

CONNECTING WILD SPACES + CREATING HAPPY PLACES

WOOD RIVER LAND TRUST

WINTER 2024



WOOD
RIVER
LAND
TRUST



STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Water is Life –
What Are We Doing
to Protect It?

Fostering Community
Engagement in
Conservation

Protecting People
& Wildlife on
Our Roads

Announcing Our
Newest Land
Conservation Project

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Enjoy the view over the Croy Wetlands at Simons/Bauer Preserve from our newly installed chairlift swing—featured on this issue’s cover! The chairlift, generously donated by the Sun Valley Company in collaboration with the Flourish Foundation, offers a spot for our community to pause, reflect, and appreciate nature.

While the swing overlook accessed from Croy Creek Road will remain open year-round, please note that the Simons/Bauer Preserve’s new mile-long accessible trail, connecting Lions Park to Mountain Humane, will be closed from December 15th to March 15th to protect critical winter wildlife habitat.

A LETTER FROM THE

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



As **we celebrate 30 years of community-led conservation**, your support continues to make it possible to address the challenges of an ever-changing environment. Thanks to you, we're able to respond head-on to increasing pressures like wildfires, drought, and population growth.

In the following pages, you'll read how we're working on both large-scale river restoration projects that attract federal funding, and collaborating with volunteers to implement low-tech restoration solutions to help our lands heal from wildfires. We're partnering with community members to collect data to inform management decisions and ensure that major infrastructure projects prioritize the safety of people and wildlife. While we remain focused on landscape-level conservation opportunities, we're also seizing the opportunity to partner with landowners on small projects with big impacts—like the creation of Old Cutters Preserve.

Big and small, our local actions add up. Together, we can ensure that our Valley remains a wonderful place to live, work, and play for generations to come. We hope you will join us this winter for our *Think Globally, Act Locally* speaker series, where experts will share how our local actions contribute to broader global conservation efforts. It's a chance to connect, learn, and be inspired by the difference we can make together.

None of this would be possible without your support. Thank you for everything you make possible—for our community, for wildlife, forever.

With gratitude,

Amy Trujillo, Executive Director



WATER IS LIFE – WHAT ARE WE DOING TO PROTECT IT?

In the heart of Idaho, water is not only essential for life—it’s a way of life. Droughts, heat waves, and population growth are adding stress to a system many once believed to be abundant and infinite.

PLENTIFUL WATER IS SOMETHING WE CAN NO LONGER TAKE FOR GRANTED

Healthy rivers and wetlands are vital for over 80% of local wildlife, as well as everyone who calls the Valley home. Through grassroots collaborative partnerships and river restoration projects, we’re taking a forward-looking approach to protect our region’s most precious resource: water.

COLLABORATIVE ACTION FOR A HEALTHY RIVER

A key piece of our Valley’s water conservation strategy is the Wood River Water Collaborative. Formed in 2015, this group is made up of over 75 diverse water users—from farmers and ranchers to nonprofits and municipalities—all coming together to try to find collaborative solutions. By planning and executing water management projects, the Collaborative ensures that:

- Safe and clean drinking water supports the needs of the watershed
- Sustainable water use supports the region’s farming and ranching
- Healthy riparian habitats support the fish and wildlife that rely on the Big Wood River, Little Wood River, Silver Creek, and their tributaries

Together, we can target areas with the greatest impact and secure funding for essential restoration projects. But our work is limited by financial resources. That’s why Wood River Land Trust is actively applying for federal grants to support the Wood River Water Collaborative to ensure our efforts can continue to protect our water for generations to come.

RESTORING RIVERS TO THEIR NATURAL FUNCTION

The Big Wood River has suffered the same fate as many rivers in the West—straightening, floodplain development, removal of beaver, and riverbank hardening have all contributed to a degraded river system. The Wood River Land Trust executes and maintains river restoration projects to return the Big Wood River and its tributaries to their natural function, reducing flood risk and increasing the overall health of our watershed, fishery, and water supply. Working with multiple partners, we currently have six active projects in various stages of development, encompassing 23 miles of river restoration.

