Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

SPRING 2011 NEWSLETTER

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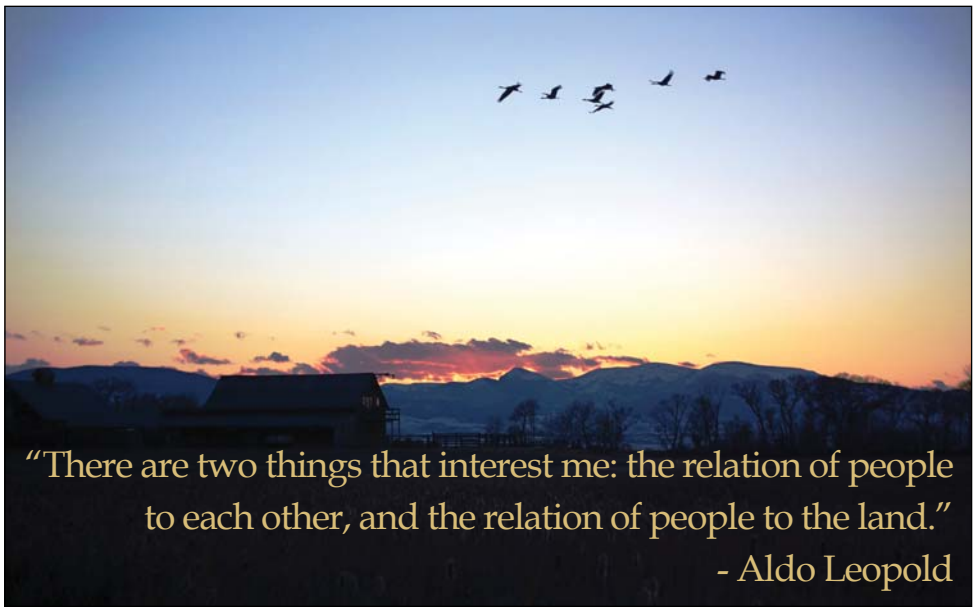
Conserving our land, water, and way of life in Colorado's San Luis Valley

From the Executive Director:
Why Conservation Matters

In April, the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust was honored to premier *"Green Fire: Aldo Leopold & A Land Ethic for Our Time"* an inspiring documentary about Leopold's life, work and modern-day influence. We showed the film in Del Norte, Saguache and Alamosa, and at each event we were amazed at how much impact Leopold continues to have. I believe it is because at our core, most of us share that deep connection to the land that he inspires.



Sandhill Cranes in flight over the Gilmore Ranch

One of the other many things we get to share with Leopold is his love of and connection to Sand Hill Cranes. "On motionless wing they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh." Here in the Rocky Mountain West, we set our seasonal clocks by the arrival of cranes. Their presence makes us glad to live and spend time in the San Luis Valley.

In late February I took a personal trip to grey and cold suburban Chicago. Upon my return and windy touch down in Alamosa a friend drove me the back way home by the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge and the Rock Creek area to see the cranes and I couldn't have been happier to be home.

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Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

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From the Executive Director - Continued...

Conservation easements on private land play a major role in protecting habitat for cranes and countless other species. In fact, protected private land in the Valley more than doubles the habitat for cranes on the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. Drive past the farms and ranches on the 3 East any day in March and you'll spot these majestic creatures, most of them happily foraging on protected private land. This is one of the many reasons why conservation continues to be relevant and important. Who would we be as a people without this connection to wildlife and to the land?

Over the spring and summer months, we hope you'll join us in some of our activities to share the splendor of these conserved lands. As always, our exciting work continues and this year we are in the midst of more projects than any year in the past. There continues to be plenty to celebrate, we hope to see you along the way!

Updates

Costilla County

With funding from Great Outdoors Colorado and the National Parks Service, we are continuing our work with Costilla County, Colorado Open Lands, and a committee of local citizens to create a Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan for the county. Recently, this group hosted two Open House meetings to unveil a vision for the Plan and gather community input on the types of recreational resources they would like to see developed. Costilla County presents a unique challenge for this effort because over 95% of land in the county is privately owned. Ideas for future projects include development and signage for the Greenbelt Trail and the Carpenter Ranch outside of San Luis and expanding the trail from Veteran's Park in Ft. Garland past the Community Center to Blanca.

Costilla County envisions...

...a system of trails, recreation resources, and protected land and water systems that represent the unique natural and cultural heritage of the county to benefit its residents and visitors.

...un sistema de senderos, recursos recreativos, y tierra protegidas y sistemas de aguas que representan la herencia natural y cultural unica del condado para los beneficios de residents y visitants.

Northern San Luis Valley Conservation Roundtable

RiGHT also continues to be involved in the Northern San Luis Valley Conservation Roundtable, a group focused on conserving natural resources and cultural heritage in the northern end of the valley. The group meets quarterly to share ideas and discuss opportunities and recently hosted an educational event on the Closed Basin Project.

Soward Ranch Conservation Easement Completed!

Article by Toni Steffens-Steward, Mineral County Miner

In 1886 Margaret Lamb's great-grandfather, Dan Soward had an "ah ha moment" after being raised across the river from what is now Soward Ranch.

