



# COLORADO

YEAR IN REVIEW  
2011



# The Nature Conservancy in Colorado

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**THIS PAGE** Tim Sullivan © *Jim Steinberg Photography*

**ON THE COVER** Wildflowers in the San Juans  
© *John Fielder Photography*

# Dear Friend,

Today's conservation movement is shaped by many factors—timing, funding and public policy to name a few. One critical key to success, however, is ensuring that people appreciate the vital role nature plays in their lives.



In our fast-paced, modern world, it's easy to overlook the enduring interdependence we have with nature. We rely on nature—for sustenance, prosperity, health and inspiration—and nature relies on us to sustain it over time. Conserving nature is essential to making all people's lives better.

This is not a new concept. Aldo Leopold once wrote, "Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land." Leopold, the father of conservation biology, understood so many decades ago that conserving the natural world is necessary to ensure the healthy lives of humans. Today, Leopold's words resonate with me—and hopefully all of you—loud and clear.

In this report, you will discover some of the incredible conservation outcomes we've achieved over the past year that benefit both nature and people. For instance, through the Winship Ranch Project we partnered with five ranching families to conserve 48,500 acres of important grasslands while strengthening the sustainability of these family-operated ranches. In doing so, we also are encouraging a future where the children and grandchildren of these ranchers will

practice conservation as a fundamental part of their business models.

In addition, you will read about the Leaders in Environmental Action for the Future (LEAF) program we participated in this summer. This initiative brought students from inner city New York to our Carpenter Ranch on the Yampa River, where they lived, worked and studied for a month. The LEAF program demonstrates the power of nature in transforming thinking, perspectives and lives. It is a powerful way to inspire the next generation to appreciate the value of nature and engage in its protection.

It is through efforts like these that the Conservancy will both protect Colorado's most significant natural treasures and demonstrate the importance of conservation to people of all backgrounds. The investments we make today will chart the future course for Colorado. Thank you for all that you've done to support our work, and I look forward to a bright future.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim Sullivan".

Tim Sullivan  
State Director

# The Future is Bright

Casey and Kate Shaw don't always get along. But even though the 11-year-old and 12-year-old brother and sister duo may not see eye to eye on everything, they do agree the best place to spend their free time is outdoors. In a world where the connection between kids and nature is vanishing, the Shaw children are bucking the trend.

**K**ate is a cowgirl. Even at this young age, she's an expert at herding cows and often rides with her dad, helping him manage their ranch in Eastern Colorado.

Casey is a budding scientist and is fascinated with anything that moves. Reptiles and insects are his favorites, as they prove to be the most rewarding finds.

Both kids share a common goal for the future: "We want to keep our family ranch going." It's a dream that certainly pleases their parents.

The Shaw family has seen this area change over time. The Arickaree River, which runs through the ranch, was once surrounded by lush meadows, and was home to beaver dams, fish ponds and abundant waterfowl. Now, dropping aquifer levels have caused the meadows to dry up and lower flows in the stream have reduced the area's wildlife.

Thankfully, Kate and Casey's parents are taking action. Both Dana and Sonja Shaw participate in the local Three Rivers Alliance, an organization supported by the Conservancy that is working to help landscapes adapt to a future with less water.

The Conservancy and Three Rivers Alliance are also working with local landowners to retire irrigation wells in order to keep water in rivers like the Arickaree.

"Colorado's grassland habitats are in jeopardy," says William Burnidge, grasslands program director for the Conservancy in Colorado. "The Shaws are part of a growing community in eastern Colorado working side-by-side with the Conservancy to ensure this landscape remains viable for people and nature."



BACKGROUND Kate and Casey Shaw © Dana and Sonja Shaw

Go online to see Kate and Casey helping the Conservancy with stewardship efforts on the Brett Gray Ranch at [nature.org/Colorado2011](http://nature.org/Colorado2011).

# Forests

## TEAMWORK AND TRUST LEAD TO FOREST HEALTH

“We have a dangerous job, so trust is very important on this team,” says Jeff Crandall, captain of the Conservancy’s Southern Rockies Wildland Fire Module. “We start our year with intense training and team-building. The trust begins there and we continuously build on it.”

