

# FOR LAND'S SAKE

The Nature Conservancy is protecting some of America's most treasured landscapes

by Eric Lucas

ONE OF SOUTHEAST ALASKA'S FEW FLATLAND REGIONS, THE GUSTAVUS FORELANDS (RIGHT) OFFERS SPLENDID VIEWS OF THE DISTANT FAIRWEATHER RANGE. AS GLACIERS RETREAT INTO GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK, A UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT SLOWLY RISES FROM THE WATER (FAR RIGHT).

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Gustavus, Alaska, is growing.

Literally, physically, geographically growing, as the sandy shoreline flatland at the edge of town, once pressed below sea level by the weight of glaciers, springs back. Standing atop some of that land, Morgan DeBoer grins at the novelty of good ground materializing from the chill saltwater depths of the aptly named Icy Strait.

"It's rising about an inch-and-a-half a year. Just on the border of my property, that amounts to roughly an acre of new land every year," DeBoer reports, obviously charmed by the fact he lives in a place that is reconstituting itself. His family first came here in the early 20th century, and his parents received one of the last homestead patents awarded in the United States, in 1959.

The physical reincarnation of Gustavus is now being matched by a corollary cultural renewal, as residents join with The Nature Conservancy of Alaska in an effort to preserve much of the town's surrounding flatland. Using \$3.9 million in funds raised from public grants and private donations, TNC this September will buy 4,136 acres currently owned by the Alaska Mental Health Trust, ensuring they will never be developed. The Gustavus Forelands project, like many such Nature Conservancy efforts, melds habitat preservation, recreation and local values. The project was first broached by area residents such

as DeBoer, and they have been an integral part of the effort ever since.

In effect, then, The Nature Conservancy is helping preserve the land, and its utilitarian value,

for both animals and humans. Across the country, that's exactly what TNC does. Supporters consider it one of the most pragmatic and most effective of environmental organizations, for two reasons: It seeks either to buy land outright, or to acquire permanent conservation easements, eschewing efforts to get tangled in public policy or land-use debates. And it embraces multiple purposes for the land it preserves, often including conservation-compatible human uses.

Some of the organization's preserves are in fabulously remote spots; some are next door to massive metropolitan areas. Some are desert, some alpine, some coastal, some grassland, some forest. In every case, they represent private preservation efforts funded significantly by individual and corporate donations. Nationally, The Nature Conservancy owns or manages about





MARK KELLEY (2)

1,400 preserves totaling 15 million acres.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent, and the land they've saved so far is priceless. The Gustavus Forelands is an admirable example.

Gustavus residents feel their home is unique, and they can make an excellent case for this belief: It's the gateway to Glacier Bay National Park, a landscape so memorable and environmentally precious that it's part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Gustavus itself, situated on a broad peninsula guarding the entrance to Glacier Bay, occupies virtually the only extensive flatland in Southeast Alaska. Remarkable views are commonplace in the Great Land, but the panorama from here is exceptional: The snow-burdened heights of the Fairweather Range soar northwest, from whence many of the park's glaciers arise. To the

east the Chilkat Range is only slightly less imposing. To the south Chichagof Island is a bulky, misty mystery. Westerly-born Pacific wind and water pour in through the strait.

In the foreground, Nootka lupine and cow parsnip shoulder their way to the sky, chest-high shrubs. Copses of spruce pirouette upward, like dancers in green A-line dresses. Eagles wheel 50 feet over the shoreline. A local hybrid of yellow and red





paintbrush sport blossom hems of orange. The soft cinnamon scent of flowers spices the breeze.

DeBoer's Mount Fairweather Golf Course winds through the Gustavus flats, adjacent to the property The Nature Conservancy is about

to buy. From the sixth tee on DeBoer's nine-hole links, a quixotic layout quintessentially Gustavian—that is, the third hole has, not sand traps, but wood-chip traps: hitting out of them feels like striking foam rubber—you can watch ravens beak-plow the fairway ahead, pitching up chunks of turf to find grubs and such. Course rules say players get relief when their balls land in “raven rough”—such as my badly sliced tee shot on the sixth—and on the rarer occasions

when a raven just heists the ball outright. High tides lap at the fairway of the eighth hole; if tide-water reaches the course, and your ball goes for a swim, relief is available for that, too. Left to the tidal currents, the ball might well wind up across the way on Tract B of the Gustavus Forelands, a 280-acre parcel in which vegetative progress bears striking testament to the transformation under way here.

At shoreline, sand and mudflats newly risen from the strait hold intricate patterns marking tidal flows, shorebird peregrinations, and coyote, moose, wolf and bear visits.

Go up a couple inches in elevation—100 feet inland—and you reach ground pioneered by the first plants, beach grasses, which bend pale green blades leeward toward the town. Another few inches upward, 50 yards farther inland, finds beach pea and other small forbs such as shooting star. The next stage inland is the territory of lupine, paintbrush and young willow, the fall and winter pantry of deer and moose. Beyond



**TOP: THE MOUNT HAMILTON AREA OF THE DIABLO RANGE IS THE LAST MAJOR UNDEVELOPED LANDSCAPE IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA. BOTTOM: MULESHOE RANCH, A 49,000-ACRE PRESERVE IN SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA, IS ONE OF THE MANY PLACES JOINTLY MANAGED BY THE NATURE CONSERVANCY AND FEDERAL AGENCIES.**

that is older willow, often moose-browsed into stubby head-high copses. Then the first spruce seedlings poke their tips out from the surrounding brush. In the winter, the nearby water's relative warmth keeps snow depths shallow, drawing animals of all types.

There are spots in this tract where small hillocks of glacial debris hold all these different vegetative zones in an expanse of just 50 feet—their toes in beach grass, the center of the mound crowned by an 8-foot spruce. It's a subtle ecological marvel, and preserving it is The Nature Conservancy's goal for the Forelands project.

"This is absolutely unique in Alaska," explains project manager Rob Bosworth. "There's very little flatland in Southeast to begin with, and some of the habitats here are found virtually nowhere else."

When British explorer George Vancouver sailed by in 1794, he charted a 300-foot wall of ice at the entrance to Glacier Bay. Every natural feature on the Gustavus peninsula has appeared

over the past two centuries as the glaciers retreated northward to the mountains—thus the unique ecological evolution taking place along the shore. But not all the land The Nature Conservancy will buy is shoreline; another tract along the Good River holds a lovely spruce forest, newly grown and thus much more passable than most of Southeast's formidable old-growth woods. This is a key wildlife-migration corridor that moose, deer and bears use to reach the shoreline in winter.

The lightly shaded woods themselves are carpeted with horsetail, an ankle-high vegetative net that looks like chartreuse mist. Toppled spruce giants form bridges across the loosely coiled river. Squirrel middens clasp the feet of standing trees.

Lovely as the area is, no one in Gustavus expects (or wants) their soon-to-be preserve to become a major tourist attraction. Visitors will continue to come here, as they have for more than a century, mainly to set sail into Glacier Bay itself,

one of the few places on earth with tide-water glaciers. Here, between the rugged stone ankles of the Fairweather Range, glaciers still force their way downhill to meet salt water. The towering glacial walls lean into emerald inlets strewn with



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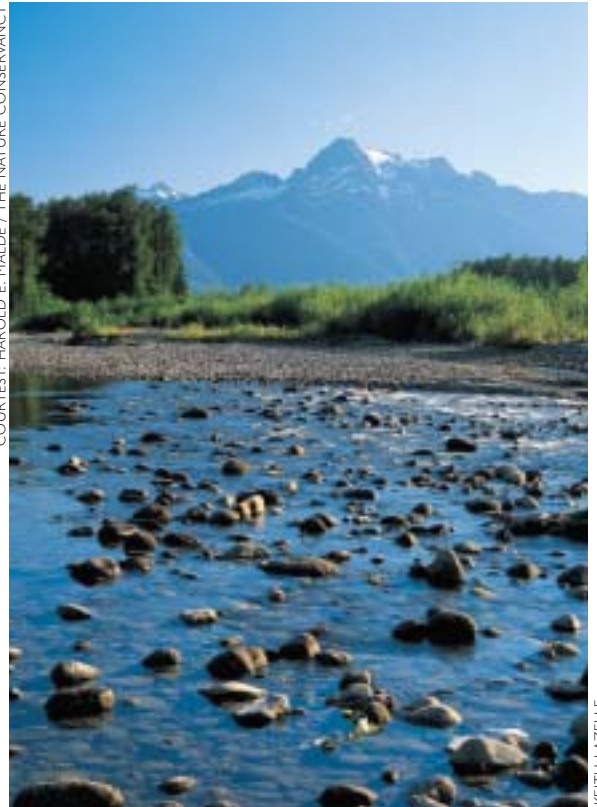
chunks of ice. Moored quietly at the foot of these, you can listen to the cracks of ice separating, the muffled booms as pieces plunge into the water. Huge brown bears forage along nearby granite knobs, gulping paintbrush salads. Experiencing all this is what brings international attention to Gustavus, the reason it is one of the smallest communities (400 year-round residents) in North America with scheduled jet service.

The Gustavus townsfolk who spurred the Forelands preservation campaign will be the ones who use the preserve most. Hiking trails loop through both shorelands and woods. Hunting will continue on the land, though motorized vehicle access will likely be restricted. Biking and cross-country skiing will draw seasonal adherents. Of course, visitors to the small inns and B&Bs of Gustavus can enjoy the land, too.

“We all use this land,” DeBoer observes, “so

we all understand how valuable it is.” A mail-in town survey of sentiment on preserving the property yielded a remarkable 80 percent support for the project.

**I**n southeastern Arizona’s uplands, early evening brings a flurry of activity to the mesquite bosk along Muleshoe Ranch’s Hot Springs Wash. A fresh breeze, born in a towering thunderstorm 50 miles south, near Willcox, whisks among the comblike fronds of the acacia and mesquite trees. A vermilion flycatcher bounds from branch to branch, shopping for



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**THE NATURE CONSERVANCY WORKS TO PROTECT WILDLIFE HABITAT IN PLACES SUCH AS OREGON’S BORAX LAKE PRESERVE (ABOVE LEFT) AND WASHINGTON’S SKAGIT RIVER DELTA (ABOVE).**

## IF YOU GO

**GUSTAVUS INN:** Family-owned for almost 40 years, the red-roof, white-clapboard restored homestead farmhouse is surrounded by flower and vegetable gardens, and broad expanses of meadow in the middle of Gustavus, Alaska. The rooms are spare and comfortable, with wood trim, handmade quilts and sitting areas. The daily rate includes three meals—dinners are gourmet affairs relying on local seafood—airport shuttle and use of the inn’s bikes. Lodge staff will happily arrange Glacier Bay sightseeing tours, kayaking or fishing excursions. For reservations, call 800-649-5220, or visit [www.gustavusinn.com](http://www.gustavusinn.com).

**GLACIER BAY LODGE:** The only accommodation within the park itself is a handsome cedar-and-stone lodge blended into the forest along a quiet inlet at the entrance to Glacier Bay. The 56 guest rooms are in separate buildings joined by a boardwalk to the main lodge. The Fairweather dining room offers fine dining based on local seafood. Glacier Bay Cruiseline tours, run by the lodge operators, depart each morning from the park’s main dock nearby, and encompass much of the park during a daylong run “up-bay.” A Park Service naturalist provides commentary during the tour. For reservations call 800-229-8687, or visit [www.visitglacierbay.com](http://www.visitglacierbay.com).

**MULESHOE RANCH:** Founded as an Arizona cattle ranch in the 1880s, and later the home base for an eccentric sculptress, The Nature Conservancy ranch offers accommodations for overnight visitors in handsome stucco casitas, or dorm rooms in the main lodge. Cooking facilities are provided, and a delightful nature trail through the ranch’s riparian woods is nearby. The buildings perch on a small bluff at the edge of Hot Springs Wash, overlooking the mesquite-and-ash woods of the canyon. Closed in summer; for information call 520-507-5229, or visit [www.nature.org/arizona](http://www.nature.org/arizona).

**VISITING NATURE:** The Nature Conservancy operates several guest ranches and remote lodges on preserves throughout the United States, including preserves in Montana, Colorado and Arizona. For more information, visit [www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org). —Eric Lucas

dinner. On the verandah of the ranch's main lodge, a dozen black-chinned hummingbirds buzz querulously around the feeder, finally settling in a tidy circle, one at each sipping station.

Mulshoe is the centerpiece of a 49,000-acre preserve jointly managed by The Nature Conservancy, Coronado National Forest and the Bureau of Land Management. TNC owns the 5,700-acre ranch, and as it's the gateway to the ensuing 20 miles of canyonlands, it's the key to the whole parcel. Overall, the preserve harbors rare desert fish, such as the Gila chub, in its equally rare perennial streams; holds massive, corduroy-trunked old-growth cottonwoods and Arizona ash trees; offers habitat to black bears, mountain lions, white-tailed deer, coatimundi and bobcats; and embraces a warm, stone-and-sand landscape, midway between the Sonoran and Chihuahan deserts, that invariably amazes first-time visitors with its lush diversity.

And visitors are frequent. TNC welcomes overnight guests in cozy casitas tucked in the hill just above the wash; day hikers make the drive (two hours from Tucson) to stroll the bosks and canyons just as I've done on a late spring eve. In the woods, the babble of bird song is tropical in breadth. The low-angled light, softened by the prism of storm clouds, soaks the canyon rim.

A thousand miles north, in an entirely different desert, the breeze is tinged with sagebrush spice. At Oregon's Borax Lake Preserve, perched on a small rise by the Alvord Desert, gem-clear alkaline water holds its own unique chub, endemic only to these waters, which are fed by hot springs. The Nature Conservancy bought the 320-acre parcel in 1993.

Even in midsummer, the towering ramparts of Steens Mountain 40 miles west are draped by holdover snow-fields. Graceful, lean wild horses range across the nearby sage flats, and night herons, avocets, terns, geese, ducks, plovers and other waterfowl use the lakeside marsh as stopover habitat, a desert bird motel.

The Nature Conservancy works worldwide, and has chapters and programs in all 50 states, as well as in Mexico and Canada. Information on TNC programs can be obtained by calling 703-841-5300 or visiting the Web at [www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org). Information on activities by state are available on the Web, or from TNC field offices:

<b>Alaska</b> 907-276-3133	<b>Nevada</b> 775-322-4990
<b>Arizona</b> 520-622-3861	<b>Oregon</b> 503-230-1221
<b>California</b> 415-777-0487	<b>Washington</b> 206-343-4344

Six hundred miles northwest of here, in yet another entirely different landscape, some of the same waterfowl—terns, geese, ducks—probe the cold brackish waters of the Skagit River Delta. The largest river reaching Puget Sound, the Skagit is widely known as the winter home of hundreds of bald eagles that roost in its cottonwoods and feast on a late-season salmon run. The Nature Conservancy helped pioneer preservation of the upriver eagle habitat, and is now working to enhance the fish-and-wildlife value of the river's estuary, 60 miles downstream.

"The Skagit basin overall is one of the richest wildlife ecosystems in the Pacific Northwest," observes Nature Conservancy staffer Bob Carey. "In its Cascade headwaters it's the place where grizzly bears and wolves are working their way back into the Northwest. Everybody knows about the eagles in the Marblemount stretch. But the delta may be the most overlooked piece of the puzzle. It's not just waterfowl, though there are hundreds of thousands of those. It's one of the few places in Washington state, for instance, where you can see all five North American falcons, from kestrels to peregrines."

Though parts of the delta are already held by state and federal agencies, The Nature Conservancy is working to expand the amount of land devoted, at least in part, to wildlife habitat. In one 50-acre parcel the organization may

buy, a dike would be moved back to open the ground to tidewater. In others, farmers may simply be paid for conservation easements that forestall development proposals and encourage bird-friendly agricultural techniques such as winter-cover cropping, which leaves vegetation such as winter wheat in the field to reduce erosion.

"We believe farming and conservation can coexist," says Carey.

The conservancy has often practiced that philosophy over the past two decades, buying title to or easements on working farms and ranches throughout the West. Sometimes these projects are modest in scale, such as the 50-acre Skagit River Delta parcel. Sometimes they are almost unimaginably vast.

Such a campaign is under way south-east of San Francisco Bay in the Mount Hamilton area of the Diablo Range, a rugged upthrust between the Santa Clara Valley and the San Joaquin Valley. The Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza led a party through the range in the late 1700s, looking for a shortcut into the Central Valley, and regretted the detour.

"They hated it. They got lost and concluded the shortcut was a huge mistake," says Lloyd Wagstaff of The Nature Conservancy's California chapter.

Even today it's easy to see how that could happen. The Diablo Range looms over both its adjacent valleys like a hide-colored, impenetrable wall. Tawny grassland foothills are carved by deep washes in which native sycamores line the rare streams. A bit higher, blue oaks dot the mountains' hips; and above that, Coulter pines lend a blue-gray haze to the distant high ridges. Mountain lions, deer, eagles and hawks are home here. Though they haven't worked their way this far north yet, California condors would find it hospitable territory, too.

Forbidding as the range seems, it is the last major undeveloped landscape in the Bay Area, and urban pressures are coming to bear. Subdivisions are creeping in from both valleys; proposals to build a freeway and a high-speed rail line would cut through the heart of the range. So The Nature Conservancy is

setting out to conserve a bit of it—200,000 acres or so, doubling the land already held in state and federal preserves. More than \$30 million has been spent so far, on 80,000 acres; TNC would like to devote another \$150 million to the rest. Often, a conservation easement will best suit both the organization and the landholder.

“Most of the families that have ranched here for more than a century don’t really want to see the land turned into subdivisions,” project director Wagstaff reports. “An easement is a tool that allows the ground to stay in grazing uses, and it makes the best use of our money. Luckily, all the pressure on this area is also spurring a lot of regional interest in our project.”

Urban-development pressures are immense forces, and it would demonstrate remarkable foresight should the conservancy succeed in attracting enough support from the Bay Area to protect the Mount Hamilton area of the Diablo Range. On the Gustavus Forelands, a thousand miles north of Mount Hamilton, Morgan DeBoer credits his own community’s foresight for what will soon be, a preserve that holds ground unique on Earth.

“Most of the money for this will come from elsewhere, but here in Gustavus we raised \$80,000 ourselves. That’s remarkable for a town with less than 400 residents,” says DeBoer. “I’m incredibly lucky to live in a place that takes such an avid interest in preserving what’s best about it.”

We’re all that lucky, actually. Every Western state holds dozens of landscapes already preserved by The Nature Conservancy—and each one represents the simple, heartfelt value we all place on the ground we call home. ▲

*Eric Lucas lives in Seattle and Northern California. The Nature Conservancy’s Alaska chapter is still seeking contributions to finalize payment for the Gustavus Forelands; for more information, contact the chapter at 907-276-3133, or visit [www.nature.org/alaska](http://www.nature.org/alaska).*

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