For a majority of Idahoans, this state is much more than our home.

For a majority of Idahoans, this state is much more than our home. It’s our playground, our livelihood and even our church. The collective fondness most residents feel for our great state extends beyond loyalty. It’s more aptly a devotion to the rivers, mountains and open spaces that sustain our bodies, minds and spirits. As more and more people realize how special Idaho is, the need is ever present to protect our state’s unique character.

Idaho Stories of the Land will share narratives of landowners, land trusts and people from across the state who are working to protect and restore Idaho’s lands and waters. Many of the forthcoming stories are about conservation easements that celebrate the preservation of working farms and ranches, while protecting wildlife corridors, native fish habitat, and open space for trails and recreation. All of the stories speak to the need for protecting Idaho’s future while preserving our past and culture.

Land Trusts function as a voice and advocate for such special places in need of protection. Idaho land trusts have assisted private landowners in conserving over 320,000 acres across the state, ensuring that character of our majestic rangeland, the productivity of our agricultural lands, the economics of our working timberlands, and the health of our lakes, streams and wildlife habitat remain intact.

The Idaho Coalition of Land Trusts works with twenty of Idaho’s Land Trusts with the goal of maintaining working farms, forests, and ranches while supporting forests, water quality, wildlife habitat, recreation through voluntary, private-property conservation efforts.
Instant love. That’s what Diana Bryant felt for the old Cox Dude Ranch when she saw it for the first time, “covered to the top fence rail in snow with its red roofs gleaming against the white in the sunshine.” She signed the papers before the snow melted and arrived in June to restore the property into what it is now known as Wapiti Meadow Ranch.

The ranch borders the 2.3 million acres of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness to the east and fifty miles of backcountry to the west, making it a refuge for not only humans, but also critical habitat for fish and wildlife. Johnson Creek runs through and borders the property and is vital spawning ground for Chinook salmon. In fact, just a two-mile stretch of the creek provides 95 percent of the habitat for spawning salmon in the drainage. Bull trout, westslope cutthroat, steelhead and rainbow trout are also prolific in these waters, which drain into the South Fork of the Salmon River. Annually, one hundred elk make their home in and around Wapiti Meadow, hence the ranch’s namesake.

The land has a rich history, emblematic of Idaho’s cultural heritage. Over the years the property has traded hands from a prospector who couldn’t make a living during the Thunder Mountain Gold Rush to a homesteader who grew vegetables in the lush valley to feed nearby miners. The Cox family took ownership in the mid-1920s, establishing the Cox Dude Ranch. Diana purchased the ranch in 1986, converting and restoring it into a guest ranch and an Orvis-Endorsed fly-fishing lodge.

Wapiti Meadow Ranch now functions beyond a place for folks to rest their heads. In 2010 Diana worked in cooperation with the Nez Perce Tribe, the Pacific Northwest Salmon Recovery Fund, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to develop an Aquatic Habitat Restoration Plan for the property, as well as a conservation easement to further protect this historic and wild piece of Idaho. The meadows will be managed and preserved for wildlife populations. The streams will be improved upon and monitored for salmon and steelhead fry habitat. The ranch can no longer be altered, built upon, or timbered (without plan and approval) in perpetuity.

Diana says it’s difficult to put into words her affection for the ranch – it’s beyond a love for the scenery, the adventure of living remotely and the joy in seeing and hearing her wildlife neighbors. She is grateful that, through her husbandry of the land and the conservation easement, future generations will able to enjoy Wapiti Meadows Ranch. She says, “This spot is an important part of Idaho’s history and heritage, and it’s my hope that I will have some part in its preservation – the land, the structures, the stories.”
Merrill Beyeler can be described as a teacher, a father and grandfather, a legislator, a rancher and stockman. He can also be labeled a guardian, a partner and a steward for his efforts protecting his land for future generations. Nearly 2,400 acres of conservation easements have been placed on Beyeler Ranches, improving not only rangeland and wildlife habitat, but providing a choice for his grandchildren to stay in Leadore and work the family’s viable, producing ranch.

In 2010, Beyeler placed conservation easements on his private land near Leador in the Lemhi Valley with the intention of supporting sustainable agricultural practices. At the same time he partnered with Trout Unlimited and other nonprofit groups, as well as state and federal agencies, to restore a portion of Little Springs Creek that runs through the property. This key tributary of the Lemhi River is critical to migrating salmon and steelhead. By rerouting water and reconnecting just two miles of streams, the project gave fish access to seventy-miles of very valuable habitat.