**T**rust, teamwork and cohesion combine to allow this team to excel.

The Module—a team of seasoned professionals—conducts scientifically based prescribed burns to restore forests and wildlife habitat, and also fights wildland fires to protect people, property and water supplies. This year has been extraordinarily busy for the crew. They were called on by federal partners to spend time on the front lines of the record-setting Wallow Fire in Arizona and the Las Conchas Fire in New Mexico.

The Module is a one-of-a-kind team: versatile and ready to take on a wide variety of challenges. They are able to draw from diverse backgrounds ranging from biology to forestry. One minute they are ecologists; the next, firefighters.

While working the front lines in Arizona and New Mexico, the Loveland-based crew scouted fire lines, hiked canyons to make assessments, removed fuels and managed bulldozers among many other tasks.

The job is physically exhausting. “Sometimes we have to hike a couple of miles to the line with 50 pounds on our backs,” says Jeff. “Then work 16 to 20 hours.” The Module endures intense heat, dense smoke and callused hands. But, no matter how tough the day, everyone feels a sense of accomplishment and shared purpose.

After four weeks battling the mega-fires of the Southwest, the crew returned to its primary role: igniting prescribed burns in Colorado. Weather, terrain and fire behavior are just a few things they must consider for these projects that leave behind healthier and more resilient landscapes.

Much of the team’s work has been focused on the Front Range. In 2011, the Module participated in 11 planned burns—creating healthier forests as well as protecting watersheds and nearby communities. The team has also thinned ponderosa pine and removed beetle-infested trees from campgrounds, roads and trails.



PHOTOS Jeff Crandall © TNC

Go online to see the fire crew making news at [nature.org/Colorado2011](http://nature.org/Colorado2011).





## **PUTTING GOOD FIRE ON THE GROUND**

The Conservancy is an advocate for the USDA's Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). Why? Because it works, saves money and creates jobs. These are the reasons Congress introduced the program, as a tool for investing in large forest restoration projects. In the first year of the CFLRP, a Colorado partnership known as the Front Range Roundtable received \$1.5 million dollars that was used to restore an estimated 4,000 acres on the Front Range, including an area impacted by the 2002 Hayman Fire. Additional investments could prevent future catastrophic fires that destroy lives, water resources, landscapes and habitats.



# Western Range

## HOME, HOME ON THE RANGE

It's hard to predict where life will take you. Fifteen years ago, Rob Bleiberg had just finished graduate school at the University of Michigan and was in the middle of a fellowship with the Conservancy when an interesting job offer popped up with the Mesa Land Trust in Grand Junction.

**R**ob loved the area, and thought it would be a good place to spend a few years launching his career in land protection. A decade and a half later, he's helped build a successful land trust with an impressive collection of conservation success stories and close connections to the Conservancy.

When Rob arrived at the Mesa Land Trust he was the only full-time employee of the conservation group. Since then, the organization has grown and now touts the protection of 64,000 acres and 180 conservation easements among its accomplishments.

Rob is especially proud of a project in Glade Park, just outside of Grand Junction.

“Glade Park’s location, natural beauty and cooler temperatures make the area prime real estate,” says Rob. “Despite development pressures, we’ve had success ensuring this landscape remains intact.”

Glade Park is also a high conservation priority for the Conservancy because of its immense ecological value. In total, Mesa Land Trust, the Conservancy and others have protected more than 90 square miles of this area.

“The Conservancy has been with us along the way providing scientific expertise, funding for land deals and operational support,” says Rob. “It’s definitely been a partnership that’s helped both organizations achieve their goals on the Colorado Plateau.”







## SMITH RANCHO

Cowboys, wildlife and skiing—the area around Steamboat Springs embodies classic Colorado. It is also a place benefiting from amazing conservation work. Just west of the city, the Smith Rancho project is one of many collaborative efforts ensuring this landscape keeps its best attributes for future generations.

A keystone in an uninterrupted landscape, Smith Rancho has attracted crucial funding from Routt County Purchase and Development Rights, Great Outdoors Colorado, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Each entity is helping support different conservation easements associated with the property that will be held by the Conservancy.

Smith Rancho sits near two Conservancy projects—Wolf Mountain Ranch and Carpenter Ranch—linking together significant wildlife habitat on the Yampa River. All together, it is a project whose parts add up to one big win.



**ABOVE** Smith Rancho © *TNC*

**THIS PAGE** Rob Bleiberg and Mandala Bleiberg © *Rob Bleiberg*



# Rivers and Streams

## REALIZING POSSIBILITIES ALONG THE DOLORES RIVER

Peter Mueller, North San Juans project director for the Conservancy in Colorado, has always been a team-builder. He was a teacher and principal in Colorado schools for 19 years before joining the Conservancy.



Now, Peter helps build teams that are improving the way the Dolores River is managed, while working with stakeholders on issues ranging from farmland irrigation and riparian restoration to recreation and native fish protection.

“Whatever the situation, I believe in meeting people where they are and building on their strengths,” says Peter. “The keys are to keep everyone’s eyes on the goal they want to reach, find common ground and identify the resources that can help achieve the goal.”

Peter works within two stakeholder groups that are making a big difference—the Lower Dolores Working Group and the Dolores River Restoration Partnership. Participants include county commissioners, ranchers, farmers, recreational boaters, water managers, fish

biologists, community leaders, legislators, environmental groups and state agencies.

Their collaborative efforts are producing big changes for protection and restoration of the river. Currently, they are changing the way water is released from a major federal reservoir to benefit native fish by improving spawning temperatures and moving sediment out of critical habitats. Stakeholders have been working for 25 years to change water management, and many thought it would never happen. Now, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is working towards releasing some of the projected surplus runoff in response to the collaborative recommendations.

“This process, for me, is like watching a student grow up,” says Peter. “Like students who suddenly realize they can do much more than they ever thought possible, stakeholders on the Dolores River are now realizing solutions that only a few years ago were thought to be out of reach.”

**THIS PAGE** Peter Mueller © *Nikki Melanson/TNC*

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Dolores River © *John Fielder Photography*

**BOTTOM RIGHT** Rainbow trout © *iStockphoto.com/SFB Photographics Inc.*







## FISH LOVE LAWYERS

Colorado's rivers have an important friend—the Colorado Water Trust (CWT). The staff and board are experts in Colorado's complex water laws and, as part of their work, they provide integral counsel to land conservation organizations throughout the state. CWT's staff attorney, Zach Smith, puts it this way: "Land conservation is inextricably tied to water law, but I've never met a conservation professional who liked wading through our water laws."

By providing technical assistance to land trusts, Zach and his colleagues help ensure water is not an afterthought in conservation projects. They have even created a useful handbook that gives step-by-step guidance on water rights for land trusts to follow during a conservation easement project.

The Conservancy is a close partner of CWT. Both organizations continue to share information and expertise that help Colorado's rivers and streams remain healthy for the people, animals and fish that depend on them for survival.





# Grasslands

## THE WINSHIP RANCH: STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Harold Yoder's roots run deep in eastern Colorado. His father came up from the Arkansas Valley in 1940, looking for work as a cowhand. He found it and set about carving out a life for his growing family by leasing and eventually buying ranchland.

**W**hen his oldest son was looking to move from Oklahoma back to Colorado to ranch, Harold thought about the neighboring Winship Ranch, a 37,000-acre spread that had been for sale since 2008. "It's a good, solid ranch with a great diversity of sandhill grasses," Harold says. "We're dry country by nature, but this ranch is pretty dang good grass country."

A few of Harold's neighbors were interested in the Winship, too, but unfortunately, none of them could swing the asking price on their own.

That's where the Conservancy came in.

"We went out in August of 2009 and met with the interested buyers," says Melissa Garvey, land conservation program manager for the Conservancy in Colorado. "We literally spread a map of the ranch out on the hood of my truck and started talking about how we could do this together."

That first discussion would eventually lead to a new model for private lands conservation in Colorado, one in which five families and the Conservancy partnered to conserve a

48,500-acre expanse of shortgrass prairie—land essential for providing wildlife habitat and for catching and purifying water—while simultaneously protecting several historic ranching operations.

"With funding from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), and the guidance of Conservancy board member David Smith, we worked out a way for the neighbors to lower their out-of-pocket costs by splitting the ranch among themselves and placing easements on the tracts," says Melissa. "They also put easements on their home ranches, creating savings they could put toward the purchase of the Winship."

The Conservancy negotiated the easements and also purchased 20,000 acres of the property, which was then placed under a conservation easement and resold. "The Conservancy really bent over backwards to try to accommodate the desires of the group," adds Harold. "They really went the extra mile."

"This deal makes sense from an agricultural perspective, yet it also allows us to keep this wonderful shortgrass prairie free of development," says Melissa. "It's a true win-win solution for conservation and the community."



[Watch a video](#) honoring the Winship Ranch families at [nature.org/Colorado2011](http://nature.org/Colorado2011).





## APISHAPA RANCH

Named for the river curling through its shortgrass prairies, the 32,000-acre Apishapa Ranch in Otero County in southeast Colorado is a remarkable place. The sprawling 55-square-mile ranch is home to a staggering array of wildlife, including species of conservation concern such as the ferruginous hawk and mountain plover.

It's also home to the Larson family and their cow/calf operation. They'll continue to ranch sustainably into the future, thanks to a partnership with the Conservancy that placed the Apishapa under a conservation easement and allowed the family to purchase an additional 15,000 acres of state land within the ranch's borders.

The additional land will allow the Larson family to expand their ranching operation and keep a huge and important swath of prairie intact for future generations.

The Apishapa Ranch project received critical funding from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO).

**THIS PAGE** Three generations of the Yoder Family on the Winship Ranch. © Lauryn Wachs/Taurus Productions, Inc



## CONSERVATION IN CHINA

What does land conservation look like in the world's most populated country? A new book by Megan Kram, public lands manager for the Conservancy in Colorado, gives us a glimpse.

Working with colleagues from the Conservancy's China Program, Megan has authored a book featuring a collection of case studies on how land is used, managed and protected in China.

"The studies showcase the Conservancy's strong relationship with the Chinese government, particularly in the southwest where our anchor projects are located," says Megan. The book, *Protecting China's Biodiversity: A Guide to Land Use, Land Tenure and Land Protection Tools*, will be used as a resource for anyone interested in learning about land protection in China. It will be available for download on the Internet.

"While conservation groups play a big role in land protection in the U.S., far fewer are involved in this kind of work in China," adds Megan. "Yet, the need is magnified because China has 10 percent of the world's biodiversity, one-fifth of its people, and ever-growing development pressures."

The Conservancy is experimenting with different ways to protect land in China, including land trust reserves, national parks and conservation developments. Megan drew upon her extensive land management experience in Colorado to create a book that will help people expand these conversations and take action on the ground.





## STUDENTS FROM THE BIG APPLE EXPLORE COLORADO'S CARPENTER RANCH

This summer, 72 high school students from urban environments headed to preserves across the country as part of the Conservancy's Leaders in Environmental Action for the Future (LEAF) program.

LEAF is all about empowering the next generation of conservation leaders. The program works with a select group of environmental high schools and provides paid summer internships for students in natural areas across the nation.

In Colorado, three participants from the LEAF program were put to work on the Conservancy's Carpenter Ranch, situated on the Yampa River. Their primary task for the four-week internship was to help with on-the-ground restoration. The work was a far cry from what the three young men were used to. But considering other challenges they face back home in New York City, rolling up their sleeves was a welcomed challenge.

Keon Flavius, a 17-year-old LEAF participant from New York City, says that "staying in high school and not in the streets getting into trouble" has been one of his greatest accomplishments after returning home from this experience.

Go online to [nature.org/Colorado11](https://nature.org/Colorado11) to watch a video of LEAF intern Keon Flavius overcoming his fear of riding a horse on the Carpenter Ranch.

**OPPOSITE PAGE TOP** Megan Kram in China © TNC  
**BOTTOM** Megan and with China Program staff © TNC

**THIS PAGE** Keon Flavius on the Carpenter Ranch © Erika Nortemann/TNC





## TURNING A PASSION FOR ART INTO A RAINFOREST RESCUE

At nine years old, Colorado resident Vienna Vitek may have been one of the Conservancy's youngest supporters.

Now, seven years later, this wise-beyond-her-years teen has raised more than \$5,000 for the Conservancy's work in Costa Rica—and she's aiming to donate \$5,000 more before she graduates high school.

"In 4th grade, we learned about the rainforest," she remembers, "and it really intrigued me. I knew I wanted to do something to help protect it."

And so began Vienna's incredible practice of giving back.

In addition to being a young philanthropist, Vienna is also an artist and an entrepreneur. She began drawing pictures of the rainforest plants and animals that had piqued her interest in the classroom. With help from her grandmother, she turned her drawings into stationery, which she began selling to "anyone who was interested." Over time, the sales added up to more than \$2,000.

A year later, Vienna's family traveled to Costa Rica, where she presented a check to Conservancy staff in person and had the chance to see the rainforest

firsthand. "It was amazing to be there," she says. "I got to see all the sloths and monkeys and other animals from my drawings come to life."

Now, Vienna has expanded her artwork to include paintings and jewelry, and she donates all the money from her sales to the Conservancy.

"I think about recruiting more people," she says. "For me, it's not about how good the art is or whether it's going to sell. It's about getting people involved. What the Conservancy does is so cool; I just want other people to know about it."

With so much curiosity, drive and determination, Vienna paints a picture of what the world might look like if everyone gave just a little bit of themselves to make it a better place. And she reminds us that even the smallest actions can add up to big results.

"I'm always the friend who says, 'don't get a plastic bag, I'll carry your stuff,' or who picks up the empty water bottles after lacrosse games. I just think, why wouldn't you do it? It's the simplest thing."







## STAYING AT VAIL'S SONNENALP RESORT IS GOOD FOR THE MIND, BODY AND SURROUNDING FORESTS



A new partnership between Vail's Sonnenalp Resort and the Conservancy is benefiting Colorado's forests. Through Earth Day in 2012, the resort is contributing \$1 for each room night booked. It is also encouraging guests to make a donation of their own. Proceeds from this effort will go toward the Conservancy's forest restoration work in Colorado.

Sonnenalp's owner and general manager, Johannes Faessler, has a finger on the pulse of the community. His hotel has been actively involved in a wide range of local programs around the Vail Valley for over 20 years.

"The health of our forests is a real concern for business owners in the area," says Johannes. "Beetles, drought and fire could impact our ability to entice visitors to the Valley. The good news is we can do something about the state of our forests right now."

Each hotel room contains additional information on the Conservancy's forest health work. The partnership will raise at least \$50,000 and elevate awareness of forest health among guests.

"Our summer guests tend to be from the Front Range and knowledgeable about the state of our forests. They have also been very receptive to learning more," adds Johannes. "Our winter guests come from all around the world. It will be interesting to see if they want to become engaged in this issue as well."

Sonnenalp Resort is not a newcomer to environmental practices. The resort's eco-friendly approach recently earned it the Luxury Eco Certification Standard (LECS) from Sustainable Travel International, becoming the first hotel in the western United States to pass this intensive inspection. Sonnenalp's partnership with the Conservancy is a continuation of their environmental ethic and it makes a lot of sense to Johannes.

"We were attracted to the Conservancy's non-confrontational, science-based approach. Our guests come from a wide variety of backgrounds so it is imperative to present pragmatic ideas with real results."

**THIS PAGE** Sonnenalp Resort in Vail © *Sonnenalp Resort*  
**INSET** Johannes and Rosana Faessler © *Sonnenalp Resort*

**OPPOSITE PAGE TOP** Vienna Vitek © *Vienna Vitek*  
**BOTTOM** Vienna's artwork © *Vienna Vitek*





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PHOTO Jenni Mullins © Jenni Mullins

## It's Never too Early to Think About Your Legacy

"I believe we all have a responsibility to educate ourselves about the impact we have on the Earth and to support organizations that are the best extensions of ourselves," says Jenni Mullins, a Conservancy supporter who, at 29, recently became the youngest known member of The Legacy Club in Colorado.

The Legacy Club is a group of Conservancy supporters who have made lasting commitments to conservation through life-income gifts or by naming the Conservancy as a beneficiary in their estate plans.

After graduating from Colorado State University, Jenni worked in a seasonal position at the Conservancy's

Phantom Canyon Ranch Preserve. It was there that she decided to pursue a career in nonprofit environmental work. She soon landed a job in the Conservancy's Colorado office, where she worked for nearly three years.

Jenni now works for Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, but the Conservancy remains close to her heart. "It's doing the work I want to see being done in the world." Jenni is proud to be a part of The Legacy Club and plans to be a lifelong advocate.

**If you would like to plan your conservation legacy, please contact** Mary Musilek: [mmusilek@tnc.org](mailto:mmusilek@tnc.org) or (720) 974-7029.