15-16** | Gunnison Basin Wildflower Tour, Gunnison and Crested Butte
- September 29-30** | Southeastern Plains Tour, La Junta
- March 2027** | San Luis Valley and Sandhill Cranes Tour, Monte Vista
- April 2027** | Annual Conservators Celebration Dinner, Denver Metro

Find out more details about all upcoming events by scanning the QR code or visiting coloradoopenlands.org/events





Our Partnership with Crested Butte Land Trust

Colorado Open Lands and Crested Butte Land Trust (CBLT) partner to protect extraordinary land in Gunnison County! These two parcels are owned by CBLT and are now under easement with COL. All photos on this spread provided courtesy of CBLT.

Long Lake Recreation Area

The Long Lake Recreation Area is a conservation jewel which is the product of a sustained effort by the community in Crested Butte to acquire three parcels, balance public recreation, natural habitat, and agriculture, and now protect its tremendous conservation values in perpetuity. The bulk of the property was acquired by CBLT in 2020 as part of a land exchange between CBLT, the US Forest Service, and Trust for Public Land. Gunnison National Forest received 630 acres of land near Fossil Ridge Wilderness Area in eastern Gunnison County in exchange for deeding Long Lake to CBLT.

Long Lake is originally a natural, glacially-formed lake nestled into a ridge above the Town of Crested Butte. The new 137-acre conservation easement, held by COL, comprises the southern half of that body of water. The property includes a stacked-loop trail system and is open to the public for hiking, fishing, water sports, and other recreation activities. Abundant wildlife, including mule deer, black bear, elk, and neotropical migrant songbirds, also use the property and migrate through the area. The southern shore of Long Lake provides critical access to water for livestock that graze the area in late summer.



Slate River Wetlands Preserve

The 146-acre Slate River Wetlands Preserve is a unique property located immediately north of the Town of Crested Butte. The property serves as an important wildlife sanctuary, highly visible community separator, and public recreational access location for residents and visitors to Crested Butte. The property includes $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of Coal Creek and $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of the Slate River at their confluence, with extensive wetlands and an irrigated pasture for summer cattle grazing. There is seasonal public access for floating and fishing. Excellent habitat is provided for great blue heron, elk, moose, beaver, boreal toad, northern leopard frog, and myriad songbirds, raptors, and waterfowl.

CBLT acquired the property over a series of nine transactions since 1992, acquiring the final 90 acres in early February of this year. Funding from Gunnison County, the Town of Crested Butte, Gates Family Foundation, 1% for Open Space and private donations from community members supported the final parcel acquisition, and the property is now protected in perpetuity under conservation easement.

Clear Creek Ranch

The 373-acre Clear Creek Ranch is located in a glacial valley draining the eastern flank of the Sawatch Mountains in Chaffee County. The ranch includes approximately 2 miles of Clear Creek meandering and braiding across the valley bottom, with riparian and emergent wetlands, irrigated hayfields, and shrublands and forests rising into San Isabel National Forest to the north and south.

The property supports four plant communities of concern, is potential habitat for the endangered boreal toad, and provides habitat for numerous wildlife species including bighorn sheep, elk, moose, mountain goat, mule deer, white-tailed ptarmigan, snowshoe hare, wild turkey, and many other species of mammals, birds, and fish. The property is highly visible to the public from Chaffee County Road 390 and The Colorado Trail, which skirts its eastern boundary and traverses above the property to the north and south. It is also visible to adventurers sojourning to numerous nearby mountains and trails, including three fourteeners.

The property is equidistant from Buena Vista and Leadville, in a region with an active recreational property market. Without protection the property could be developed and divided into numerous properties with access to the creek. This easement keeps the ecosystem intact, the water rights on the land, and the views protected.



Thirtynine Mile Mountain Ranch

This 1,320-acre property is located in southeast Park County on the southern flanks of Thirtynine Mile Mountain, directly south of Pike National Forest. Its protection adds to more than 7,000 acres of nearby conservation easements and, together with the adjacent La Dolce Vita Ranch (conserved with COL in 2025), provides an important forest buffer, as well as grazing access to a neighboring rancher.

Across its high-elevation contours from roughly 9,500 to 10,020 feet, the property hosts a mosaic of plant communities shaped by steep topography and varied microclimates. Bristlecone pine, spruce, fir, ponderosa, Douglas fir, and aspen give way to expansive rangelands of native grasses and shrubland. Riparian pockets with sedges, willows, ponds, and perennial streams support rich wildlife diversity, including black bear, elk, mule deer, pronghorn, mountain lion, and numerous bird species such as Brewer's sparrow, burrowing owl, golden eagle, and northern goshawk, along with many small mammals and bats.

