

U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

PARTNERS FOR FISH & WILDLIFE PROGRAM

Montana • Colorado • Utah • Wyoming



PARTNERS FOR FISH & WILDLIFE PROGRAM MISSION:

To efficiently achieve voluntary habitat restoration on private lands, through financial and technical assistance, for the benefit of federal trust species.

ABOUT US

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW) provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and tribes who are willing to work with them and other partners on a voluntary basis to help meet the habitat needs of federal trust species. Through voluntary agreements, PFW provides expert technical assistance and cost-share incentives directly to private landowners to restore fish and wildlife habitats. Locally-based field biologists work one-on-one with private landowners and other partners to plan, implement, and monitor their projects. PFW field staff help landowners find sources

of funding and assist them through the permitting process, as necessary. This level of personal attention and follow-through is a significant strength of the program that has led to its popularity among landowners and record of success. Implemented by thousands of private landowners across the Nation, PFW supports strong local economies and agricultural productivity/profitability while enhancing fish and wildlife populations in support of the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

PFW'S CORNERSTONES FOR COLLABORATING WITH PRIVATE LANDOWNERS INCLUDE:

- Trust
- Respect
- Honesty
- Flexibility
- Friendship
- Two-way communication

Without a close partnership with private landowners, we will never recognize our most critical fish and wildlife objectives.

Excerpt from USFWS Mountain-Prairie Region's Regional Priorities (Oct 2015)



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

PARTNERS FOR FISH & WILDLIFE PROGRAM

ARCTIC GRAYLING REVIVAL

**FOURTH-GENERATION RANCHER PRESERVES
MONTANA'S NATURAL HERITAGE**

By Kristen A. Schmitt



Photo by Mark Conlin

The Big Hole River, a well-known fly-fishing paradise, winds between the Anaconda Range and the Pioneer Mountains, spanning 156 miles across southwestern Montana. It flows past the small town of Wisdom where Blake Huntley, a fourth-generation rancher, raises about 1,500 cattle in the valley. It's also one of the last remaining places in the contiguous United States to find Arctic Grayling. A cousin of the trout, this member of the salmonid family is known for its large colorful sail-like dorsal fin and beautiful iridescent hues, and has been on and off the candidate list for Endangered Species Act protection for years.



Historically, Arctic Grayling were found in both Michigan and Montana, but have since vanished from the Great Lakes state where there is a current effort to restore self-sustaining populations within its historical range. An important part of Montana's natural heritage, Arctic Grayling were once widespread throughout the Missouri River drainage. Now, the Big Hole River is one of the few remaining places where strictly river dwelling grayling exist in Montana.

It's essential to work with landowners to alleviate threats impacting the future of Arctic Grayling.

"Montana Arctic grayling have been on the radar for listing since the early 90s," says Jim Magee, a private lands biologist for U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program in Montana.

PFW, which works with private landowners on a voluntary basis to restore and enhance habitat for Federal Trust Species while supporting working lands through financial and technical assistance, has been a critical ally to the recovery of Arctic Grayling. This is because 90% of Arctic Grayling habitat in the Big Hole Valley falls on private lands, which are owned by traditional livestock cattle ranchers like Huntley who raise cows and grow hay.



Because this fish species primarily exists on private lands, it is “essential to work with landowners to alleviate threats impacting the future of Arctic Grayling,” says Magee, which is why Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation worked with the FWS and private landowners to establish a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) program for Big Hole Arctic Grayling. The CCAA allows landowners to develop and implement conservation plans to address the threats to Arctic Grayling like inadequate stream flows, channel and riparian habitat, fish passage or entraining grayling in irrigation ditches. “In return,” says Magee, “the landowners get what we call regulatory assurances, which means if the species is listed, they’d only be required to do what they’ve already agreed to. Essentially, it provides landowners peace of mind from potential Endangered Species Act concerns and helps to ensure their ability to have economically sustainable operations.”

“It’s all about partnerships and developing trust,” adds Magee.

Huntley, who is one of 33 landowners enrolled in the CCAA, couldn’t agree more.