The restoration project not only improved aquatic and riparian habitat, it also has had a lasting economic benefit for the community. The conservation easements allowed Beyeler to place a pivot on his land, increasing profits and providing the community with an example of how progressive land management has economic value. The collective partnership permitted valuable resources to be reconditioned with a huge payoff for fish and wildlife, as well as the adjacent community.

Often in life, the right thing is sometimes the hardest. For Merrill Beyeler, hard work combined with a marriage of agriculture and conservation have eliminated barriers for spawning salmon, as well as provided economic value to a community and family ranch. Beyeler says of the experience, “It hasn’t been easy, but it’s been worth it.”
The Boise Foothills

The foothills help define Boise and are part of its DNA.

Boise may be the City the Trees, but just as emblematic as the tree-lined Boise River are the foothills that contour the city. Tim Breuer, Executive Director of the Land Trust of the Treasure Valley, says the foothills help define Boise and are part of its DNA. “They are fundamental to our marketing strategy and economic development, as well as our quality of life,” Breuer explains.

For many residents, the foothills are the reason to call Boise home. The city is unique with urban amenities just minutes away from access to trails and open space. The foothills allow recreational enthusiasts of all walks an opportunity to escape the city and enjoy nature. The intersecting trails that overlook the valley weave through public and private lands, depending on cooperation not only from trails users, but also a collective effort from different partners to protect, restore and maintain the open spaces that nourish so many both physically and emotionally.

Fred Alleman, an avid trail user and outdoor enthusiast, saw the work being done by the City to protect the open spaces in the Boise Foothills and decided to get involved. Fred recalls, “I had some money I had accumulated over the years, and I thought, that’s what I want my legacy to be.” In addition to the $320,000 from the 2001 Foothills Serial Levy Fund, Fred’s donation of $1 million helped the City acquire the 1,320 acres of land in the Stack Rock area, one of the most iconic features of the Foothills, as well as a popular destination for hikers, mountain bikers, and rock climbers.

In 2013, The Land Trust of the Treasure Valley worked with three separate land owners in creating trail easements, providing a shorter and more direct route to Stack Rock. Previously, the trail access was over nine miles long from Bogus Basin Ski Resort, a long hike for most people. The new 4.86 mile trail, aptly named Freddy’s Stack Rock Loop Trail, gives people who otherwise would never have been able to reach this iconic Boise landmark a chance to see and enjoy it. Fred says, “I go up there now and just think all the use that it’s getting; it’s just terrific.”
Conservation and value for nature are in Mark Rockefeller’s genes. Growing up, he spent time at the family’s JY Ranch near Jackson, Wyoming, where his uncle Laurance instilled in him “a real love and passion and appreciation for unspoiled nature and the importance of the natural world.” The family’s devotion to preserving and sharing natural spaces is unmistakable with their impact on Grand Teton National Park and the surrounding area.

Twenty-five years ago this summer, Mark continued his family’s legacy of conservation stewardship when he fell in love with the South Fork of the Snake River. Mark’s property, now known as Eagle Rock Ranch, was a highly sensitive and biodiverse area valued not only as critical habitat for wildlife, (it’s the largest native Yellowstone cutthroat trout fishery outside of Yellowstone National Park), but it’s also known for its incredible beauty and value as a natural treasure. In addition, the area provides recreation and world-class fishing for thousands who visit the South Fork of the Snake River each year, supporting Idaho’s economy and providing myriad jobs in the state’s tourism industries.

When Mark began his quest for property of his own, this sensitive part of the South Fork Canyon was slated for development – a 66-homesite subdivision complete with a golf course and boat marina. Working with the Conservation Fund, the Nature Conservancy, the BLM and willing landowners, Mark assembled more than 2,200 acres in total through multiple land transactions and eventually placed a conservation easement on about 545 acres of riverfront property. Mark gives credit to the conservation groups and land owners whose collective effort helped to protect and enhance this “treasure.” Mark Elsbree of the Conservation Fund describes the project as “one of the most far-reaching and significant private land protection efforts in the West.”

Mark began immediate work of restoring and enhancing the property, reclaiming thousands of acres of prairie and sage and creating habitat for native wildlife. Mark says, “One of the greatest joys of all has been seeing the response from wildlife, particularly the sharp-tail. We had no sharp-tail on the ranch, no habitat, and now we’re just overflowing with sharp-tail up there. And also to see things like the mule deer moving back into the country and to see badgers and song birds that are all now flourishing. That has been really wonderful.”