When the Homestead Act was enacted, Soward worked out a plan with members of his family to homestead nearly 1,300 acres. His daughter and her husband and others each set up their own homestead in a kind of jigsaw puzzle that eventually made up the ranch. Dan only asked that he have the first option to purchase the land if they wanted to sell. Once he became the sole owner of the property, he started raising cattle and horses. In the meadow, they grew hay which was sold in town. Soward built the lakes on the property and spawned fish then shipped the eggs off on ice to locations all over the country.

His entrepreneurial spirit and creativity carried on after he passed away and his daughter, Emma Soward McCrone, became the sole owner of the property.

"...we preserved a part of Colorado history today. We preserved habitat for some of the largest of our local species, elk, and some of the smallest, the Northern leopard frog. We preserved a jaw dropping view from a State Scenic Byway, that never fails to take my breath away."

- Nancy Butler
RiGHT Executive Director

View of the Soward Ranch from the Silver Thread Scenic Byway Highway 149. Photo by Rio de la Vista.

In the 1930s, fishing in the area had become popular and often people would stop by the ranch and ask for permission to fish. She began to let people stay on the property over night and soon realized that this was the business she should be in.

The ranch has always been owned by a family member and several years ago Scott Lamb went in search of a way to "preserve the heart and soul of the land." The first conservation easement of 580 acres on the land was through the Wetland Preserve Program and set aside much of the "moving water" on the ranch. Then they started to look at a way to preserve at least some of the lakes. After a great deal of planning and negotiations, they now have 268 acres under a conservation easement with the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust.

The project was made possible through contributions from lottery-funded Great Outdoors Colorado, the Gates Family Foundation, the Brown Family Foundation, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and a generous donation from the Soward Ranch, LLC.

Easily one of my favorite drives in Colorado is coming off Slumgullion Pass and the views along here. So happy future generations will get to see it!

Rio de la Vista Honored with National Wetlands Award

The Environmental Law Institute recently announced that Rio de la Vista received the 2011 National Wetlands Award for Conservation and Restoration. Rio's enthusiasm, creativity, and commitment to bringing together broad-based partnerships has helped conserve more than 27,000 acres of wetlands, many on private lands, across the San Luis Valley in Colorado.

"I have witnessed [Ms. de la Vista's] dedication and ability to build a community of collaboration between water users, environmentalists, conservationists, ranchers, farmers and city dwellers," said Travis Smith, basin director for the Colorado Water Conservation Board." Ms. de la Vista has a gift of listening, learning, and then implementing the possibilities through the Rio Grande Headwater Land Trust and their many partners."

Ms. de la Vista works on a variety of projects for multiple organizations. Her contributions to the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) as the coordinator of the *Rio Grande Initiative*, have resulted in the protection of more than 19,000 acres and 33 miles of the Rio Grande, including ranchlands, wildlife habitat, and senior surface water rights.

With Ms. de la Vista's help, the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust has completed every project it has initiated. She is affectionately referred to as their "chief visionary officer." The *Rio Grande Initiative* is one of the most successful conservation projects in Colorado. It has more than doubled the pace of conservation along the Rio Grande from 6,000 acres protected from 1986-2006 to an additional 13,000 acres protected since 2007.

The Rio Grande and its wetlands offer significant wildlife habitat and essential groundwater recharge to the San Luis Valley's rapidly dwindling aquifer. There are approximately 200,000 acres of nationally and internationally important wetlands in the San Luis Valley under private and public ownership and management. For more than a decade Ms. de la Vista has been their voice, as she is known for saying, "We need to keep the 'wet' in wetlands."

For more information on the National Wetlands Awards, visit www.nationalwetlandsawards.org

Spring snow on the Sangres. Photo by Rio de la Vista

Rio de la Vista receives National Wetlands Award at the US Botanic Garden in Washington DC.

"While the Rio Grande headwaters are still relatively intact, we realized that we had a chance to achieve some substantial conservation. Securing the working ranches and the associated senior water rights along the river through voluntary, incentive-based conservation easements emerged as a tool that we could implement immediately. Easements could be accomplished without requiring any regulatory actions and could really contribute to our collective efforts here for local solutions to water and wildlife challenges and to keeping our agricultural economy viable."

"A favorite saying of mine is from Jacques Cousteau: 'People protect what they love.' For people to fall in love with their own wetlands, rivers, and open spaces, there is a great need to provide opportunities for personal experience, and for education about the values and benefits we derive from wetlands everyday, wherever we may live."

"In Colorado, and across the arid west, riparian zones and wetlands comprise only about 3% of the land base, but 75% of all wildlife depend upon them. The working ranches along the river are where many of our wetlands, and that water to keep them wet, are concentrated here in the San Luis Valley. With its central role in our high, dry Valley, that narrow ribbon of life that is the Rio Grande is literally the lifeblood of our community."

Upcoming Events

Claytonia Ranch Plein Air Paint-Out
Saturday, June 11th, 8am-2pm

Come join local & regional artists at the Claytonia Ranch outside of Villa Grove as they capture the scenic landscape on canvas.