“You couldn’t have this level of success if only one or two ranchers were involved,” says Huntley, adding that the CCAA has about 150,000 acres currently enrolled, including 3,350 acres of his land. With the help of CCAA partners, Huntley has installed headgates and measuring devices on his property to improve efficiency and regulate the flow within his irrigation system and fencing along the riverbanks to control seasonal grazing and enhance riparian vegetation. Other projects coordinated by PFW and the CCAA partners that Huntley has been involved with include restoring riverbanks by planting willows, repairing structural bank damage, and installing fish passage structures and stock water systems.



“Without the landowner commitment—without their buy in, it’s not going to work,” says Huntley. “That’s what I love about CCAA. You’ve got great people on the ground who know what needs to be done to help species like the Arctic Grayling while also listening to what we as landowners value, too. They want our viewpoints and our involvement.”

While Huntley points out that there have been some challenges beyond their control — like droughts that have impacted water levels in previous years—for the most part, the projects completed by him and other landowners have proven successful.

“We’re super fortunate because we have a great monitoring program,” says Magee. “We’ve developed a toolbox to address threats and we measure habitat response based upon those conservation metrics.”

One way they monitor is by measuring stream flows. Magee points out that they hit their flow targets 75% of the time, which was what they had hoped to do. They also keep tabs on the grayling response and have seen the average number of breeding individuals increase 66% from 2006-2011 to 2015-2018, suggesting that the Arctic Grayling population is benefiting from on-going conservation efforts.

“It’s a great formula because we have the ability to measure both the habitat response and the fish response, and keep private working lands in production,” says Magee. ■



Riparian areas and instream habitats are important features in the Big Hole Valley of Montana and contribute to the conservation of Arctic Grayling. In addition, privately-owned wet meadows provide important habitat for many wildlife species including pronghorn, sandhill cranes, and greater sage grouse. Conservation investments on working lands in this area reap multiple benefits for many species.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

PARTNERS FOR FISH & WILDLIFE PROGRAM

LEAVING A LEGACY

PRIVATE LANDOWNERS RESTORE WETLANDS FOR WATERFOWL & LIVESTOCK

By Kristen A. Schmitt

Spring thaw has arrived in the San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado. And, with it, comes thousands of waterbirds, migrating from their winter to summer ranges, ready to establish nesting sites for another generation of cinnamon teal, mallard, Wilson's phalarope, and more. Once considered a waterfowl mecca, the San Luis Valley has experienced changes in land use and water availability that have reduced the amount of nesting and migratory habitat. Decreased precipitation, increased water usage, and declining aquifers have further complicated the issue. However, in 1970, a group of eight waterfowl hunters and conservation enthusiasts dubbed Eight High Ltd., took over management of 530 acres in Alamosa County with the goal of bringing the land back to its former glory.

The opportunity to manage, to understand how water and land come together, is what binds everybody together.

"Conserving this area comes from wanting to leave a legacy for the future," says Eight High Ltd. member Steven Deitemeyer, who points out that the club has owned the land for 50 years and is currently in its third generation of owners. "Not only for the waterfowl and wildlife on the property, but also for the families that are involved. The opportunity to manage, to understand how water and land come together, is what binds everybody together."

But changing the layout and improving habitat wasn't an easy task, which is why Eight High Ltd. collaborated with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program—a program that they've been involved with since 1992. The goal of the PFW program is to partner with private landowners on a voluntary basis to restore and enhance habitat for Federal Trust Species while supporting working lands.

PFW provides technical and financial assistance, which is often leveraged with funding from other agencies, organizations and private landowners. Some of that financial assistance comes directly from Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW), which is unique since other states rarely have similar arrangements, says Brian Sullivan, CPW Wetlands Program Coordinator.

