

# Utah

## Spring 2025



Gift and Estate Planning

## Create Your Conservation Legacy

What does tomorrow hold for the world we love? We are grateful for the thousands of forward-thinking individuals who have made a gift for the future by including The Nature Conservancy in their estate plans. Each year, more than 20% of the total funds raised come from gifts like these. They truly make a difference for our world. You can make a lasting impact for nature by including The Nature Conservancy as a beneficiary in your will or estate plan.

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To create your own legacy for nature, contact Eden Bennett, at (801) 531.0999 or [eden.bennett@tnc.org](mailto:eden.bennett@tnc.org).

**ON THE COVER:** Black-necked stilt at Great Salt Lake.

© Mary Anne Karren



## Every Dog Counts

This spring, biologists from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) are taking a special head count—small furry heads, to be exact. They’re looking for adult Utah prairie dogs, a threatened species found only in the southwestern part of our state. The annual census helps biologists, landowners and land managers determine whether this vulnerable species is stable, in decline or improving. TNC has long worked with partners to bolster the recovery of Utah prairie dogs, and we’ve protected more than 1,000 acres of prime habitat. In 2024, UDWR biologists visited three of TNC’s protected properties and counted more than 170 adult prairie dogs who appear to be thriving, and those numbers could easily soon double when the spring pups are born. It’s all good news for a species that once teetered on the brink of extinction.

**I can't think of a more important time** for TNC's work.

In Utah, across the United States, and around the world, TNC has charted a course for a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature. There is comfort in knowing that our mission is inviolate. Our health and well-being—and our very existence—hang in the balance as we work to protect our natural world. That's why every TNC project is a step forward for all of us. And no matter what unexpected challenges arise, I know that we will remain steady on our shared path to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

Here in Utah, we are staying focused on goals and celebrating progress. In this newsletter, you'll read about our recent purchase of critical habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse, one of the West's most endangered birds. And you'll learn about our expanded use of Landscape Conservation Forecasting, a ground-breaking TNC conservation tool that's helping the Bureau of Land Management to improve management on public lands in southeast Utah, part of our landscape-level work in TNC's Sagebrush Sea program. Finally, you'll get a deep look at TNC's inspiring legacy of action on behalf of Great Salt Lake, from our very first wetlands purchase 41 years ago to our current leadership on promising solutions for Lake water levels and ecosystem health. I'm also excited that this issue features some of our newest team members, who will play vital roles for our future success on the Colorado River and our collaboration with Tribal communities.

I hope these stories, projects and people fill you with hope and with certainty. What we're doing matters. And our commitment to Utah, and to the planet, will never waver. This spring, I am grateful to you for standing strong alongside TNC as we continue to take steps together toward a brighter future.



*Elizabeth Kitchens*

**Elizabeth Kitchens**

Utah State Director



Uinta Basin wildflowers  
© Gary Crandall





American avocets © Mary Anne Karren

## Great Salt Lake: TNC's Role as a Conservation Leader

### A 40-Year Legacy of Protection and Leadership

In 1984, TNC made a bold and pioneering move. We purchased 1,192 acres along the eastern shore of Great Salt Lake, becoming the first private conservation organization to protect critical migratory bird habitat in the area. This landmark action not only safeguarded vital wetlands, it also established our Utah chapter, and it marked the beginning of TNC's enduring commitment to the Lake's preservation. In the decades since, we've been a driving force for key advances in science, habitat protection, policy and public education to benefit Great Salt Lake. Today, as the Lake faces growing challenges, we remain at the center of the most promising efforts to safeguard its future.

### Why Great Salt Lake Matters

Utahns, and people worldwide, have recently had a major wake-up call about Great Salt Lake's value—and its fragility. While the Lake has rebounded somewhat from its historic and critical low point in 2022, its water levels remain too low

and its future is uncertain. Today, though, many more people recognize that the Lake's loss would threaten the Western Hemisphere's bird species, jeopardize our air quality and water supplies, weaken mountain snowpack, damage local and global industries, and cost Utah taxpayers billions of dollars. This staggering reality is why TNC has always made Great Salt Lake a top priority.