EMPOWERING NATURAL PROCESSES TO LEAD IN ECOSYSTEM RECOVERY

Nature’s engineers—beavers—play a critical role in water conservation. Beaver dams create wetlands that store water, reduce wildfire risks, and protect essential wildlife habitat. However, as beaver populations have declined, we’ve turned to their natural techniques for guidance in restoring rivers and streams.

To date, Wood River Land Trust has partnered with

landowners and conservation groups to install, monitor, and maintain 13 miles of post-assisted log structures and beaver dam analogs. These human-made structures mimic the functions of natural beaver dams, empowering natural processes to lead in ecosystem recovery at a much lower cost and higher success rate than humans could accomplish alone.

RINKER ROCK CREEK RANCH FIRE RECOVERY EFFORTS UNDERWAY

On September 2, a lightning strike ignited the Glendale Fire southwest of Bellevue, burning 4,653 acres of Rinker Rock Creek Ranch. This remarkable property, protected in 2014 by the Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy Idaho, is now managed by the University of Idaho and has since become a hub for science-based research, where ranching, recreation, and conservation intersect.

This fall, Wood River Land Trust joined forces with the University of Idaho, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Department of Fish & Game, and dedicated volunteers to carry out a post-fire stream stabilization and restoration project. Over one week, volunteers installed 100 post-assisted log structures and beaver dam analogs in the

channel to prevent erosion, slow water flow, and support reseedling with native plants to curb the spread of invasive species like cheatgrass.

With Rinker Rock Creek Ranch serving as a research hub, we have a unique opportunity to monitor the ecosystem’s recovery. Early signs of regeneration are already visible, and researchers will continue tracking wildlife, such as sage grouse, to assess the recovery. We’re incredibly grateful to the University of Idaho for their ongoing stewardship and to our volunteers and donors for their commitment to restoring and protecting these critical landscapes. A heartfelt thank you to everyone who contributed to this vital recovery effort!



Staff and volunteers carrying out post-fire recovery at Rinker Rock Creek Ranch.

FOSTERING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN CONSERVATION: REVAMPING OUR TROUT FRIENDLY YARD CERTIFICATION

Beyond large-scale restoration, individuals can also make a difference at home. This fall and winter, we’re working with partner environmental non-profits, private businesses, individual homeowners and associations, and local government partners to revamp our Trout Friendly Yard Certification. This certification informs community members how you can get involved in improving water quality, conserving water, and mitigating the risks of natural hazards in your backyard.



Aerial view of the 10,000+ acre Rinker Rock Creek Ranch, located west of Hailey.



Visit our website to take a survey to help inform updates and potential changes to our Trout Friendly Yard Certification.



**FOSTERING
COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT IN
CONSERVATION:
CITIZEN
SCIENCE BIRD
MONITORING
PROGRAM**

In the Wood River Valley, a diverse array of avian species find sanctuary amidst the lush landscapes and pristine habitats. But ensuring the protection of these feathered friends requires more than just appreciation; it takes active participation and data-driven conservation efforts. Enter the Wood River Land Trust's Citizen Science Bird Monitoring Program, a collaborative initiative empowering community members to become stewards of their natural environment and provide important data to inform management decisions.

Now in its fourth year, the Citizen Science Bird Monitoring Program began with a grant from Cornell University. With primary objectives focused on increasing our capacity for avian data collection and fostering community engagement, the program seeks to create a network of trained individuals dedicated to helping monitor bird populations across Wood River Land Trust properties.

Central to the program's success is a robust training regimen designed in collaboration with the Intermountain Bird Observatory. Volunteers undergo comprehensive instruction, including online coursework through Cornell's eBird platform and specialized bird identification workshops led by seasoned birders. Armed with newfound knowledge and skills, participants are equipped to conduct surveys during migration and breeding periods.