The property has been owned by Henry Flint and his family for decades, after Henry became enamored with the property in college. Henry shares his vision for the property: "It is home to deer, elk, antelope, and bear. Colorado Parks and Wildlife has tracked a puma in the area. Old Mose, the last grizzly bear in Colorado, lived in the area. Some of the bristlecone pines may be more than 1,000 years old. Going forward It is my hope that the area remains wild."

Park County's Land and Water Trust Fund was a project partner.



Vallie Ranch

Vallie Ranch lies along the Arkansas River in Coaldale, in western Fremont County, and buffers the adjacent Vallie Bridge State Park, part of the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area. The ranch is highly visible from boaters along the river as well as travelers driving on US Highway 50.

The landowners, John Walker and Roxann Moore, protected 170 acres of the upland areas nearly 20 years ago with San Isabel Land Protection Trust. Discussions to add the additional 79 acres, including ½ mile of the Arkansas River, began back in 2011, and are now complete!

This new conservation easement combines the previous two, adding the river corridor and an irrigated farm with vineyards, orchards, seed crops and a “bear garden” of native plants grown for a nearby wildlife rehabilitation center. The property serves as a movement corridor for elk, deer, bear, bobcats and many other species between the river and the piñon-juniper forests of the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. John and Roxann, energetic and dedicated conservationists, have invested in stewardship of the property for decades. This includes building up soil health and planting shrubs and trees along US Highway 50 to steer wildlife movement under a bridge and away from the road.

Fleur Creek Farm

Fleur Creek Farm is a remarkable 45-acre property in the Wet Mountain Valley, just north of Westcliffe in Custer County. The land is owned by longtime community members and conservation advocates who have been deeply involved in local land protection efforts since the mid-1990s.

Two creeks flowing from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains create irrigated pasture and an expansive wetland complex. In fact, two-thirds of the property is wetlands, including the Brush Creek Fen. Fens are defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as “peat-forming wetlands that rely on groundwater input and require thousands of years to develop and cannot easily be restored once destroyed.”

The fen hosts some of Colorado’s rarest plant species, and the broader property supports a wide range of wildlife, including burrowing owl, golden eagle, multiple bat species, and regular use by black bear, elk, and mule deer. The land also supports cattle and sheep grazing, hay production, and a small apiary tied to the landowners’ longstanding cottage industry.



Keep It Colorado was a project partner.



Bears Head Ranch

Bears Head Ranch is a 1,522-acre property in the Wet Mountains in western Pueblo County and the largest private inholding within San Isabel National Forest. The property was historically operated as the “Don K Guest Ranch.”

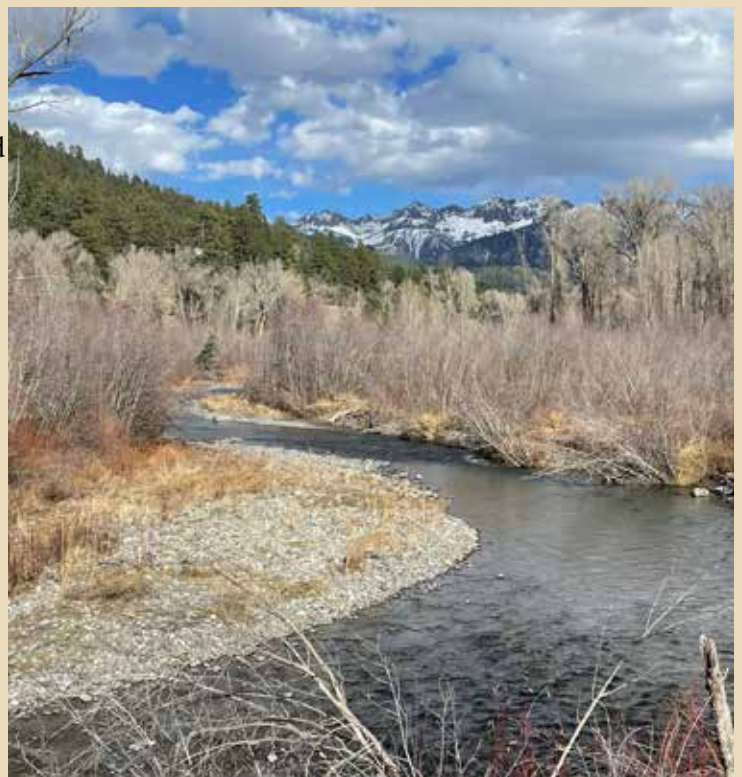
The property consists of high-altitude meadows, scrub oak, poderosa pine, and piñon-juniper forests with stands of cottonwoods and wetlands areas. This landscape provides excellent wildlife habitat and corridor connectivity into over 200,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service lands across the Wet Mountains. The property provides extensive habitat for elk, mule deer, pronghorn, black bear, white-tailed deer, and an active mountain lion den. Much of the property burned about 20 years ago; most of the downed timber has been cleared and the property is recovering. This easement contributes to the conservation successes of this valley within the larger landscape of the Wet Mountains.