"For more than 40 years, TNC has led the scientific and community-based approaches needed to protect Great Salt Lake," says Elizabeth Kitchens, TNC's Utah State Director. "This is an all-hands-on-deck effort. Each one of us has a role to play in protecting this unique and precious ecosystem, which matters so much to our future."

Today we are working with diverse partners on strategic, practical and long-term interventions to protect freshwater flows to the Lake, enhance water quality and protect vulnerable wetlands. Our programs span three major focus areas:



### **Preserving & Restoring Habitat**

Since 1984, TNC has preserved more than 12,000 acres of wetlands and uplands at Great Salt Lake. We now manage 10,000 acres at several preserves, including 4,531 acres at our marquee Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve—an oasis for migratory birds that acts as a buffer against rapid development in Davis County.

At all of our protected properties, TNC manages habitat with the goal of benefiting the larger Lake ecosystem. Our preserve managers are protecting water sources, restoring critical wetlands and fighting invasives. They also partner with other private, state and federal wetland managers to exchange best practices in water control, herbicide use, equipment use and fire management.

### **Transforming Policy & Securing Water**

TNC engages with Utah leaders to advance legislation enhancing the Lake's management, funding research and modernizing water laws to optimize water use and management and protect water quality and quantity. Today we are focused on testing and implementing voluntary water market solutions and flexible instream flow provisions to benefit Great Salt Lake. We also serve on the Great Salt Lake Advisory Council and work closely with the government

entities tasked with responsibly managing Great Salt Lake, including the Department of Natural Resources and the Office of the Great Salt Lake Commissioner.

TNC is especially excited to be co-managing the Great Salt Lake Watershed Enhancement Trust alongside National Audubon Society. The Trust was established in 2022 through the passage of HB 410, which authorized \$40 million in state funds in an historic effort to enhance water quantity and quality for the Lake and its wetlands, as well as to protect and restore wetland habitats.

Working collaboratively and coordinating with the State, the Trust has facilitated, provided transaction costs, and/or contributed funding to water transactions that will provide water directly to the Lake (approximately 64,000 acre-feet on a diversion basis in 2023 and approximately 69,000 acre-feet on a diversion basis in 2024). The Trust has also supported projects to restore 19,000 acres of Lake wetlands.

### **Educating & Inspiring People**

The future of Great Salt Lake truly hinges on whether people care about its unique natural qualities. TNC has long built programs and partnerships to educate the public about the Lake's immense value. At our Great Salt Lake Shorelands

Preserve, visitors can explore the visitor center with a boardwalk, observation tower, educational displays and bilingual audio tour. Open year-round and free to the public, the Preserve is also home to our Wings & Water Wetlands Education Program, which has taught more than 25,000 Utah fourth-graders about the Lake's ecosystem.

TNC's Nature Lab program recently created a new virtual field trip at Great Salt Lake, bringing lessons from the Wings & Water program to students worldwide. Our preserves also serve as living laboratories for research by scientists and universities on avian habitat, invasive species treatments and groundwater systems, helping inform future management.

### Looking Ahead

"When TNC started buying land along the Lake's eastern shore in 1984, we were thinking far ahead," says Chris Brown, TNC Utah's Director of Stewardship. "Now, as we face expansive development, climate change impacts and water shortages, it's more important than ever to provide protected, stable wildlife habitat."

So much has changed since TNC first chose to act on behalf of Great Salt Lake four decades ago. Back then, we couldn't have imagined the challenges we'd face or predict the momentum we're seeing now around support for the Lake's future. We know much work still lies ahead. The Lake's fate remains precarious. But if there's one thing TNC's Utah chapter has learned over the years, it's that if we are persistent, strategic and hopeful, change happens. Building on our legacy of leadership, we're more committed than ever to achieving lasting, meaningful results for Great Salt Lake—and for all of us.