During a part of the spring migration (May 15-21) and the breeding season (June 14-20), community scientists traverse designated routes within five Land Trust project sites, meticulously documenting bird sightings and species diversity. Utilizing eBird technology, volunteers compile data, providing invaluable insights into avian population trends and habitat utilization. By employing sophisticated analysis techniques, trends in species richness and distribution are compiled, laying the groundwork for informed conservation strategies.

The 2024 monitoring efforts yielded remarkable findings, with volunteers recording over 2,083 birds representing 88 distinct species. Notably, sites such as Draper Wood River Preserve and Sun Peak exhibited heightened species richness during the migratory period, underscoring the importance of these habitats as critical stopover points for migratory birds. Our volunteers' observations provide crucial baseline data essential for evaluating the efficacy of restoration projects and monitoring long-term avian trends in the Wood River Valley.

Beyond the realm of data collection, the program is a way for people to get involved with environmental stewardship. By fostering meaningful connections between participants and the natural world, the initiative instills a sense of ownership and responsibility towards conservation efforts. Each year we learn more about how to enhance the program and provide ongoing support for our dedicated volunteers.

If you are interested in joining our Citizen Science Bird Monitoring Program next season, please email our Stewardship Manager, Ben Majsterek, at ben@woodriverlandtrust.org.



PROTECTING PEOPLE & WILDLIFE ON OUR ROADS

The Wood River Valley community cherishes the beautiful and abundant wildlife of our surrounding mountains and watersheds. As human presence in the valley grows, so must our attention to the impacts on wildlife and habitats. Being “wildlife smart” means preventing and mitigating conflicts with wildlife. Being wildlife smart is a key responsibility in proximity to great swaths of nature.

TRAFFIC SAFETY & THE RESIDENT ELK HERD

The issue of wildlife-vehicle collisions on State Highway 75 (SH75) is one of wildlife management, as well as one of traffic safety. The solution-making is complex. The small amount of federal funding available for safe wildlife crossings is earmarked for critical priorities located elsewhere—where the survival of a herd or species depends on safe crossing on roads intersecting migration routes. Here in the Wood River Valley, a resident elk herd has stopped migrating and taken up residence where they can enjoy food year-round. Now, they have no reason to migrate: the resident elk have found food and a largely comfortable home in the Valley. As the resident elk meander between the river and fodder on the valley floor, they risk their lives and traffic safety for the increasing number of commuters on SH75.

REDUCING WILDLIFE VEHICLE COLLISIONS: A LOCAL PROJECT

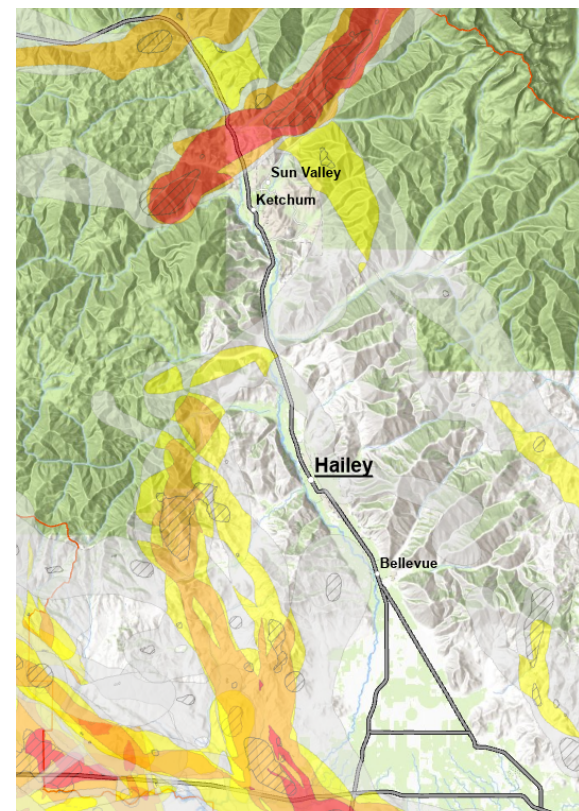
Wildlife vehicle collisions are monitored through the Blaine County Sheriff's Office, which responds to crashes, and Idaho Department of Fish & Game, which hosts a portal for people to report road kill and salvage. The Blaine County Safety Action Plan—focused on improving traffic safety—recently analyzed both crash data sources and found that **wildlife is involved in 21% of crashes on SH75 through Blaine County.**