Also: Tour the award-winning Kerber Creek Restoration Project (1-4pm)

Directions and additional information is available on our website.

"Keep the Rio Grande Grand" Fine Art Benefit Sale
Saturday, June 25th through Monday, July 4th, 2011

Join us in Del Norte at the Gallery at the Windsor for our 4th Annual Fine Art Benefit Sale! A variety of art will be available for purchase with a percentage of all sales benefiting the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust.

Opening night reception: Friday, June 24th, 6pm
Please call our office to RSVP

Fly-fishing at CAH Farm
Saturday, June 25th 3pm-8pm

We're very excited to be hosting our first fishing event at this beautiful ranch outside of Monte Vista. Over one and a half miles of the Rio Grande run through the CAH Farm, providing plenty of great fishing holes. Space is limited. Cost: $150/person
Please call our office to RSVP.

First Annual "Headwaters Hoedown"
Sunday, September 18th - Gilmore Ranch, Alamosa

Mark your calendars now for our annual celebration! We'll have local food, live music, birding tours, hay rides and more. Details will be available on our website soon.

Volunteer & Sponsorship Opportunities

Events are a great way to support the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust and get involved in our work.

For volunteers, there are opportunities to help with outreach and planning before the event as well as help with on-site activities the day of.

For your business, there are multiple options for cash and in-kind event sponsorship that will both support the land trust and show your commitment to conservation in the San Luis Valley.

Why I Serve: Angie Krall, RiGHT Board President

RiGHT Board President Angie Krall

In 2008, I moved to the San Luis Valley to take the job of Heritage Program Manager for the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center, a 'Service First' Unit of the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Before that I lived in the Yampa Valley in northwestern Colorado for the better part of 15 years.

It was a bit of homecoming for me to come back to the SLV; I grew up in Pueblo, CO and came to the SLV for summer camp in the Alamosa Canyon, to catch the big one in Rio Grande Reservoir, and later as a student at Colorado College, to the Baca Extended Campus at Crestone. I guess it is a piece of the world that I just keep coming back to. It is so precious in memory and experience that I pinch myself in surprise that I am actually able to get mail here now.

That strong attachment led me to the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) after being awed by the incredible work they were doing up and down the watershed and their commitment to the nexus between Habitat and Heritage. I believe it began on a backcountry ski tour with RiGHT's Stewardship Director Aaron Derwingson as we moved joyfully on snow waiting to charge the mighty Rio Grande.

During my tenure in the Yampa Valley I watched agricultural land shrink and real estate prices skyrocket. It became harder and harder for folks to put land into conservation easements given the enormous amount of funding they had to raise to do so. Cut to the SLV and I am surprised and delighted to witness the contrast wherein agricultural land is not succumbing to rampant development and land prices are still reasonable.

After serving on the RiGHT Board for almost two years and recently becoming President, I began to realize what a seminal time this is in the life of the organization; the stars have aligned, if you will. There are three stars that are currently supporting the work of conserving land, water and way of life in Colorado's San Luis Valley; 1) RiGHT has been at this work for over twelve years now and has matured in all of the RiGHT directions to bring conservation dreams to reality, 2) people still value agricultural land highly in the SLV, and 3) land prices remain reasonable. In my experience, these variables only gather and remain in rare cases, therefore I cannot understate the fact that the opportunity is now and the time is RiGHT to continue building a conservation legacy in the San Luis Valley. So please join me in partnering with RiGHT to build this legacy, one conservation easement at a time!

This newsletter was made possible thanks to the generous support of the San Luis Valley Federal Bank.

San Luis Valley Federal Bank

"At San Luis Valley Federal Bank, we believe the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust is working hard to preserve some of the San Luis Valley's most beautiful natural areas, ensuring that our wildlife, river corridors and open spaces have a chance to thrive. We think this is not only a great investment in the physical elements of the Valley, but also helps ensure that our future generations will be able to enjoy the natural heritage of this special community."

Duane Bussey, President/CEO
San Luis Valley Federal Bank

"Far and away the best prize life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing"

- Theodore Roosevelt

On behalf of the RiGHT Staff and Board of Directors, thank you to all of our 2010 donors for supporting our work!

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* *RiGHT Board Member*
\+ *Ray Wright Memorial Donation*

Make a lasting gift to the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

Marilyn Willett & granddaughter at the Cross Arrow Ranch. RiGHT completed a conservation easement on this 3,200 acre family ranch in Conejos County in 2009.

When you make a gift through your will or estate to the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, you help ensure that the conservation work we are accomplishing today will continue long into the future.

No matter the size of your estate, it is possible to make a meaningful gift that benefits you and supports the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's important work protecting working ranches and farms, wildlife habitat, and the scenic landscape of Colorado's San Luis Valley.

To include the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust in your will or estate, please use the following language: "The Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, (tax identification number: 84-1495770) a nonprofit corporation, organized and existing under the laws of Colorado, with its principal address of P.O. Box 444, Del Norte, CO 81132."

If you have already decided to include the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust in your estate plan, please let us know, so we may take the proper steps to thank you for your commitment. Knowing about your gift helps us better plan for the future. All wishes for anonymity will be honored.

Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

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