

## Teton Regional Land Trust: Protecting and Restoring Priority Habitats

**Project Summary:** Protect and restore key habitats, including 27,000 acres of diverse and productive wetlands for water birds and other wildlife in the rapidly developing Teton River Basin. The land trust has protected nearly 9,000 acres of land through cooperative efforts with private landowners and has begun restoration efforts on over 4,000 acres in the upper Teton River watershed.

**Regional Setting:** The Teton River, flanked by the Teton Range to the east and the Big Hole Mountains to the west, is a tributary of the Henrys Fork of the Snake River in eastern Idaho. Part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the Teton River Basin encompasses an irreplaceable landscape that provides migratory corridors, breeding habitat and over-wintering lands for thousands of waterbirds. Development pressure driven by demand for second homes in this spectacularly scenic area threatens traditional land uses that have sustained high quality wetlands along with local ranching and agricultural communities.

**Land Trust Mission:** The Teton Regional Land Trust conserves agricultural and natural lands and encourages land stewardship in the Upper Snake River valley for the benefit of today's communities and as a legacy for future generations.

**Service Area:** Upper Snake River Watershed. Idaho counties: Bonneville, Clark, Fremont, Jefferson, Madison, Teton. Wyoming counties: Teton.

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### Biodiversity Values

The Teton River Basin's most notable ecological feature is 27,000 acres of wetlands and associated uplands adjoining the river. Thousands of nesting and migratory water birds depend



upon this wetland/upland complex, including a number of waterfowl and shorebirds identified as priorities in national bird conservation plans. The wetlands and nearby grain fields provide essential staging habitat for the migratory Rocky Mountain population of greater sandhill cranes. The river corridor provides regionally significant wintering habitat for hundreds of trumpeter swans. Nesting long-billed curlews are found here in greater density than anywhere else in their range. The river itself is home to a self-sustaining population of the sensitive Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Many rare and sensitive plants and animals live in these wetlands.

### Conservation Strategy

Guided by extensive scientific and community planning, the Teton Regional Land Trust and partners have three goals for the area: 1) protect priority lands from inappropriate development through work with willing landowners; 2) restore streams and wetlands found on these lands to their full ecological potential; and; 3) sustain ecological monitoring to track results and inform land management.

Since 2001, Teton Regional Land Trust staff, partner agencies and contract biologists have conducted numerous water bird surveys, including surveys of breeding waterfowl, staging and

roost areas for greater sandhill cranes, summer and winter use by trumpeter swans and nest sites for long-billed curlews. The land trust uses these data to inform both protection and management strategies.

Restoration efforts hinge upon cooperative conservation agreements between willing landowners, the land trust and other partners on properties with landscape-scale habitat importance. Many of the basin's wet meadows serve as summer pasture for cattle ranches. Partnerships with the ranching community have enabled restoration of stream corridors, riparian areas and key wetlands to benefit native fish, wildlife and plants. Conservation easements with willing landowners, backed by successful partnerships with agencies, foundations and resource groups, are creating a landscape of protected, healthy habitats along the Teton River and its tributaries.

## Partnerships and Funding

The Teton Regional Land Trust plays a key role in helping private landowners access funds available through government conservation programs. Several government agencies, including the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Idaho Department of Fish and Game, partner with nonprofit conservation groups to offer incentives to help Idaho's private landowners protect, improve and manage wildlife habitat. These programs offer both cost-share funding and technical assistance for private landowners. Examples of projects suitable for cost-share include assistance for in-stream, river bank, riparian and wetland restoration, wildlife plantings, protective fencing and conservation buffers.

One such project is located along Teton Creek and its spring creek tributaries, where the Teton Regional Land Trust has protected more than 1,000 acres of high quality wetland and upland habitat. The Kirk family, donors of an easement along Teton and Dicks Creeks, is working with Ducks Unlimited and the land trust to enhance waterfowl habitat. This restoration project involves evaluating the property for shallow ponds to



*Photo: Sandhill cranes.*

increase nesting, foraging and rearing areas for migrating waterfowl. It is one of many projects designed to establish and implement restoration plans with willing landowners for high value habitat along the river corridor.

## Key Elements for Successful Restoration

- **All restoration programs are voluntary.** Technical assistance to complete applications, accomplish on-the-ground work, monitor results and provide advice is available through the Teton Regional Land Trust.
- **Landowners continue to control public access** to private land.
- **Out-of-pocket landowner expenses may be reduced** by combining two or more programs.
- **Additional financial assistance may be available** through local conservation organizations like Teton Regional Land Trust.
- **Conservation easements provide long-term habitat protection** and ensure natural functions in restored areas, and may offer significant financial benefits for landowners.

## Looking Ahead

Teton Valley's phenomenal residential growth threatens valuable stream corridors and wetlands. Dense residential development in the wrong places can destroy the water quality, fish and wildlife habitats and agricultural opportunities that have long been the hallmark of the Teton River and surroundings.

The Teton Regional Land Trust is expanding its landowner outreach to protect and restore priority habitats. The land trust is also diligent in its dynamic conservation planning and ecological monitoring programs to continually hone the focus and effectiveness of its conservation programs. The Teton Regional Land Trust and its partners have engaged many additional landowners in the negotiation of land protection and restoration projects and they monitor the impact of these programs on target species at the landscape scale.

## For More Information

- **Federal Habitat Incentive Programs for Landowners:** [www.biodiversitypartners.org/incentives/programfed.shtml](http://www.biodiversitypartners.org/incentives/programfed.shtml)
- **Idaho One Plan:** [www.oneplan.org](http://www.oneplan.org)
- **Idaho Habitat Incentive Program:** [www.fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/hip](http://www.fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/hip)
- **Ducks Unlimited:** [www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org)