## Welcome to New TNC Conservation Staff Members

### Ellie Oakley — Utah Colorado River Project Manager

As the new Colorado River Project Manager for TNC Utah, Ellie Oakley develops and manages conservation projects for Utah's portion of the Colorado River Basin, with a focus on addressing critical threats to natural systems and river-dependent species.

Prior to joining TNC, Oakley worked for American Prairie, where she coordinated land acquisitions, water rights and grazing leases. She grew up exploring the arid wonderlands of New Mexico and Colorado and later spent time living in Bozeman, Montana—a place that sparked her dedication to conservation.

Oakley holds a bachelor of arts degree from Middlebury College and a master's degree in environmental law and policy from Vermont Law School, where her studies focused on the Colorado River system.

*"I'm passionate about conserving wild landscapes and waterways, and it has long been a dream of mine to work on Colorado River water management.*

*I'm so excited to dive into this water conservation work on the ground and to collaborate with the many stakeholders within this river system."*

— Ellie Oakley



### Jaiden Willetto — Program Fellow & Coordinator, Native Americans Tribes Upholding Restoration & Education (NATURE) program

Jaiden Willetto is a Diné woman from the Navajo Nation, and a recent graduate of Environmental Science from Northern Arizona University.

A passionate advocate for Indigenous climate justice and food sovereignty, Willetto is supporting TNC Utah's goal to work collaboratively with Indigenous peoples and weave together western science and Indigenous knowledge.

She will be helping to develop and manage TNC's NATURE program, which is an 8-week leadership internship that connects tribal youth to scientists, ranchers and Indigenous scholars. Willetto will support NATURE student recruitment efforts, co-create the internship curriculum, and serve as a mentor for the students as they complete their capstone research project.

*"I am excited to coordinate such an important and fun program for Indigenous students in Utah and the Colorado*

*Plateau region. This is a great opportunity to support students going into fields of conservation or natural sciences to gain leadership skills and knowledge from a network of knowledge holders."*

— Jaiden Willetto





# Saving a Bird—and a Habitat—on the Brink

## The Dance of Survival

In an open patch of sagebrush, as frost sparkles in the first rays of dawn, one of the West's most celebrated dancers takes the stage. He straightens his back. His tail feathers spread and quiver. He throws his head forward, his chest lifts and his yellow air sacs inflate and flare with a low-pitched pop that carries on the cold breeze. This is a Gunnison sage-grouse, performing an ancient spring ritual to attract a female. His lek—or mating ground—is near Monticello, in southeast Utah, where you can find one of the seven remaining populations of Gunnison sage-grouse left on Earth.

## Expanding Protected Habitat

In a bid to ensure this species continues to dance and thrive, The Nature Conservancy recently purchased 305 acres of sagebrush and wet meadow habitat in the heart of the grouse's Utah range, protecting the land from development or conversion to dry farming. The newly purchased tract is adjacent to another 1,080-acre property that TNC protected in 2012, adding to a vital stretch of continuous habitat for the grouse.

Every acre matters for this iconic bird, which is lesser known but even more endangered than its slightly larger counterpart, the greater sage-grouse. Ranked by National Audubon Society as one of the 10 most at-risk bird species in North America, the Gunnison sage-grouse has lost close to 90 percent of its historic range due to fragmentation by development, agriculture and recreation. Today, small populations of these birds live only in southwest Colorado and southeast Utah, and their numbers are declining.

## A Living Laboratory for Conservation

"When the habitat range is this small, and the population numbers are this low, we know each action we take can truly mean the difference between survival or extinction," explains Sue Bellagamba, TNC Utah's Canyonlands Regional Director. Bellagamba oversaw the purchase of the new protected area, as well as TNC's previous property purchase for the grouse. For years, she's been working with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources on ways to enhance the species population in San Juan County. "This latest purchase builds on the living laboratory we've established to figure out how to help these birds," says Bellagamba. "Not only are we protecting what is already there, but we're improving the existing habitat and trying to bolster the local population."