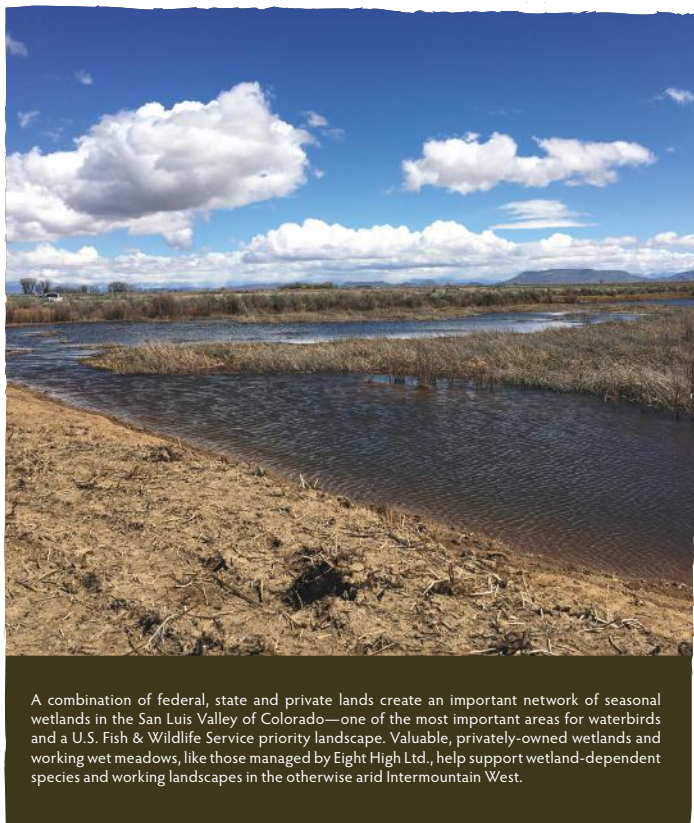
"Great Outdoors Colorado [state lottery] funding awarded to CPW back in 1997 enabled us to really scale up our wetland and riparian conservation work and expand our partnerships," says Sullivan. "We now have an agreement where we provide funding to PFW on an annual basis. It really helps them expand the scale of their work and it's been a great partnership."

"We try to identify the roles and expertise of what each partner brings to the table," says Brandon Miller, a local field biologist with the Colorado PFW program working in the Southwest and San Luis Valley focus areas. "That way we can leverage our technical abilities, financial assistance, contacts—whatever it may be to maximize our impact in the Valley."



Miller works directly with Eight High Ltd. and coordinated their most recent project, which concentrated on enhancing a five-acre parcel of existing wetlands and working wet meadows. Miller designed new levees that follow contours of the land on both sides of an existing island. The addition of these levees and the installation of a flow-through water control structure allows Eight High Ltd. to move water, fluctuate water depths and manage for desirable vegetation structure and composition, while extending the upper limits of the wetland footprint.

Once dry, the wetland has now come back to life with the recent improvements, allowing native grasses, sedges, and forbs to flourish, which is beneficial to waterbirds and other wildlife that depend on this type of ecosystem. It's also helpful to Kit Page, who leases the property from Eight High Ltd. for grazing. Page utilizes rest-rotation grazing to support native plant diversity, health, and vigor.



A combination of federal, state and private lands create an important network of seasonal wetlands in the San Luis Valley of Colorado—one of the most important areas for waterbirds and a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service priority landscape. Valuable, privately-owned wetlands and working wet meadows, like those managed by Eight High Ltd., help support wetland-dependent species and working landscapes in the otherwise arid Intermountain West.

“Kit’s very supportive of this project,” says Jim Ficke, president of Eight High Ltd. “He’s both our lessee and our caretaker...he knows our land as well as we do and this project benefits him, too.”

Finding the “win-win balance between waterfowl habitat and grazing needs” was central to the project, says Miller. Because the landowners and rancher were on the same page, that balance was easily met with the added benefit of expanding the wetlands and increased livestock forage production.

In the eyes of Miller, Ficke, Deitemeyer and other members of Eight High Ltd., the project is a success thanks to the strong partnership between PFW

