

Sheep Bridge

Below the town of Virgin, Utah, the Virgin River drops into a deep and dramatic canyon. A 419-acre property here, known as “Sheep Bridge,” encompasses river corridor, floodplain, striking arroyos and uplands. In the 1850s, these narrow canyon walls supported the first “sheep bridge,” a one-lane crossing that ranchers used to move sheep single-file across the river. Rebuilt several times over the years, a plank pedestrian bridge still stands today next to the modern bridge that now spans the river. This scenic property, with sandstone walls lining the river, and framing its bends and cascades, is adjacent to the 80-acre “Falls Park,” owned by the Bureau of Land Management, which is popular with hikers, bikers and swimmers.

This region’s lush river corridor is also a magnet for wildlife seeking an oasis in the arid desert landscape. Thick vegetation provides critical habitat for a variety of migratory birds, amphibians and reptiles, and the river itself supports a range of native and at-risk fish.

WHY WE CARE

The Sheep Bridge property supports two miles of the Virgin River, part of a river segment that the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) has named as one of the most pristine in the American Southwest. Situated near the gateway to Zion National Park, this spectacular river stretch is valuable to both people and nature. The property and surrounding area offers unique recreation opportunities prized by local residents and visitors. For fish and wildlife, Sheep Bridge provides crucial habitat for four of the Virgin’s six native fish, including the Virgin spinedace, flannelmouth sucker, desert sucker, and speckled dace. The property is located above the Quail Creek Diversion in the town of Virgin, a corridor that remains in relatively natural and good condition.

The Conservancy has been active in this region for some time, working with partners such as UDWR and the Virgin River Program to conserve as much of this special river corridor as possible. As development pressures loom, the acquisition of Sheep Bridge represents an important chance to safeguard healthy river habitat as well as support community enjoyment and low impact recreation.



“There’s significant momentum around efforts to protect the Virgin. With all the partners working toward a shared vision, we have real hope for the river’s sustainable future.”

Elaine York, West Desert Regional Director
The Nature Conservancy



OUR WORK

In June 2020, TNC joined forces with the Virgin River Land Preservation Association, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others to purchase the 419-acre Sheep Bridge parcel. Now that this property is preserved, it will be managed as one of the “best of the best” portions of the Virgin River ecosystem. In addition to protecting the critical fish and wildlife habitat, the purchase of Sheep Bridge will ensure the property supports public access, including a designated hiking and biking trail, to promote visitation and responsible recreation. For nearly a decade, the Conservancy has been focused on the Virgin River, working with partners to restore streamside habitat and explore agricultural efficiency projects that will benefit farmers and ranchers while keeping water instream for fish and birds.

The Conservancy already owns a key 27-acre parcel near the Sheep Bridge property, and is eager to ensure this corridor remains viable for the wealth of wildlife it supports.

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A River at Risk

The Virgin River is one of the most remarkable, and most threatened, rivers in the Southwest. Spanning elevations from 10,000 feet to the desert floor, the river encompasses vastly different ecoregions and a stunning array of biodiversity—40 state sensitive species, 12 federally-listed species and six native fish. The river’s riparian corridor is vital for nesting, wintering and migration for neotropical birds including the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher, Wilson’s warbler, and many more.

Carving through Zion National Park, the Virgin is responsible for some of the most scenic natural attractions in the United States—drawing millions of visitors. Downstream, human demands on the Virgin are growing. Washington County is on pace to reach a population of 500,000 in the next 50 years. A new urgency to protect this vital river is bringing together diverse partners and communities with creative solutions. Today there is potential to safeguard the Virgin’s rich, streamside corridors, and develop projects with a common agenda – water sharing for people and wildlife.