Eagle Rock Ranch exemplifies the belief that such spaces require a balance between preservation and access, and the South Fork of the Snake River will now be enjoyed by many as a place of refuge and solitude. He says, “I have enormous value for unspoiled nature and to see that area, which is so biodiverse and so breathtakingly beautiful, to know it’s in many ways safe and protected, there’s piece of mind knowing that it can be enjoyed by many people for many, many years, and hopefully forever.”
An oasis exists in Moscow where children get glimpses of wildlife on their daily commute to school. Ducks, geese, songbirds, pheasant, raccoons, muskrats, cottontails, and occasionally, beaver provide uncommon companionship and a welcomed pause during the urban shuffle to and from school.

The twenty acres owned and now preserved by Maynard and Margaret Fosberg is in the heart of Moscow. The Fosbergs purchased the property in 1951 when their land was considered too far out of town for public services, like milk delivery. Gradually the city grew up around them, making their little homestead a natural sanctuary in the midst of urban development. The property would have been an ideal subdivision with its central location in town, but the Fosbergs appreciated the land far beyond its monetary value. In 1999 they worked with the Palouse Land Trust to permanently protect their property from future urbanizing, ensuring that it would retain its natural, scenic and agricultural function, as well as provide valuable open space for the town of Moscow.

The Fosberg’s conservation ethic of valuing open space and appreciating nature motivated them to improve on the property by restoring a portion of Paradise Creek and reestablishing native Palouse prairie to the segment of the land not producing hay. They worked closely with the Latah Soil and Water Conservation District and the Palouse Prairie Foundation to plant riparian vegetation, as well as native grasses, to restore the health and habitat of the creek and the prairie, making welcomed and unexpected habitat for wildlife in town.

Amy Trujillo, Executive Director of the Palouse Land Trust, explains that often projects such as this aren’t valued as highly as the bigger, “sexier” conservation projects, but the little spaces are just as important. Projects such as the Fosberg’s are highly visible and make a big impact on the community at large. She says each day kids get little experiences with nature adding up to big impressions over time.

Not only have the Fosbergs taken great steps to return a portion of urban Moscow to its original state, but they have created a natural sanctuary for wildlife and the community to enjoy. Sometimes it’s the little projects such as this that create the biggest ripples.
Sherwood Forest

“It’s a bigger way of thinking about the work that land trusts do, and that’s exciting.”

The name Sherwood Forest elicits an air of whimsy, even a hopeful exuberance, thanks to its association with the legend of Robin Hood. There’s a modern day Sherwood Forest in Sandpoint that evokes similar feelings, thanks to a local couple’s desire to protect and share their own whimsical place with fellow nature enthusiasts.

Sherwood Forest, also known as Syringa Trails, is 140 acres of natural forest with myriad trails accessible by the public and located about a mile from downtown Sandpoint. The area is not only a welcomed haven for recreationalists looking for a morning hike or lunchtime bike ride (it boasts over ten miles of single-track trails), but it has also been identified as important habitat for white-tail deer, moose, black bear and other critters.

Landowners Mark and Susie Kubiak wanted to ensure the protection of the property from development and encroachment of residential, commercial and industrial uses. Working with the Kaniksu Land Trust, a conservation easement was placed on the property. The easement first protects natural habitat and open space, but it also allows for the marriage of recreation and sustainable forestry and agriculture, as a portion of the property has been allotted for such uses.

Kaniksu Land Trust Executive Director, Eric Grace, says the protection of this property is a huge benefit to the local community and contributes to the quality of life so many seek in the Sandpoint area. Over 350 visitors a week were recorded visiting Sherwood Forest early last summer.

And then there is the art. Grace says an unexpected and whimsical element to the property is the natural material sculptures created by Mark Kubiak that dot the property. He says, “You’ll be going for a hike, and you’ll turn a corner, and there’s a sculpted wooden bust or a stone-carved head. It’s really fun and provides the user a different type of outdoor experience.”

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“...”

Kaniksu Land Trust

Stories of the Land
Russo Property

The Teton Range is arguably one of the most emblematic and most-photographed mountain ranges in North America. Creating a portion of the border between Idaho and Wyoming, the Teton Range’s ethereal beauty inspires both artistic and recreational enthusiasts seeking adventure, solace, or creative muse.

Frank and Maryann Russo valued and treasured the landscape created by these striking mountains near the town of Driggs, Idaho, describing it as “one of the most beautiful places on Earth.” In 2014, the Russos purchased 70 acres of land bordering the Caribou-Targhee National Forest in Teton Canyon. Working with the Teton Regional Land Trust, they placed a conservation easement on the property protecting it from future development and preserving the view for generations to come.