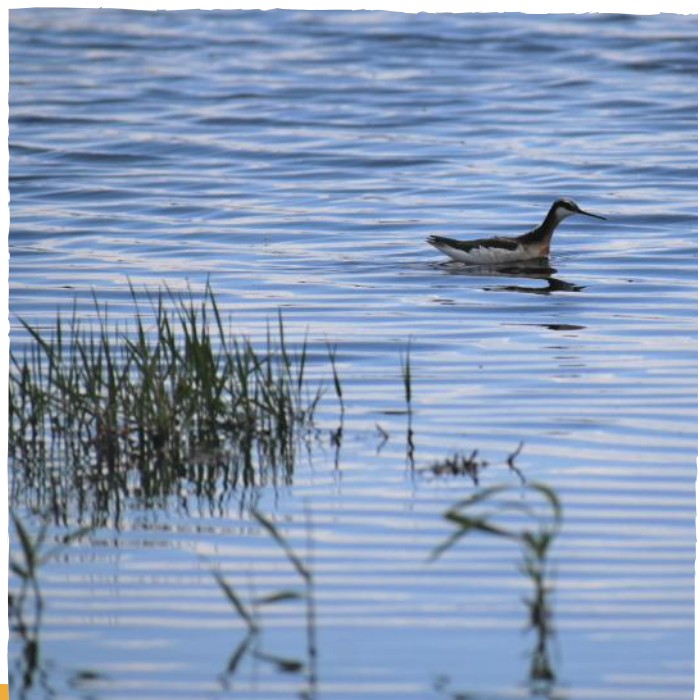
and CPW. This partnership has also completed numerous other conservation projects involving installation and/or repair of flood irrigation infrastructure throughout the San Luis Valley.

“We get a tremendous display of sandhill cranes, waterfowl and shorebirds,” says Deitemeyer. “We also have a larger contingent of nesting birds that come and stay.” During annual migrations, the majority of the Rocky Mountain population of sandhill cranes spends approximately 3 to 4 months in the San Luis Valley.

Over the next few years, they plan to use walk-throughs, bird counts and photography to monitor the number of waterfowl using the area—both for stopover and nesting—and document vegetation change over time. As for future projects, Eight High Ltd. is already looking at other areas of their land to improve for waterfowl and other wildlife.

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“I would encourage people who want to do similar projects to utilize the PFW program,” says Deitemeyer. “They’re great at bringing together partners and resources for private lands. Our experience is that you’ll find a shared motivation and interest and, then, be able to leave that legacy.” ■



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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THE CONSERVATION GUARDIAN

FIFTH-GENERATION RANCHER USES CATTLE TO CONTROL INVASIVES

By Kristen A. Schmitt

Jagged snow-capped mountains frame farmland along the Bear River where a herd of cattle graze on phragmites, content on foraging the invasive plant currently overrunning Utah's native wetlands. It's part of an unusual grazing system established by Joel Ferry, a fifth-generation farmer and current representative of J Y Ferry and Sons, Inc., a livestock and farming operation near Corinne, Utah. It's also a solution to keeping the rapidly expanding invasive reed from displacing native plants and native wildlife—one of the many conservation-based projects interwoven into the Ferrys' family business.

"It's not super common for ranchers to teach their cattle to forage on phragmites because most do not have access to large wetland areas," says Karl Fleming, the Utah State Coordinator for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's (FWS) Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW), which is a voluntary private lands habitat restoration program that provides landowners interested in restoring fish and wildlife habitat with financial and technical assistance. "Through intense grazing, they've been able to reduce the phragmites found on their private property and surrounding areas."

The Ferrys are conservation-minded with a conservation ethic.



These areas include wetlands adjoining the Great Salt Lake, the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and other state management areas. This landscape is one of the most important in North America for wetland birds and millions fly through every year. Through rotational grazing, the Ferrys' livestock stunts the growth of the oppressive invasive plant, resulting in open water areas for waterfowl and shorebird use. This targeted grazing pattern provides forage for the cattle and benefits birds like White-faced Ibis, Great Blue Herons and Cinnamon Teal that use the migratory flyway.

"I have better forage for my cattle to graze on, cleaner water for them to drink," says Ferry, whose family has been raising cattle and growing crops in this valley for 120 years. "I have more abundant water for my crops to use. It's not just a one-sided equation. By utilizing resources like PFW, we become more efficient and sustainable and the wetlands become healthier and more productive. It's better for the entire system."

"I love the land and I love what I do," continues Ferry. "And I'm willing to invest in what I do because I can see the difference it makes."