The last time the community examined wildlife-vehicle collisions on SH75 was in 2013, following the first phase of the (current) highway expansion. About ten years ago, the Blaine County Regional Transportation Committee launched

a citizen science campaign to crowdsource wildlife-vehicle collision data, a common practice in road ecology. The local citizen science campaign found 32 of the 60 crashes north of Hailey, along the 2.5-mile section between McKercher Boulevard and Buttercup Road involved wildlife. In addition to that dataset, a group of high school students estimated that, over the course of 2013–2015, the average cost of damages in crashes was \$1,500 per vehicle and \$80,000 overall. Since then, the cost of damages in crashes involving wildlife has not been calculated.

Under the guidance of the Wood River High School's applied physics class teacher, students studied the speed at which cars could avoid or prevent collisions with wildlife spotted near or crossing the road. With the assistance of a State Police Resident Trooper and a Police Department Patrolman, the local students found that cars traveling 55 miles per hour were unable to avoid hitting a simulated deer made of cardboard boxes when it was spotted 150 feet away. The Idaho Transportation Department credited these school children and teenagers for their contributions in determining one mitigation measure: reduced nighttime speeds and signage.

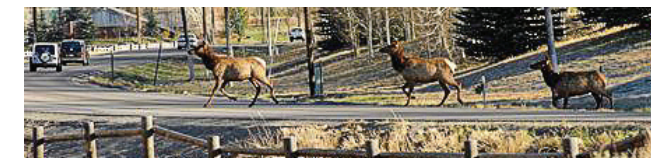
The high school students' assessment aligns with present-day recommendations. A 2021 literature review summarizes that drivers can drive about 40 miles per hour, at maximum, to avoid a wildlife-vehicle collision at night with medium headlights. The nighttime speed limit north of Hailey, between Buttercup Road and McKercher Boulevard, is currently posted at 45 miles per hour.



A snapshot of Blaine County big game migration routes and stopovers in the Smoky-Boise Complex Priority Area. Numerous migrations include pronghorn, mule deer and elk, bisecting US-20 south of Bellevue and SH-75 north of Ketchum. However, the majority of wildlife vehicle collisions on SH75 involve the resident elk herd north of Hailey. This snapshot only reflects a portion of IDFG's mapped migration routes, and the resident elk are not represented on the map.



Idaho Mountain Express photo by Emily Jones.



Idaho Mountain Express photo by Roland Lane.

ASSESSMENT: HOW CAN WE FURTHER REDUCE THE RATE OF WILDLIFE-VEHICLE COLLISIONS ON SH75?

To address this longstanding human-wildlife conflict and traffic safety issue in the community, the Wood River Land Trust has partnered with Blaine County and the Idaho Conservation League to evaluate measures to reduce the number of wildlife-vehicle collisions on the local stretch of SH75. As before, the effort is timed with the finalization of the roadway designs for the highway expansion overseen by the Idaho Transportation Department.

There are many possible ways to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions. However, factors like the geography of the constrained corridor, the location of driveway curb cuts on the highway, plus the installation and maintenance costs of potential solutions render some more feasible than others on SH75. Thanks to a generous donor, the Land Trust has secured funding to hire roadway ecologists to conduct a site-specific assessment of 5-10 measures known to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions, including:

- Roadside animal detection system
- Vegetation management
- Reduce speed limit
- Habitat enhancement and connectivity west of the highway
- Crossing structure
- Fencing and lighting in conjunction with and separate from other measures

By clarifying the benefits as well as the financial costs associated with each potential countermeasure, the site-specific assessment seeks to build consensus around a countermeasure and implement a solution. The site-specific analysis will clearly and succinctly articulate the the 1) feasibility, 2) benefits to traffic safety and habitat connectivity, and 3) the financial cost associated with each potential countermeasure.

