

BASIN RANGE & RIMROCK

WINTER 2018 NEWSLETTER ■ UTAH CHAPTER

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Razorback sucker. Credit: © Melanie Fischer/USFWS

Breaking Ground...for Fish

This fall, at TNC’s Scott M. Matheson Wetlands Preserve near Moab, dirt began flying as part of an exciting construction project: a native fish nursery. The babies—or larvae—are in desperate need of a protected place to grow. The Colorado River’s razorback sucker is fighting for a comeback after years of decreasing water levels, habitat changes and non-native predators moving into their habitat. Scientists hope that creating a warm, shallow water safe zone, where the larvae can become adults, will be the key to establishing a self-sustaining population. By blending the perfect location with cutting-edge science and innovative engineering, TNC and its partners plan to give razorback suckers a new chance. Over the next year, the construction team at the preserve will enlarge the channel from the Colorado River to a sheltered pond. Crews will also deepen the pond to increase habitat size and optimize water quality.

Creepy, Crawly, Flying Fun

Like a moth to a flame... people flocked to TNC’s “Bat & Bug Night” held on July 25th at TNC’s Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve. In the cover of darkness, event attendees gathered at the Kay’s Creek portion of the preserve for an up-close look at dozens of insects and moths, all of which were drawn to the “Love Motel.” The sculpture is an outdoor, interactive art installation that uses large-scale, ultra-violet light to entice moths, beetles and other nocturnal arthropods. TNC featured the piece thanks to artist and biologist Brandon Ballengée’s “Love Motels for Insects” — brought to Utah by Westminster College’s Great Salt Lake Institute. Event attendees were also treated to bat observation, recording and mist-netting with experts. “It was so much fun,” said Andrea Nelson, TNC Utah’s Community Engagement Manager. “People are fascinated by all the bats and bugs that call the Lake home—and we can learn a lot about the important role these species play.”



Visitors check out the “Love Motel.” © Andrea Nelson/TNC

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Lasting Results

Utah Private Lands Protection

Number of Projects. 189
Acres Protected. 877,875

Utah Public Lands Protection

Number of Projects. 40
Acres Protected. 130,063

Total Acres Protected 1,007,938

Total Utah Membership 6,175

Headwinds

How to Navigate in a Perfect Storm



Dave Livermore
Utah State Director

“The arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.”
Martin Luther King, Jr.

THE FLIGHT HOME FROM WASHINGTON, D.C., to Salt Lake City normally takes four hours, but it can be much longer if there are headwinds—“a wind blowing directly in front, opposing forward motion” (*Webster’s*). Flying against strong headwinds is what it feels like working in conservation today. Those of us who have been around for a while remember previous eras when the environment fell off our national priority list. But today the stakes are higher. Fuel economy standards are being rolled back, the Endangered

Species Act is under attack, National Monuments are shrunken, the Paris Accord is undermined, greater sage-grouse plans are upended, and mitigation rules are being revoked. These headwinds are like none we’ve ever experienced before.

It is ironic and discouraging this Administration is rolling back protections, and ignoring climate change, precisely at the same time there are record-setting hurricanes hitting Florida and North Carolina, severe drought in the West and one of the worst wildfire seasons in history. British Columbia wildfire smoke clogged Seattle for two weeks this summer. Thick smoke impacted the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon, for ten days. California had the worst fire season in history. We are in the midst of a perfect storm. Just when nature is crying out, no one in Washington is listening. Just when more should be done to protect and conserve nature, just the opposite is taking place.

What to do? Today’s headwinds are especially challenging, but, borrowing from Martin Luther King, I believe the arc of the struggle to protect the environment is long, but it bends towards conservation. Our forward motion may be slowed, but we are still flying home. As we wait for things to turn, the key is to work locally with

people of good intent outside the glare of politics. “When Washington goes low, we go local” could be our motto. Take Grouse Creek rancher Jay Tanner, for instance, who has worked with TNC, the NRCS and neighboring families to conserve 9,500 acres of greater sage-grouse habitat in Utah’s West Desert. Or the Iron County Commission, which is now supporting efforts to conserve Utah prairie dog habitat. Or irrigators on the Virgin River, who have joined hands with TNC, local cities and the Washington County Water Conservancy District to begin implementing a \$10 million irrigation efficiency project. These are examples of successful local partnerships that work because of a shared conservation vision beyond politics. By advancing projects like these and addressing the needs of nature and people on the ground, we are weathering today’s perfect storm and laying the foundation for a better tomorrow.

The loss of biodiversity, E.O. Wilson once wrote, “is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us.” At The Nature Conservancy, we are thinking about these descendants every day. Despite today’s headwinds, we are pushing forward, keeping our heads down and doing what we can to make a difference. Someday, these winds will change.

Traditional dancers and other entertainers wowed the crowd gathered to celebrate community, culture and the natural world at TNC's iFiesta for Nature!



¡Fiesta for Nature!

Diversity & Unity Mark Inaugural Conservation Celebration

THE COLORS SWIRLED, VIBRANT YELLOWS, greens and blues, flaring in the afternoon sun, framed against the golden reeds of the autumn wetlands. But the brilliant show wasn't generated by migratory birds—the usual purveyors of color and artistry at the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve. This rainbow display came courtesy of the traditional dance costumes worn by members of Ballet Folklórico. The troupe joined several local artists performing in the preserve's pavilion at a celebration of nature, culture and community.

It all took place on September 22, when TNC welcomed more than 300 people to ¡Fiesta for Nature!, a bilingual, family-friendly event held at the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve. Attendees enjoyed free tacos and explored the preserve through hands-on arts and nature activities, including an audio tour available in both English and Spanish. Audiences of all

ages were delighted by the line-up of culturally diverse entertainers, including dancers, musicians, poets and puppeteers.

“We succeeded in connecting the attendees to this beautiful preserve,” said Maria Estrada, who helped create this event for TNC's Utah Chapter and is the associate director of TNC's Diversity and Inclusion Program. “Many families who came love spending time together in nature, and the Fiesta was an opportunity to discover a new and special place that they can now visit with their children and learn about our conservation work here.”

The event was made possible by TNC's new and deepening partnerships with a range of Utah organizations, including Artes de México, Arte Primero, Hartland Community 4 Youth and Families, Outdoor Afro, Play & Learn Outside, The Natural History Museum of Utah, Tracy Aviary and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts (UMFA).

In the pavilion, UMFA led an interactive activity called “The Pelican,” in which visitors wrote their own migratory story on paper, then wove it into a large metal sculpture in the shape of a life-size pelican. “This was a lovely community art project,” explains Jorge Rojas,

UMFA's education and engagement director. “We wanted to celebrate the amazing birds at the Great Salt Lake and their migration stories—as well as our own cultural migrations.”

Artes de México led story-telling and a puppet show in the pavilion. Children in the audience listened and interacted with the performers, exploring stories about how people, like birds, migrate to new places.

“We were thrilled to participate,” remarks Laila Villanueva, project manager for Artes de México. “This was an opportunity to promote the inclusion of Latin American communities and their cultural heritage in the preservation of natural environments, beyond borders and nationalities, for the benefit of all in the present and future of our planet.”

The success of ¡Fiesta for Nature! underscores the TNC Utah Chapter's commitment to broaden its reach to the many different people who care about our environment. “The health of our air, land and water matters to all of us,” says Estrada. “More than ever, we need more people supporting the work we do, more diverse ideas and a range of perspectives to meet the challenges facing our natural world.”

Years of dedication and collaboration among a wide range of partners have paid off for the threatened Utah prairie dog.



Living to Tell the Tale

Latest Win in Recovery Saga for the Utah Prairie Dog

The journey began more than five years ago—a conservation odyssey that wound through the arid lands and county borders of southwest Utah. With set-backs and unexpected turns along the way, the story features a disparate cast of characters from federal scientists to county commissioners to long-time ranchers—all revolving around one charismatic and controversial star: the Utah prairie dog.

“There were times when we’d hit a dry spell, or face opposition, and I wasn’t sure how it would turn out,” says Elaine York, TNC’s West Desert Regional Director and lead on Utah prairie dog protection. “We were all inspired by each other and by the perseverance of this committed group of people who truly care about the fate of this species.”

York is referring to the many partners, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Utah Department of Natural Resources (UDNR), as well as Garfield and Iron Counties, who have worked with TNC over the years to identify and protect Utah prairie dog

habitat on private land. This spring, the team acquired another 291 acres of prime prairie dog habitat in Iron County—building on past achievements that include TNC’s 2013 purchase of 800 acres in Garfield County.

Taking place in areas where prairie dogs are often unwelcome, each land purchase required patience, delicate negotiations and coalition building among a range of stakeholders. TNC and its partners relied on relationships and trust, built over time, with county commissioners and landowners who saw the benefit of working toward species recovery goals.

“Residual local animosity toward the Utah prairie dog has been a big hurdle to overcome,” said Chris Keleher, Recovery Programs Director with UDNR. “Through collaborative efforts, with each partner playing a key role, many of the issues that created this animosity have been addressed, and we were able to move forward.”

Referring to the latest acquisition, Iron County Planner Reed Erickson adds: “It took great partners working together over a sustained period to identify critical properties and find a willing seller. The County is committed to this kind of project to delist the Utah prairie dog.”

Protection wins like the one in Iron County mean a lot to this species, which is found only in a small portion of the southwestern corner of the state. By the 1970s, the Utah prairie dog had been pushed to the edge of extinction, reduced to a fraction of its historical range by threats such as poisoning, urban expansion and plague. Population numbers are more stable today, and the Utah prairie dog has been downgraded to “Threatened” status.

With each acre protected by TNC and its partners, experts see more hope. “The prairie dog occurs largely on private lands, so long-term protection of these lands is important for species recovery,” added Laura Romin, Deputy Field Supervisor with USFWS. “These purchases mark significant milestones for recovery efforts.”

Known as a keystone species, the Utah prairie dog’s fate is tied to the health of the greater ecosystem. Prairie dog colonies create islands of habitats that benefit approximately 150 other species, and they are an important part of the food chain. The holes they dig also help to aerate and fertilize the soil, encouraging plant diversity.

Stay tuned for the next chapter in the epic story of the Utah prairie dog. If partnerships like this continue, it will surely have a happy ending.

Through the CRC Fellowship Program, young scientists like Claire Karban (left) bring new energy to research designed to improve the sustainability of the Colorado Plateau.



The Young & the Hopeful

Canyonlands Research Center Fellows Pursue Solutions

CLAIRE KARBAN KNEELS IN THE RED DIRT. At mid-morning, the sun is already fierce and insistent, searing the brim of her hat. She has been collecting soil samples at TNC's Canyonlands Research Center (CRC) since 6:30 am. "At least the gnats aren't out yet," she says, surprisingly upbeat. "They get active in the afternoon, biting your ankles and ears." While the work is tedious and taxing, Karban never loses her focus or precision. These soil and seedling measurements will reveal whether the restoration methods she is testing are working... and whether they might reveal new ways to sustain life on the Colorado Plateau.

A second-year Ph.D. student at the University of Colorado Boulder, Karban is one of four graduate students participating in the CRC Fellowship Program. These young scientists, hailing from an array of universities, gained field experience while addressing questions that advance the CRC's mission. For Karban, this means testing several promising restoration techniques

to stabilize the soil so that it doesn't blow away, as well as increase nutrients and seed availability.

"This fellowship has been so important to me," explains Karban. "Having this initial funding allowed me to run several experiments and get my feet wet. With my research, I hope to overcome some of the barriers to restoration success."

Healing the soils and plants of the Colorado Plateau is no simple task. Restoration methods that work in other Western ecosystems often fail in this unique region, complicated by a lack of rainfall, low ground surface stability and soil and plants that are highly sensitive to disturbance. To add to the challenge, the lands of the Plateau now face intensifying impacts from climate change and a growing array of human demands, including recreation, grazing and mineral extraction. Scientists like Karban are in a race to better understand and support these grasses and soils before it's too late.

The CRC's three other fellows are also pursuing research designed to boost the region's sustainability. They include Tyara Vazquez, from the University of Toledo, María Cristina Rengifo, with Northern Arizona University, and Spencer Hudson, from Utah State University. Their research topics range from how climate change

impacts animals that depend on external sources of body heat, to biocrust resiliency, to the effect of heat stress and land use on horny toads and other desert reptiles.

The Fellowship program fulfills an important goal for the CRC: bring in new scientific talent and ideas to address resource challenges and help train the next generation of conservation leaders. "The fellowships provide funding for scientists at a critical stage of their careers," said Nichole Barger, CRC research director and professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. "This program has renewed my faith that the next generation will have the knowledge and skills to tackle our most pressing environmental problems."

For Karban, the gnats may be vicious and the shade elusive, but it's all worth it. "At the end of the day, you get cleaned up and drink a lot of water and eat ice cream," she says. "And you think about how awesome it is that you get to spend your day collecting data in this beautiful place to try to understand the ecological processes and how we can better manage human impacts. I am so thankful that there are organizations that recognize the importance of this work and are willing to fund it."

Special Thanks

The following major supporters have generously contributed to our Utah projects and programs during the period of July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018 (FY 18). We extend our sincere thanks to them and to the many other Utah supporters too numerous to list here, who have also given during this period.

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Corporate Partner Highlight

TNC would like to recognize Dominion Energy for its generous support of our mission since 2003. Most recently, the Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation contributed to TNC's Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve, helping us preserve critical habitat for more than 250 bird species. Dominion Energy's gift also ensures TNC will continue to use the preserve as an outdoor classroom, reaching thousands of students through our Wings and Water Wetlands Education program. "We're grateful for Dominion Energy's partnership, which is helping us protect key lands and waters and instill a conservation ethic in Utah's next generation and beyond," said Dave Livermore, TNC's Utah State Director.

STAY CONNECTED



FCS FPO

Epic Voyager



Wilson's Phalarope. © Gary Crandall

A MASSIVE BLACK RIBBON SPIRALS UP, like a wisp of smoke in the sky. In a flash, the shape twists left and dives downward, unfurling in a fluid line to skim the steel grey surface of the Great Salt Lake. The mesmerizing mid-air ballet is performed by a flock of thousands of small shorebirds, moving in perfect unity. These are Wilson's phalaropes, one of Utah's most fascinating avian visitors.

In late August, phalaropes leave the Great Salt Lake after spending the summer here resting their bodies and gorging on brine shrimp and brine flies. Every year, their goal during their Utah visit is the same: pack on the pounds. These diminutive birds double their body weight while at the Lake to survive the jaw-dropping, 54-hour, non-stop flight to their

winter home in South America. Their small pointed wings carry them 3,000 miles to reach the warm, inland saline lakes of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru.

For Wilson's phalaropes, like so many migratory shorebirds, the health of the Great Salt Lake is the key to life itself. Experts estimate that 50 percent of the world's phalarope population visits and relies on the Lake each year. "When we make choices that affect the Lake's waters and habitats, we need to understand the consequences," says Dave Livermore, TNC's Utah State Director. "The Great Salt Lake is a vital way station for phalaropes and millions of other North American shorebirds and waterfowl."