For Ferry, that investment is twofold. On one hand it is establishing relationships with federal agencies like the FWS, and utilizing the services and expertise provided by PFW staff. On the other it is looking at ways

to diversify the profitability of the landscape while managing the habitat for future successions of wildlife. One way he does this is by running a private hunting operation in the fall, which helps generate income, while also providing quality habitat for nesting and migratory birds in the spring and summer.

“They recognize the value of additional wetland areas and enhancement of those wetland areas for migratory birds,” says Fleming. “The Ferrys are conservation-minded with a conservation ethic. They’re always looking at different ways to accomplish things to benefit them as the landowners and also the wildlife.”

For example, the Ferrys’ first project with PFW was to mechanically remove invasive salt cedar from their property along the Bear River. Salt cedar typically inhabits riparian areas, outcompeting native vegetation, utilizing large amounts of water and increasing salt concentration in the soil’s surface. Removing five miles of this invasive tree improved riparian habitat conditions for both wildlife and livestock. Throughout their long-standing relationship with PFW, the Ferrys have enhanced 831 acres of wetlands by constructing small dikes and installing water control structures to facilitate the management of water levels. In one area, they fixed the erosion of 760 feet of stream bank, which required reconstruction and stabilization with rush and sedge plantings on the bench and grass plantings on the sloped bank.

Additionally, through their conservation-driven focus, the Ferrys have been paramount in establishing the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area and have voluntarily placed 750 acres of wetland and upland under

I love the land and I love what I do, and I’m willing to invest in what I do because I can see the difference it makes.



Joel Ferry is a leader in community-based conservation as evidenced by the management of his family’s agriculture operation and his involvement in local conservation efforts. In 2017, the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) recognized Joel with its Private Landowner Conservation Champion Award. This award recognizes and honors private landowners for their contributions to natural resource conservation and management in the Intermountain West in alignment with the goals, objectives and priorities of the IWJV.



conservation easement. And, their conservation dedication has only led to further collaboration with other like-minded organizations, such as Ducks Unlimited, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Utah Department of Environmental Quality.

“It all comes down to building relationships,” says Ferry. “With programs like PFW and others, it’s been fantastic working with the different members of these organizations and that’s how we can continue to be successful.” ■



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SAGEBRUSH SANCTUARY

HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE MANAGED FOR CATTLE & WILDLIFE

By Kristen A. Schmitt

Not far from Lander, Wyoming, wagon wheels once wore grooves along the Oregon Trail. The historic route, which snakes through a portion of Burnt Ranch, the headquarters for Hellyer Ranch, is a reminder of the ever-changing landscape—and one that the Hellyers have witnessed first-hand for nearly 50 years. Long-time Wyoming residents, the Hellyers purchased the first part of their ranch in 1972 and, over the years, have continued to add property at the south end of the Wind River Mountain Range. Today, they raise grass, alfalfa hay and Black Angus cattle all while keeping a watchful eye over the Sweetwater River that traverses the ranch with its green ribbon of riparian habitat and scattered wetlands making up the heart of their rangeland.



Wyoming's vast expanses of sagebrush contain nearly 40% of all known sage grouse in the world.

Their property is home to moose, elk, “antelope and deer that won’t quit and all kinds of birds and fish,” says Rob Hellyer. In the heart of the sagebrush sea, their ranch is vital not only to a robust population of sage grouse, a species that has seen significant rangewide declines, but a host of other species like pygmy rabbits, sage sparrows, sagebrush voles and Brewer’s sparrows that depend upon this unique ecosystem. Landscape changes across the West make the Hellyers’ conservation focus crucial to the vitality and future of sage grouse, once considered near threatened, and many other sage-dependent species.

“Wyoming’s vast expanses of sagebrush contain nearly 40% of all known sage grouse in the world,” says Mark Hogan, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) State Coordinator for Wyoming Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program. “That ranch is part of an area known as the Golden Triangle, which contains the largest concentration of sage grouse in Wyoming.”