If this is a cause you're passionate about, we'd love to hear from you! Whether you'd like to become an advocate, contribute your expertise, or simply learn more, reach out to our Community Planning Director, Cece Osborn, at cece@woodriverlandtrust.org.

ANNOUNCING OUR NEWEST CONSERVATION PROJECT – OLD CUTTERS PRESERVE

Earlier this year, the owner of a 2.5-acre parcel in Northeast Hailey generously approached us with a vision: to create Old Cutters Preserve—a place where people and wildlife can enjoy open space and access to a pond in a part of the Wood River Valley where land is being converted, and habitat is quickly disappearing.

Undeveloped upland meadows and ponds like this one are becoming increasingly rare, making the creation of Old Cutters Preserve a **strategic conservation opportunity**. Wildlife, such as elk and migratory birds, have already been using this space, and the community has enjoyed it informally for years. Thanks to the foresight and conservation-minded spirit of the landowner, this preserve will create a continuous open space and buffer between development and the mountains beyond, connecting the adjacent Old Cutters Park, Hangman Gulch, and the surrounding BLM lands. **Old Cutters Preserve will be a space where we can pause, reflect, and watch wildlife for generations to come.**

We're thrilled to share that, thanks to the landowners' donation, community member support and a generous matching challenge, we've secured the funds to make this vision a reality. Working together, this small parcel will have a big impact on our community for generations to come!



"To me it is comforting to know that my planned gift to the Wood River Land Trust will be used permanently to preserve the treasured landscapes of our Wood River Valley for future generations."

Bob Ordal
WRLT Board Member

The Simons/Bauer Preserve's new mile-long accessible trail, connecting Lions Park to Mountain Humane.



WELCOME, ZOE!

We are thrilled to welcome Zoe Napolitano as our newest full-time team member, stepping into the role of Stewardship Coordinator. After making a significant impact supporting restoration projects and advancing our conservation efforts during her time as our 2024 Summer Intern, we're thrilled Zoe has now joined us full-time, thanks to a generous capacity-building grant from a dedicated donor.

Growing up in Hawaii, Zoe spent her youth immersed in nature—hiking, camping, and exploring the outdoors. Her passion for the environment has taken her around the world, including volunteering in Africa, traveling extensively, and capturing her adventures through photography. Zoe recently returned to the U.S. after seven years in England, where she earned her undergraduate degree in Animal Behavior and Welfare and a Master's in Applied Wildlife Conservation.

Her passion and expertise will play a key role in our stewardship efforts. Zoe will be helping with preserve management, habitat restoration, and scientific monitoring. If you see her out on the trails, make sure to say hello and welcome her to the Land Trust team!



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Wood River Land Trust is a 501(c)(3) organization (Tax ID: 82-0474191). Contributions are tax deductible as allowed by law. Public financial information is available by contacting our office.



PRESENTED BY: WOOD RIVER LAND TRUST THE COMMUNITY LIBRARY

Native wood duck that can be seen at our Draper Preserve boardwalk. Photo by Michael Olenick

2025 THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY SPEAKER SERIES

Join the Wood River Land Trust at The Community Library this winter as we discuss how our local actions contribute to broader global conservation efforts.

Wednesday, January 15, 5:30 PM



Landscape-Scale Conservation: From the Heart of the Rockies Spanning Six Continents with Gary Tabor

Ecologist, Wildlife Veterinarian, and Founder and President of the Center for Large Landscape Conservation

Wednesday, February 19, 5:30 PM



Restoring the Dignity of Our Rivers with Colin Thorne

Emeritus Professor and Chair of Physical Geography at the University of Nottingham, UK, and River Scientist at Wolf Water Resources in Oregon

Tuesday, March 11, 5:30 PM



GNARly Solutions: Conserving What We Love about the Wood River Valley with Danya Rumore

Director of the Environmental Dispute Resolution Program at the University of Utah and Founder of the GNAR Initiative

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