Waterman Property

Located south of Pagosa Springs in Archuleta County along the Rio Blanco, this 330-acre property borders the river to the north, and national forest to the south, with sweeping views of the San Juan Mountains in the background. The property sits adjacent to another conservation easement, and its protection strengthens an already connected landscape in this important corridor.

This highly scenic property features over a mile of riparian habitat along the Rio Blanco and half a mile along Leche Creek. It includes irrigated native grass meadows and pastures, supports livestock grazing, and provides critical habitat for bald eagle, northern leopard frog, and big game species including elk, mule deer, mountain lion, and black bear. Adjacent to San Juan National Forest and the El Rancho Pinoso conservation easement, the property contributes to a highly protected and ecologically connected landscape while remaining visible from several local roads.

This conservation success builds on the legacy of Southwest Land Alliance, whose exceptional portfolio of conserved lands in Archuleta County is now stewarded by Colorado Open Lands after our 2020 merger.





Willow Creek Ranch

This 100-acre property sits in Gunnison County, about 13 miles southwest of the City of Gunnison. It's clearly visible from County Road 31 and Highway 149, popular routes for outdoor enthusiasts heading to the Curecanti National Recreation Area, Powderhorn, and Lake City.

Willow Creek Ranch was donated to Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy (GRCL) by a conservation buyer in 2022. The ranch features montane sagebrush shrublands and grasslands that support an incredible variety of wildlife, including the Gunnison Sage-grouse and American peregrine falcon, and provides critical winter habitat for bald eagle and ferruginous hawk, all Colorado Species of Concern.

It also lies within ranges used by black bear, elk, mountain lion, and mule deer, including important summer and winter ranges, winter concentration areas, and a vital elk migration corridor.

Protecting Willow Creek Ranch strengthens a 4,400-acre network of conserved lands in the area. The Gunnison Valley Land Preservation Board was a project partner.

Vogelaar Ranch

The 1,360-acre Vogelaar Ranch is located in southeastern Montrose County on Horsefly Mesa, approximately 20 miles southwest of Montrose. The estate of Anita Vogelaar, whose parents bought the property and operated the ranch for decades, donated the Vogelaar Ranch to Colorado West Land Trust (CWLTL), which then simultaneously conveyed an easement to COL for its protection.



The ranch consists of natural habitats that include montane meadow, Gambel oak woodland, sagebrush shrubland, mountain shrubland, willow riparian areas, and aspen woodlands, all of which provide food and cover for a variety of game and nongame wildlife species. Several springs and seeps are present across the property, creating small micro-habitats dominated by willow and providing additional water resources for livestock and wildlife.

Preservation of the ranch supports ongoing protection efforts in the area. Approximately 88,000 acres of public land and over 7,000 acres of private land protected under conservation easement are within 10 miles of the property.

“The Vogelaar family’s generosity ensures the permanent conservation of the ranch while also providing critical resources to advance future land conservation efforts. We are thankful for their belief in our mission and for our partnership with Colorado Open Lands to protect this special place,” said Ilana Moir, Conservation Manager, CWLTL.

Photo courtesy of CWLTL.

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Landlines is the perfect companion for your summer road trip adventures. Each episode is a deep dive into a different facet of COL's work. Recent episodes have featured our outreach and education programming, the importance of protecting shortgrass prairie ecosystems, and our team of Riparian Reconnect partners and their approach to restoring waterways and wetlands!

Landlines discusses the landscapes, people, and partnerships that make conservation in Colorado possible. Find Landlines on all major podcast platforms and YouTube.



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