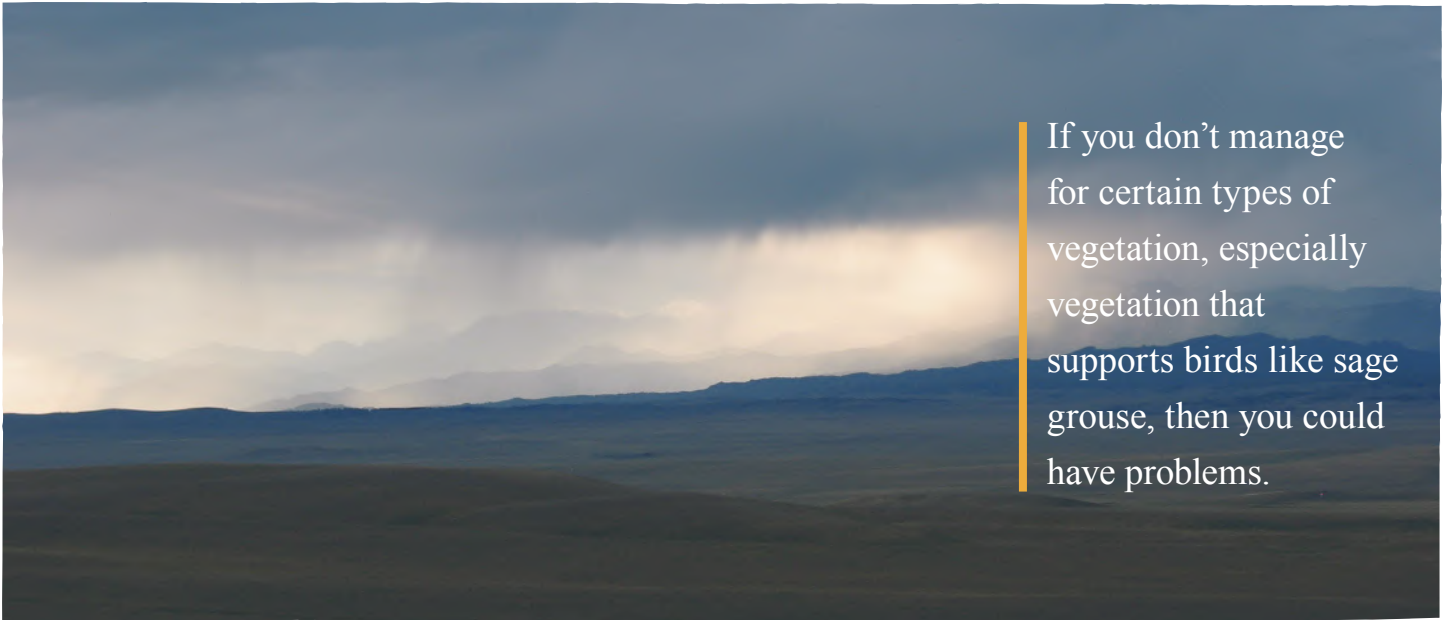
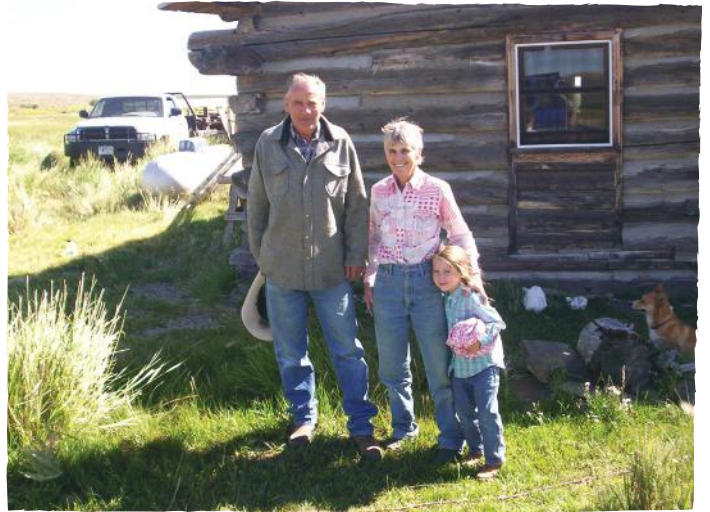
PFW works with private landowners on a voluntary basis to restore and enhance habitat for Federal Trust Species while supporting working lands. By partnering with PFW, the Hellyers received both technical and financial assistance to complete specific projects on their land—most of which targeted rangeland health to help ensure both a long-term sustainable livestock operation and fish and wildlife that rely on these areas.