At one time, the area was under threat of development with multiple condos slated to dot this picturesque valley. The area is very visible to anyone who has driven to Targhee Ski Resort, as it lies adjacent to Ski Hill Road and the Forest Service Road. Not only is the property appreciated for its scenic beauty, but it also rich with wildlife and valuable habitat. Mill Creek, which is a tributary of Teton Creek, flows through the property creating riparian vegetation ideal for an array of species, ranging from trout and big game to raptors and songbirds.

Having the property’s scenic views in mind, the Russos specifically placed and sized the height of future structures to be hidden or to blend in with the landscape so as to not interfere with the Teton’s views. The property will primarily be reserved for agricultural uses. Frank and Maryann understood the threat such treasured places are under and had the means and the motivation to protect what Renee Heibert, Conservation Specialists for the Teton Regional Land Trust, defines as “the iconic property of Teton Valley.” She says, “Some of the main recreation focus here in the Valley is going out to Teton Canyon or driving out to Targhee with those amazing Teton views. It’s amazing to know it’s protected.”

“One of the most beautiful places on Earth.”

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Stories of the Land
A community space that embraces public access, conservation and restoration work, as well as a bit of romance.

When it comes to the work of land trusts, often the projects that make the most noise or receive the greatest attention are those that are big, expansive and often expensive. It’s sometimes the less-grand projects, the ones that are overlooked or viewed as less valuable, that have a way of making the biggest impression, pulling on our heartstrings the most.

There is such a project in Hailey where the community created a space that embraces public access, conservation and restoration work, as well as a bit of romance.

The Hailey Greenway Restoration Project transformed a city dump into a functioning wetland, improved wildlife habitat and water quality in the floodplain, while providing the community an opportunity to enjoy nature out their backdoors. This multifaceted project links a number of projects completed by the Wood River Land Trust and provides improved public access to a sensitive area via a pedestrian bridge across the river, a boardwalk and trail system.

The area is enjoyed by birders and wildlife watchers, morel-mushroom hunters, dog walkers, and even lovers. A cottonwood tree along the trail has become known as the heart-rock tree. Someone picked up a heart-shaped rock and placed it in the tree’s base. Over time, others added to it creating a collection of heart rocks decorating the tree’s bark. The tree is a special “iconic” place as described by Boettger, and has even become a destination for wedding engagements.

What began as a stream bank restoration project grew into a community treasure and an opportunity for land trusts to demonstrate that the scope of their work extends beyond large ranches. Boettger says success for land trusts lies in getting people involved with land conservation who don’t actually own land. He says, “I like to say that we could do our job, and we could go and acquire a piece of property and put a sign that says ‘keep out, this is too important for people.’ We lose in the long run. We need to get people to not just own that land, but respect it as their own and value it. That’s when you really protect land.”
For four generations, the O’Neal family has called this valley home.

Home to bighorn sheep, antelope, wolves and black bears, the Pahsimeroi Valley is wild and rugged. The valley provides important winter range for elk and deer. Sage grouse are no strangers to the area.

For four generations, the O’Neal family has called this valley home. The O’Neal Ranch straddles the Lemhi-Custer county line, flanked by sagebrush and towering peaks. The working family ranch is now managed by Ted and Debbie O’Neal.

In 2013 the O’Neal family placed a conservation easement on the property to ensure the functionality and vitality of the ranch. Working in coordination with the Lemhi Regional Land Trust and the Idaho Chapter of The Nature Conservancy with funding from the Snake River Basin Adjudication Habitat Fund, the 353-acre ranch will be preserved for generations to come.

Additionally, the easement helps to protect and enhance the habitat of native fish and wildlife by protecting the many springheads on the property. When asked why they chose to place a conservation easement on their ranch, Ted O’Neal simply said, “This keeps us whole.”

The O’Neal conservation easement is the second in a package of four Pahsimeroi Valley conservation easements as part of a joint venture between Lemhi Regional Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy. Ultimately this package will result in nearly 5,800 acres under conservation easements and permanent protection for approximately 5 3/4 miles of the Pahsimeroi River, two miles of Pahsimeroi River tributaries, and spring and wetland sources.

The O’Neal Ranch is yet another example of the cooperative efforts of like-minded people who wish to see not only natural resources restored and protected, but that family ranches remain functional for generations to follow. Thanks to efforts of the O’Neal family and others, the vitality of the Pahsimeroi Valley has been sustained, and the local economy has received a boost, as well.

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Stories of the Land
The Sagebrush Steppe Land Trust secured permanent protection of the headwaters of Little Blackfoot River by accepting the gift of a conservation easement from Ronn and Roberta Rich. The Rich family has a long history in the sheep business in Caribou County dating back over a century. Ronn and Roberta, who make their home in Coeur d’Alene, came into ownership of some of the family ranch ground, and they approached the land trust with the idea of protecting the natural habitat of the rangeland. Much of the nearby landscape was being converted to 10- and 20-acre cabin sites. “The neighboring ground was being carved up, and we simply want to preserve some of the historic use that our family had always enjoyed,” said Ronn Rich. The 250-acre parcel that holds the beginning of the Little Blackfoot, and another 400-acre parcel west of Blackfoot Reservoir, is now under an easement intended to protect the wildlife and natural resources. The properties remain in private ownership and are to be managed for both livestock use and wildlife protection. The Little Blackfoot property has the riparian corridor, extensive wetlands, a large pond, and hillsides covered with groves of aspens and conifers. The aspen groves have carvings (some slightly ribald) in the tree bark from decades of Basque sheepherders using the site as a sheltered campsite while they tended the sheep.

“It is a beautiful spot in the world; it was such a pleasure to work with the land trust to refine the means to preserve the ground. Their conservation vision, first and foremost, shaped our conversations, and enabled us to do our little part in leaving the world a gift of a shared landscape,” stated Mr. Rich. The land trust works to protect and restore natural habitat and agricultural ground in the seven counties of Southeast Idaho. SSLT, now in its eleventh year, holds both conservation easements and nature preserves. It has focused on protection of both the Bonneville and Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout habitat, and holds prime elk-wintering ground in both Bear Lake and Franklin Counties. Working with private landowners, business corporations, and public agencies the non-profit organization seeks to preserve land for future generations. “It is a tremendous feeling to receive a gift of nature,” stated SSLT director Jerry DeBacker, “The generosity of the Rich’s in dedicating this ground to future generations only comes along every now and then- it was a pleasure to work with landowners who wanted to protect the natural resources we all appreciate so much in Idaho!”
Wrap Up

“One cannot be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope. When it fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.” Wallace Stegner, The Sound of Mountain Water

These vignettes celebrate wild, cherished and often threatened places. They also speak to cooperation, trust and hope that such places will be protected and enjoyed for generations.

The work that Land Trusts do is so much more than protecting open space. Land Trusts work to protect and enhance the places that make our state such a wild and treasured place. They help preserve rangeland and wildlife habitat while balancing preservation and access. They assist communities in creating welcomed and sometimes unexpected places for people to enjoy nature. They preserve a way of life and in a way, freeze time to allow future generations a chance to walk and work the lands, fish the rivers and gaze at unobstructed mountain vistas.

This brief project shared just a few of the many triumphant stories of similar successes around our fine state. The lands varied in use and intention, history and location, but they all shared the common goal of protecting spaces for future use. No single project would have been achieved without the cooperative partnership from land trusts, conservation groups, state and federal agencies, and especially motivated land owners who have both foresight and vision. The conservation ethic shared by each of the noted land owners reflects not only a desire to protect the lands for wildlife and habitat but also a desire to preserve part of our past and our culture.

We want to thank the Land Trust Alliance for their generous support with the production of this book.
STORIES OF THE LAND

Blaine County Land, Water & Wildlife
Hailey, ID

City of Boise Foothills and Open Space Program
Boise, ID

The Conservation Fund, Northwest Regional Office
Hailey, ID

Heart of the Rockies Initiative
Driggs, ID

Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands

Kaniksu Land Trust
Sandpoint, ID

Land Trust of the Treasure Valley
Boise, ID

LegacyWorks Group

Lemhi Regional Land Trust
Salmon, ID

The Nature Conservancy, Idaho Chapter
Hailey, ID

Palouse Land Trust
Moscow, ID

Payette Land Trust
McCall, ID

Pheasants Forever

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Boise, ID

Sagebrush Steppe Land Trust
Pocatello, ID

Teton Regional Land Trust
Driggs, ID

Trout Unlimited

The Trust for Public Land, Northern Rockies
Helena, MT

The Vital Ground Foundation
Missoula, MT

Western Rivers Conservancy
CO

The Wilderness Land Trust
Carbondale, CO

Wood River Land Trust
Hailey, ID