On a 130-acre tract of land that TNC purchased in 2012, we refurbished an earthen dam to catch and collect spring

run-off, creating a new area of wet meadow, which provides food and cover for the grouse as they raise their chicks. Bellagamba led these efforts to restore the dry farmland to sagebrush, a change that provided the birds more room to move between wintering, nesting and brood rearing habitats. And, with the help of partners and volunteers, TNC has added more than 15,000 new sagebrush plants. Restoration efforts like these are crucial to the species as a whole. According to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, there are only about 3,500 breeding pairs of Gunnison sage-grouse left in Colorado and Utah.

## Part of a Larger Vision: Saving the Sagebrush Sea

"The plight of this bird is part of a much larger story that we need to focus on," says Bellagamba. "Like many sagebrush-dependent species, the Gunnison sage-grouse is struggling as we lose more and more of the Sagebrush Sea."

The core of the interior West, spanning 13 states, the Sagebrush Sea is an immense mosaic of shrublands and grasslands composed of thousands of native plant species. These lands provide nesting grounds and migration corridors that are essential to more than 350 of rare, threatened and endangered species. Many, like the Gunnison and greater sage-grouse, can survive nowhere else.

Yet, the Sagebrush Sea—the largest terrestrial ecosystem in the Lower 48—is collapsing. Every year, we lose another 1.3 million acres to threats like drought, conversion to cropland, energy development, overgrazing, wetlands loss and severe wildfire. This loss matters to all of us, threatening biodiversity, weakening rural economies and endangering lives and property.

TNC's Sagebrush Sea Program is working at an unprecedented scale to reverse this devastating trend. We're teaming up with a range of partners in Utah and across six other states to stop biodiversity loss, protect the remaining core of intact habitat and restore degraded sagebrush areas while there is still time. Strategic acquisitions of vital habitat, like our protection of the Gunnison sage-grouse range in San Juan County, support TNC's larger vision to deliver transformational, ecosystem-wide impact for the Sagebrush Sea.

## Hope Taking Flight

For Bellagamba, the spectacular grouse mating rituals playing out this month on newly protected lands near Monticello are victory dances. They signal there is still hope—if we choose to act. "We have a very small window of opportunity left to prevent disaster," explains Bellagamba. "By making these types of purchases, we are hoping to gain ground and buy time, and ultimately, to make a lasting impact for the future of this species."



## Playing the Conservation Long Game to Create Lasting, Large-Scale Impact

### **The Challenge of Public Lands Management**

Utah's remarkable public lands matter to all of us, yet sustaining their health is a serious challenge. Public land managers have to make decisions that affect millions of acres, impact people and nature and balance competing interests. They have to contend with forces like climate change, wildfire, invasive species and increasing visitation—and they have to do it all with limited time and resources.

What can help? Science-driven innovation, technology and teamwork.

### **Pioneering a New Approach**

In 2012, TNC partnered with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Cedar City Field Office to apply a tool that, at the time, was relatively new: Landscape Conservation Forecasting (LCF). This ground-breaking TNC methodology uses satellite imagery, software models, human expertise, and metrics of success to predict the outcomes of land management actions. TNC applied the technology of LCF to meet the needs of BLM.

In other words, LCF helped the BLM answer important questions like: which restoration efforts will yield the healthiest overall habitat? What are the lowest cost and most effective ways to protect at-risk species? Which natural communities are most in need of specific treatments? What's more, LCF helps to answer these questions at a vast scale.

### **A Decade of Implementation**

Starting work in 2013, BLM and TNC applied LCF to improve management on 600,000 acres in Hamlin Valley and the Black Mountains in southeast Utah—home to an array of wildlife from mule deer to pronghorn, as well as vulnerable species like the Greater sage-grouse and Utah prairie dog.

For the past 10 years, BLM has been implementing the restoration actions recommended by the LCF process. “We identified a multi-year plan to prioritize treatments to make progress towards objectives considering economical limitations,” explains Dan Fletcher, Project Manager for BLM's Utah State Office in Cedar City. “We used a variety of tools; for example, lop and scatter, mastication, harrowing



TNC is enabling science-driven land management.  
© Louis Provencher

and seeding, to implement management actions to benefit a wide variety of wildlife.”

### **Measuring Success**

Fast forward to today: TNC and BLM are teaming up again to answer the ultimate question: Has LCF worked? The partners are revisiting the LCF data for the Hamlin Valley and Black Mountains area to update mapping, measure the success of management actions, natural change and infrastructure development, and simulate future restoration projects based on the updated map.

“It’s crucial to conduct this monitoring,” says Elaine York, TNC Utah’s West Desert Regional Director. “Now that it’s been a decade, we can actually measure the effects of restoration on vegetation and on specific species and simulate the next steps of BLM restoration.”

Fletcher adds: “The remapping effort will assist with assessing the success of management actions by measuring

changes in habitat suitability.” This evaluation is especially important for determining if habitat restoration efforts are working for species like the grouse, which need particular types of sagebrush to breed and nest.

### **Playing the Long Game**

The re-mapping and simulation project will take about three years, but the team knows it’s worth the wait. Louis Provencher, TNC Nevada’s Director of Conservation Ecology, is the ecological modeler for this project, and he pioneered the creation of LCF in 2007.

He puts it this way: “In arid lands, we can see that it pays to play the long game and set a more deliberate pace for conservation success. This is about applying science at a scale that matters to our public lands.”

To date, TNC has worked with partners to apply LCF to more than 9 million acres in Nevada and Utah.

# Paying it Forward: Linda Leckman Believes in TNC

## Roots in Nature

Under the feathery leaves of the mimosa tree in her Oklahoma backyard, young Linda Leckman spent hours reading—and absorbing the natural world around her.

“Being outside was an important part of my childhood,” she says. “From age three on, I was outside, often on my own.”

Her family’s long, summer camping trips in Oklahoma and Colorado helped Leckman continue building her connection to nature. But she never imagined she’d become a passionate conservationist.

“It wasn’t until I was in my twenties, living in western Nevada and New Mexico, and reading Edward Abbey, that I learned about threats to wilderness areas and started thinking about environmentalism.” That’s when she first read about an organization dedicated to preserving wild areas: The Nature Conservancy.

“That resonated with me,” Leckman remembers. It would prove a seminal moment.

## A Lifetime of Support

Leckman officially became a TNC member in 1980 and continued her support for conservation throughout her illustrious career in medicine and executive medical administration.

In 2010, she joined the board of TNC’s Utah chapter. That same year, she also made the important decision to become a TNC Legacy Club member, naming TNC in her estate plans.

Her faith in TNC’s mission and efficacy runs deep—and crosses borders.

“I have had the opportunity to visit many places where TNC works, such as Argentina, Brazil, the Solomon Islands, Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia, the Great Bear Rainforest, Pine Butte Ranch in Montana and Silver Creek in Idaho,” she explains. “What impresses me at every project I visit, here in Utah or around the world, is TNC’s consistent focus on high-quality science and its commitment to collaborating with other groups working on the same problems.”



Linda Leckman is a TNC Utah trustee and Legacy Club member. Prior to her retirement she served as Vice President of Intermountain Healthcare and the Chief Executive Officer of the Intermountain Medical Group. Before accepting this position in 1996, Dr. Leckman was in private practice as a general surgeon for 14 years.

Right: American avocet © Mary Anne Karren  
Below: Dugout Ranch © Ted Wood

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# Utah

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