“They’re very easy to work with,” says Rob Hellyer, “And it’s quite enjoyable working together, especially with Mark.”

Together, the Hellyers and PFW have installed solar-powered, wildlife-friendly, electric fences along the banks of the Sweetwater River as well as

a dozen solar-powered water systems to better disperse livestock throughout the ranch. By practicing seasonal grazing and, with the completion of these projects, the Hellyers have created several large riparian and upland pastures to allow for the rotation of livestock within the 94,000-acre parcel, resulting in improved rangeland, riparian and wetland health.

“You have to manage the water, the riparian areas, efficiently,” says Rob Hellyer, who credits strong relationships with programs like PFW, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust, Ducks Unlimited, and local grazing boards to provide a thriving landscape for both wildlife and cattle. “Everybody wants to use the water – the wildlife, the cattle, the birds. If you don’t manage for certain types of vegetation, especially vegetation that supports birds like sage grouse, then you could have problems.”



If you don’t manage for certain types of vegetation, especially vegetation that supports birds like sage grouse, then you could have problems.



“Controlling the grazing is the most important part,” adds Hellyer. “We might fence the riparian area and use it part of the year and, when those areas are fenced off, we use a solar pump nearby to take some water from that riparian area to provide an alternative water source.”

Hogan notes that project monitoring is a condition of the program and helps track improvements and trends over time. “It’s become a necessity for managing range units of mixed ownership,” he says. Martha Hellyer has overseen their conservation projects for years now and, according to Hogan, “if you want to know the status of the rangeland health, just ask Martha.” The Hellyers do this through annually reviewing permanent plant transects to help guide management decisions and making note of insects, birds and other wildlife using the area. Since completing these projects along with new spring development and river restoration, there’s been an influx of wildlife using the areas, which Rob Hellyer says is due to how carefully they’re managed. As for future projects, Hellyer says he has plenty of ideas and plans to continue his relationship with PFW and other organizations to further these habitat improvements. ■

ECONOMIC AND CONSERVATION BENEFITS

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE 1987

-  **50,000** projects
-  **1.5 million** wetland acres restored or enhanced
-  **4.5 million** upland acres restored or enhanced
-  **12,000 miles** of stream habitat
-  **45,000** private landowners
-  **5,000** partner organizations
-  **4:1** leveraging ratio





IF FUNDED AT \$75 MILLION

47,500 wetland acres,
291,000 upland acres, and
855 stream miles

could be restored or enhanced annually across the United States through over **3,100 new projects** and over **3,000 partnerships**.

The current funding at \$51 million resulted in 32,700 wetland acres, 200,200 upland acres, and 589 stream miles restored or enhanced across the United States through 2,100 projects and 2,060 partnerships.

PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

-  75% of fish and wildlife species depend on private lands for survival.
-  With 2.2 million square miles of land in private ownership, conserving habitat for migratory birds, endangered species, and other Federal Trust Species is only possible through partnerships with private landowners.
-  For 3 decades, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program has promoted voluntary habitat restoration on private lands.
-  The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program was reauthorized with overwhelming bipartisan support on March 12, 2019, in the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act.

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST JOINT VENTURE

In the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Mountain-Prairie Region, the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) works closely with the PFW program to provide outreach and science support that compliments on-the-ground projects. Established in 1994, the IWJV is a collaborative, regional partnership of government agencies, non-profit organizations, corporations, tribes, and individuals that works to conserve habitat for the benefit of migratory birds, other wildlife, and people. The IWJV operates across all or parts of 11 western states and encompasses 486 million acres. To learn more about the IWJV and its mission, visit IWJV.org.

The articles contained in this booklet reflect a collaborative effort of PFW and IWJV to highlight their common strategic conservation priorities of sagebrush and wetland habitats on private lands in a shared geography (i.e., Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming).

PARTNERS FOR FISH & WILDLIFE PROGRAM

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INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE