

## Zumwalt Prairie Preserve Facts, March 2006

### **Zumwalt Prairie Preserve**

In October, 2000, The Nature Conservancy purchased the 26,920-acre Camp Creek Ranch and created the Zumwalt Prairie Preserve. The 42-square-mile preserve, located on the eastern edge of Zumwalt Prairie, includes about 12,000 acres of native grasslands and about 15,000 acres of wooded canyons descending toward the Imnaha River and Hells Canyon. The preserve includes 38 miles of creeks and encompasses most of the Camp Creek and Trail Creek watersheds.

### **Pine Creek addition to Zumwalt Prairie Preserve**

The Nature Conservancy has signed an option to purchase an additional 6,065 acres from a private owner adjacent to, and to the west of, the preserve. The preserve addition includes some of the highest quality native grasslands on the prairie and also wooded slopes of North Findley Butte and most of the headwaters of Pine Creek. Over 13 miles of intermittent streams include habitats important to imperiled Snake River steelhead and other wildlife. The property was the last refuge of the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse before it vanished from Wallowa County in the 1940s, and will likely play a role in ongoing efforts to reintroduce the once-common grassland bird.

The purchase price is \$3,000,000 as established by an independent qualified real estate appraiser. Closing is scheduled for September 29, 2006. In addition to the purchase price, the Conservancy will also fundraise for initial management costs on the property and a stewardship endowment to support long-term management.

### **Zumwalt Prairie**

Zumwalt Prairie is the largest and highest-quality expanse of palouse, or fescue-dominated, bunchgrass prairie in North America. It covers over 200,000 acres on a plateau east, north and northwest of Enterprise at elevations from 4,500 to 5,500 feet. Deep, fertile soils support bunchgrass communities dominated by Idaho fescue and scores of native wildflower species, including rare plants. Along the edges of the plateau, the grasslands descend into wooded canyons with perennial streams. Because it is slightly higher, colder and drier than other palouse prairies in the Northwest, little of Zumwalt has ever been cultivated, and livestock grazing has been managed in ways that have minimized impacts to the ecosystem. Zumwalt Prairie is almost entirely in private ownership.

### **Ecological significance**

Fescue-dominated (palouse) bunchgrass prairies are found in the intermountain region of the northwestern United States and southwestern Canada, in the northern foothills of the Rockies, on the northern edge of the Great Plains, in southern Eurasia and in New Zealand. Historically, these deep-soiled, fertile prairies evolved a rich and complex diversity of wildlife and plant communities. Today, however, nearly all have been converted to crop production or livestock grazing, and the bunchgrass prairie ecosystem is now globally imperiled.

Because of its vast prey base of ground squirrels and other small mammals, Zumwalt Prairie hosts one of the densest concentrations of breeding birds of prey in North America, including ferruginous hawks and golden eagles. Intermittent and perennial streams on the prairie are critical to federally protected runs of Snake River steelhead, and chinook salmon. Rare plants include the federally listed Spalding's catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*). The prairie supports an exceptional diversity of other wildlife, including grassland songbirds, herds of elk and deer, and many mammal predators such as black bear, cougar, badger and bobcat.

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## **Management of Zumwalt Prairie Preserve**

The Conservancy's goal is to conserve and restore the biological diversity of Zumwalt Prairie with focus on the grassland and riparian ecosystems. Acquisition of the Pine Creek addition will expand our opportunity to conserve and restore Zumwalt's native grasslands and riparian habitats. The addition also affords an opportunity to expand reintroduction of the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in cooperation with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The Conservancy's management plan for our existing property includes as key strategies the control of invasive species, reintroduction of prescribed fire, restoration of stream functions and vegetation, fencing of sensitive areas, and research on grazing impacts, breeding birds of prey, ground-nesting songbirds, and other subjects. In addition, we have conducted archeological studies and repaired historic structures and housing which are used by visiting scientists, volunteers and conservation partners. The Conservancy currently leases closely monitored grazing to our neighbors, providing discounts in exchange for habitat restoration work on their lands. The Pine Creek addition will allow us to expand this "grass bank" for neighboring ranches while we meet ecological goals on the property. When the Pine Creek property is acquired, we will manage it using the same key strategies outlined above, using detailed on-site inventories and evaluations to guide and refine our work.

## **Wallowa County and community**

An advisory board of local citizens including members from the county commission, natural resource agencies and organizations, Nez Perce Tribe and ranchers assists the Conservancy in developing and implementing its management plans and activities. Conservancy staff participate in the local Resource Advisory Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Weed Management Area and other initiatives. Staff helped lead an in-depth Upper Joseph Creek watershed assessment and developed resources to fund culvert removals and other priority watershed restoration projects. Although it is a tax-exempt non-profit, the Conservancy since 2000 has voluntarily paid \$38,384 in local property taxes and \$29,858 in fire patrol fees, and will continue to pay taxes on the Pine Creek addition.

The Conservancy's many partners at Zumwalt Prairie and in the community include Wallowa County, Oregon State University, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Oregon Department of Forestry, Wallowa Resources, Nez Perce Tribe, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, Bonneville Power Administration, Grande Ronde Model Watershed, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Army Corps of Engineers, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, numerous private landowners and others.

## **Economic benefits of conservation**

The Conservancy actively manages its property and we purchase and contract locally, including vehicles, supplies, building materials, fencing, weed control and construction work. A staff of 4.75 full-time employees live and work in the community, and at least 500 others including volunteers, scientists, seasonal workers and visitors come to the area each year. The Conservancy contributes at least \$380,000 to the local economy in salaries, rent, supplies and property taxes. In addition, the Conservancy has helped raise over \$1.5 million for research and restoration work on the preserve and in the region, including over \$500,000 from private sources for prevention and control of invasive weeds in Wallowa County and Hells Canyon, \$500,000 for research on grazing impacts on nesting songbirds, and \$230,000 to assess and improve conditions in the Joseph Creek Watershed. Grazing has continued on the preserve, with 2-3,000 AUMs leased annually. Hunting tags for deer and elk on the preserve are donated each year to local schools, 4-H, hospital, senior center and other causes, raising over \$80,000 so far to assist these local organizations.

### ***For more information, contact:***

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