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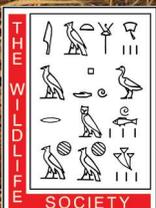
## Private Conservation

Good land stewardship is a conservation cornerstone



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# Private Conservation

## GOOD LAND STEWARDSHIP IS A CONSERVATION CORNERSTONE

By Megan Radke

On any given early April morning, Meghan O'Toole Lally can watch dozens of male greater sage-grouse dancing on her family land on the Colorado-Wyoming border in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. In the cool spring air, the grouse puff up their chests, shake their pointed fan of tail feathers and bob their heads, resulting in their signature sound that can be heard over a mile away—all in hopes of attracting a mate.

► Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) at sunrise in Wyoming.

Credit: Jennifer Stickland, USFWS



“I didn’t realize that seeing something like that wasn’t very common until I grew up,” she said.

The Ladder Ranch and neighboring public land are a refuge for a number of grouse, but they’re also home to one of North America’s largest elk herds and a thriving mule deer population. Situated near the confluence of the Little Snake River and Battle Creek, the ranch spans peaks of the Rockies and sagebrush desert pastures.

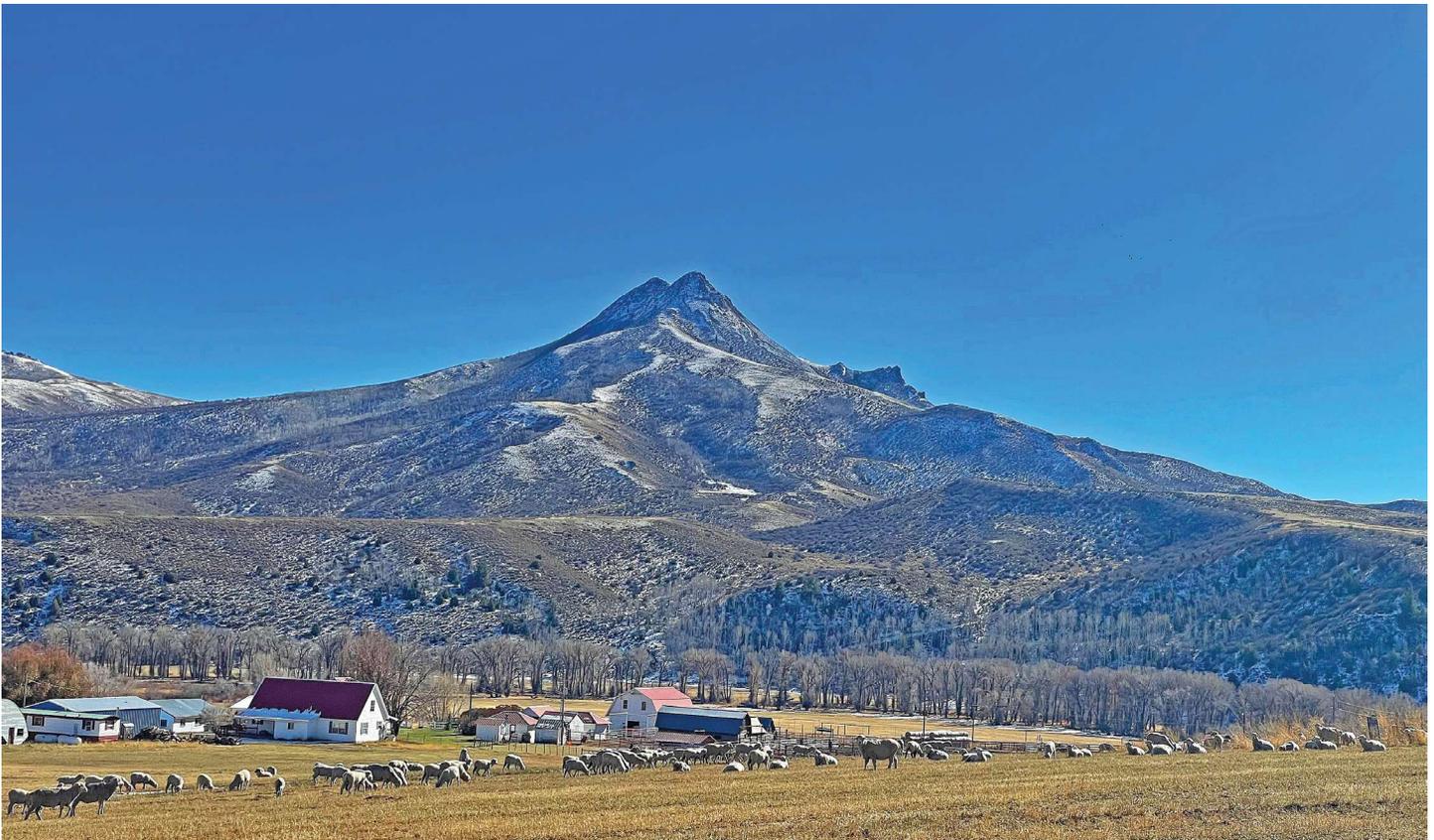
“Up in our high hay meadows, we’ve got some five miles of creek bottom,” Lally said. “You can go up there in the spring and see 200 cow elk calving. Those elk have come out of the Forest Service lands, and I think our private land gives them a bit of refuge where they can have their babies in peace.”

The O’Tooles’ great grandparents, A.W. and Anna Louise Salisbury, established the ranch in 1881. Six generations of cattle ranchers have called Ladder Ranch home, and responsible land stewardship has been integral to the O’Toole family’s ethic for decades.

Starting with a rotational grazing system in the 1950s, the family has continually worked to protect habitat for both livestock and wildlife. Lally’s mother, Sharon Salisbury O’Toole, now manages a cattle and sheep operation alongside her children and their spouses. These efforts earned the ranch the Leopold Conservation Award from the Sand County Foundation—a national nonprofit that helps farmers, ranchers and forestland owners make ethical land use decisions—in 2014.

Private landowners possess approximately 60%—some 1.4 billion acres—of U.S. land. Wildlife don’t recognize the difference between private and public land, but these distinctions can certainly affect them. Unfortunately, some private landowners don’t take wildlife conservation into their management plans, clearing valuable native habitat or overworking land to the point that soil is no longer productive. In other instances, improper management can negatively affect wildlife travel corridors and riparian areas or even degrade water quality through excessive fertilizers or pesticides, having a ripple effect beyond their property boundaries.

▼ Sheep graze on the Ladder Ranch.



Credit: Ladder Ranch

However, some other private landowners are investing their own time, money and land in an effort to save endangered species, conserve native wildlife and keep ecosystems in a healthy state.

These conservation-minded landowners sometimes face challenges, including financial constraints or regulatory hurdles. In other cases, they simply lack the technical expertise to know where to begin. Then comes the challenge of passing land management knowledge onto subsequent generations, especially as more areas in the U.S. become urbanized and disconnected from nature.

The Ladder Ranch's story exemplifies the way private land stewardship can boost broader conservation efforts. The work that they do is critical for conserving species whose habitat doesn't always lie in protected areas like national parks or wildlife refuges.



Credit: Ladder Ranch

“I think people underestimate the private landowner aspect of conservation,” said Thad Heater, a leader on the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Outcomes Team. “They are doing this work voluntarily. They do their work, they take pride in their work and they go home and sleep well at night because they’re doing good things.”

### A seat at the table

Not all landowners know how good land stewardship can benefit wildlife. That’s where nonprofits, federal programs or other organizations come in. Conservation Without Conflict (CWC) is one such organization that guides private landowners through conserving wildlife while benefiting their own land and businesses like forest products companies.

Leopoldo Miranda-Castro, the executive director of CWC, helps facilitate conversations between landowners, agencies and other stakeholders to find the most practical middle ground that can

help them keep working while still abiding by regulations relating to wildlife and endangered species. Nested within the Wildlife Management Institute—a nonprofit established in 1911 to improve wildlife management—CWC is a coalition of private and public entities, including the NRCS, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Alliance of Forest Owners and others.

Much of CWC’s work revolves around forestry issues—including those that affect the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Leuconotopicus borealis*), a species designated as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Miranda-Castro catches glimpses of red-cockaded woodpeckers every now and then on his own property, Ochillee Farm in Georgia, as they venture over from nearby Fort Moore. In some ways, they remain just out of reach. “I don’t have any yet. They’re just across the property line,” he said.

▲ A rancher herds calves on the Ladder Ranch.

The birds rely on mature longleaf pine forests for nesting and foraging. In many instances, landowners managing land for timber or related products recognize that their property may be attracting these species. But they may bump heads with agencies due to the strict regulations that pop up whenever a red-cockaded woodpecker is found.

A good example is in the aptly named Long Leaf, Louisiana, where Crowell Forest Resources, LLC, is based. The timberland includes habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers, but it's also important for the company to turn a profit. "If you have shareholders that own this asset with you, you have to be able to generate an income, and that doesn't come easy," said Michael Crowell, the president of the company.

Even-age plantation management, Crowell said, is not what the woodpeckers need even though it's what many forestry operations employ today. The management technique involves growing a stand of trees that are all the same age or are at least within a narrow age margin. While economically efficient, it can contribute to biodiversity loss.



► Red-cockaded woodpeckers require mature longleaf pine forests for nesting.

Credit: Alan Schmierer

To ensure that the woodpeckers are safe within their property, Crowell implemented a conservation area where the birds can nest in their ideal habitat and remain undisturbed. They continue to successfully manage the population in partnership with the state of Louisiana under a Safe Harbor Agreement, a voluntary agreement between the USFWS and a private property whose actions contribute to the recovery of an endangered or threatened species.

"We currently try to increase the quality of the habitat for the [red-cockaded woodpeckers] in that conservation area and grow more birds," Crowell said.

With this as an example, Miranda-Castro—who's been working with Crowell Forest Resources on red-cockaded woodpecker management—said the relationship is a mutually beneficial one.

"They are helping CWC understand the needs of people and companies like them and how they can keep working lands working while still conserving nature," he said. "With their perspective and experience, we can then be more effective in proposing and designing new innovative tools with regulating agencies and other private and public entities."

More recently, Miranda-Castro said that CWC has been able to obtain funding for Crowell from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to support longleaf planting and prescribed burning on their properties.

"In partnership with the USFWS, we will be able to provide regulatory assurances similar to those under the Safe Harbor Agreement but using the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program," he said.

Crowell said that CWC has been able to provide private landowners like himself a voice and help get everyone—including regulatory agencies—at the same table.

Meanwhile, on the Ochillee Farm, Miranda-Castro is working to restore the property's longleaf pine ecosystem to improve habitat for these woodpeckers, which he hopes to see on his land before too long.



Credit: Leo Miranda-Castro

“Eventually, I know that what I’m doing here will result in nesting habitat for those birds,” he said.

From planting longleaf seedlings to yearly prescribed burning, these measures increase the native plant understory and help the native seedbank flourish. Migratory birds and even gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*) benefit from his work to maintain a healthy ecosystem.

### Freedom to roam

Conserving and keeping a wildlife species on private lands can be challenging. But what about conserving areas when wildlife are just passing through?

In the case of migratory animals, fences that delineate property lines can pose an obstacle. But the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) aims to help private landowners remove some of these obstacles to ensure a promising future for elk (*Cervus canadensis*) and other species.

RMEF has historically worked on public lands in the West to benefit wildlife and hunting. But Blake Henning, RMEF’s chief conservation officer, said that the foundation’s private lands program is much more ambitious these days.

“We’ve worked with landowners for a long time,” Henning said, adding that the foundation’s first foray into private lands was creating conservation easements in the 1990s, which protect critical elk habitat from development while maintaining the land’s agricultural and recreational use.

“We saw a need to help private landowners with habitat stewardship,” he said. This includes grants

▲ Yearly prescribed burns are conducted on the Ochillee Farm.

▼ The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation helps private landowners better manage their land for elk.



Credit: Neal Herbert, NPS

to share the cost of habitat improvement with landowners in areas with elk and other big game like mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), moose (*Alces alces*) and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

RMEF provides resources, expertise and even funding for initiatives such as restoring native vegetation, improving water sources and managing forest health to create ideal grazing and elk calving areas. Henning said that these practices contribute to the overall biodiversity of an ecosystem.

The foundation also helps landowners with wildlife-friendly fencing, helping to clear the

migration routes of elk and other species—some of which don't adapt well to changes on these well-trodden paths. This can mean removing or replacing outdated five-wire and barbed-wire fences with smooth wire that's 10 inches off the ground and less than 42 inches high. That way, pronghorn (*Antilocapra Americana*) can get under it, and other species can hop over.

### Room to recover

In some cases, private lands can play a role in helping to bring a species back from the brink of extinction.

Today, fewer than 80 ocelots (*Leopardus pardalis*) live in the United States. These small, secretive cats historically occurred from the central U.S. through South America. But due to habitat loss, they've become a federally endangered species. The majority in the U.S. reside on ranches in south Texas—a state where more than 93% of land is privately owned, making landowners critical to the big cat's conservation and recovery.

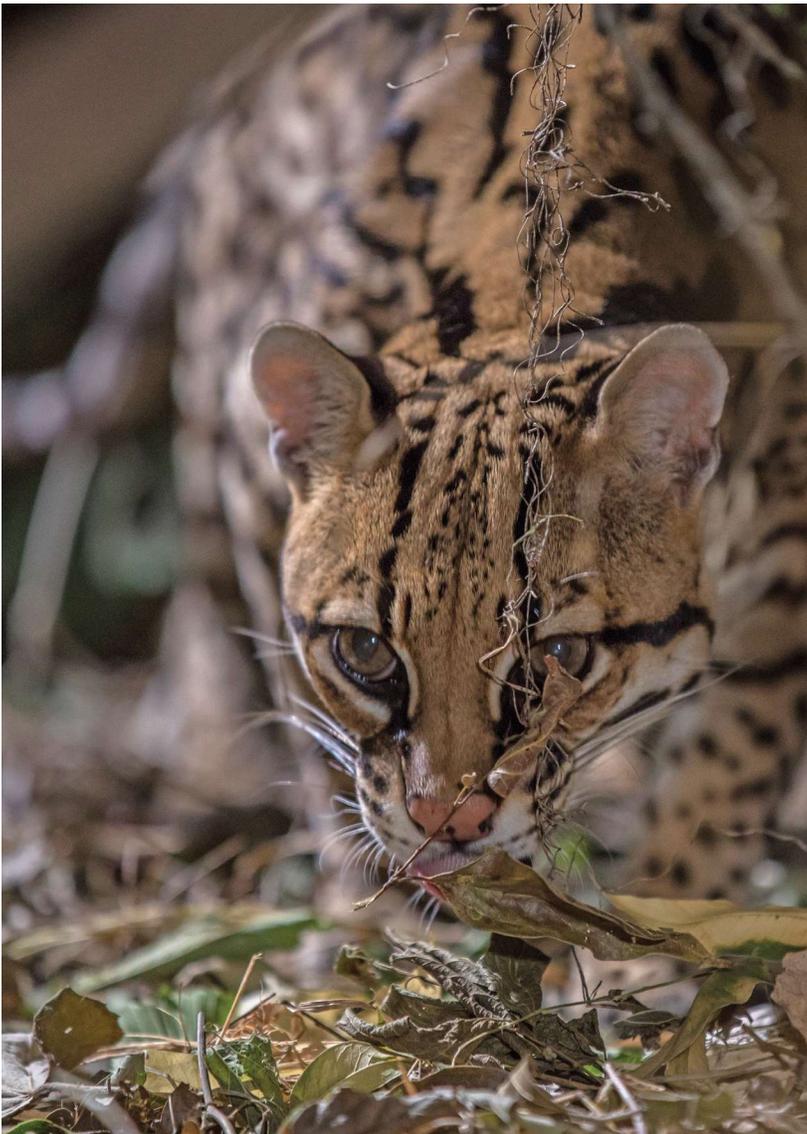
The East Foundation manages over 217,000 acres of private ranchland across six ranches. Ocelots can be found on one of those ranches. “[Ocelots] like dense cover that's near the ground because it provides shelter and a thermal refuge for them,” said TWS member Lindsay Martinez, a research program coordinator at the East Foundation. And as far as ocelots are concerned, they may have hit the private landowner jackpot.

By maintaining these lands with a focus on sustainable grazing and wildlife management, the East Foundation ensures that the dense thornscrub and brush they prefer remains intact. While the foundation works on keeping the current ocelot population safe, it's also helping to bolster the population by researching assisted ocelot reproduction.

“We want to protect our existing populations on the ranch, but we also want to use our lands to reintroduce a new population to further aid in the species' recovery,” Martinez said. “We're bringing that private landowner perspective into our collaborative research with universities and wildlife agencies on this conservation project.”

They can't do it alone, though. The East Foundation is committed to education and

▼ An ocelot occurs on East Foundation's El Sauz ranch.



Credit: Fin & Fur Films

community involvement. Through its outreach programs, the foundation raises awareness about the importance of ocelots and the ecosystems they inhabit. The outreach efforts received a boost through the help of films like “Deep in the Heart” and “American Ocelot,” each produced by Fin and Fur Films, which featured the foundation’s land and work with the species.

“Letting people actually see this cat and see how beautiful it is—see the family relationships they form—it’s huge for awareness and people’s interest in the species,” Martinez said.

Since the release of the films, the foundation has seen an influx of landowners interested in helping the species. “Just amplifying the story of how private ranchers in Texas have enabled ocelots to be here today and that they have a role in expanding populations in the future—that’s a big message,” Martinez said.

For the East Foundation, the work doesn’t stop today—the organization also helps to educate the next generation of natural resources managers. It provides multiple opportunities for students from the elementary level to master’s and PhD candidates to learn about land stewardship and endangered species conservation.

Its Behind the Gates program allows the East Foundation’s education team to bring in kids from nearby schools for interactive, day-long science lessons on the ranch. “They get to come out and experience the land,” Martinez said. “They have a chance to understand what land stewardship is, where food comes from and so much more.”

Martinez is one of those students, having conducted research on ocelots with the East Foundation while finishing her master’s degree. She experienced the importance of such an opportunity early on in her career.

“Folks getting their master’s or PhD can do their research on East Foundation lands,” Martinez said. “And that’s really important because these are the future leaders in wildlife or in agriculture. They can learn firsthand about the connection between private land stewardship and wildlife.”



Credit: Bethany Friesenhahn Boggan

## Passing the torch

Efforts to educate others about conservation on private lands even occur outside one of the biggest cities in the U.S.

Budd Veverka, TWS Northeast Section President and Director of Land Management at Mianus River Gorge, oversees operations at the 960-acre preserve in Bedford, New York. The preserve, founded in 1953, is an independently owned nonprofit and was the first land project of The Nature Conservancy. The property features over 100 acres of old-growth hemlock forest, along with a 22-mile portion of the Mianus River, just miles from the New York City metropolitan region.

▲ East Foundation staff and graduate students conduct field work.

“We have a National Natural Landmark designation because of our Hemlock forest,” Veverka said. He said significant effort goes into keeping those trees intact while also curbing the impacts of invasive species and managing for overabundant wildlife like white-tailed deer. Part of that management effort is put into educating the preserve’s neighbors.

“We try to be consultants for the public on how to manage their lands, too,” he said. “We can manage our almost 1,000 acres, but we’re still going to have effects from the neighbors, so the more neighbors that we can talk to—and then get them talking to their neighbors—the wider the impact we can have.”

▼ Students sample plots for invasive earthworms on Mianus River Gorge.

Veverka frequently holds talks and workshops for county officials, biologists and the general public on topics like bear management and invasive

species to help equip locals and local officials with land-management knowledge.

The ecosystem can benefit from small actions by small landowners as well. These steps can be simple, like planting native trees, flowers and shrubs to provide food and shelter for birds and pollinators ([Smallwood et al. 2023](#)), or even leaving fallen leaves on the lawn to create habitat for reptiles, amphibians and small mammals. Organizations like the National Wildlife Federation have campaigns to “Leave the Leaves Month.” In a [survey](#), the federation found that while only 25% of respondents are leaving their leaves, 82% are open to doing so to benefit wildlife.

While Veverka hopes their outreach efforts can give suburban residents a deeper connection with



Credit: Jean-Luc Plante

the surrounding environment, the preserve's programs to engage urban students in the outdoors also have an impact.

"Probably our biggest education program is a high school-aged program for New York and other area schools," said Chris Nagy, the director of research and education at Mianus River Gorge.

The Wildlife Technician Program is a three-year internship program that provides high school students the chance to delve into a research project in natural sciences while still in school.

"They start during their sophomore year. They design the project, do the literature review and then have a field season depending on their project," Nagy said. "Then, through their senior year, they're presenting their research, often at the New York Wildlife Society Conference."

Nagy said that the ambitious program accepts three to six students each year. It allows them to receive valuable mentorship from working biologists and exposes them to different career paths in conservation and research.

"I think that's one of the most rewarding things about my job," Nagy said. "I like seeing those kids really take to conservation."

### Bringing conservation full circle

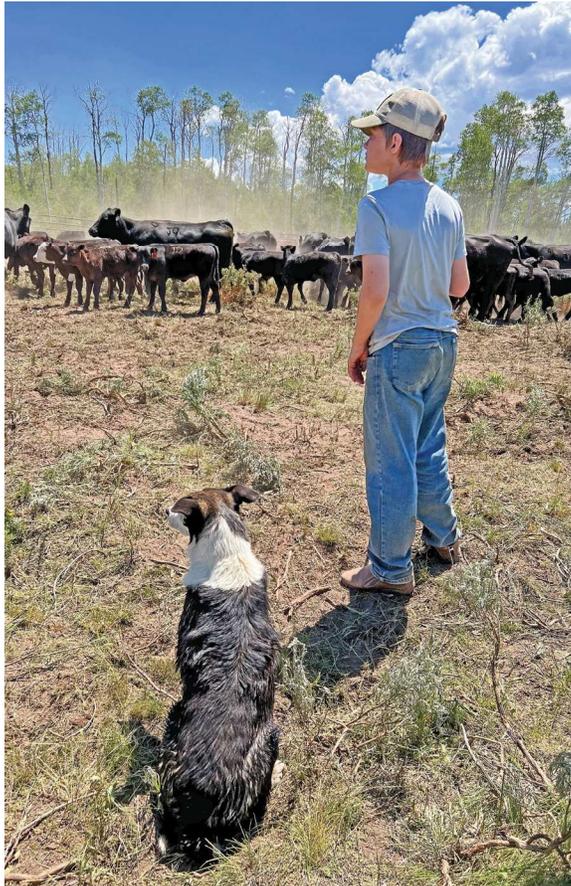
Back on the Ladder Ranch, Lally and her brother also work hard to ensure that their children understand the importance of conservation.

"At this moment in time, we're the owners—the stewards of the land—and it's not like we're ever going to sell it or benefit financially from it beyond making a living on it. We're just trying to keep the land in production and in a healthy state."

It doesn't come easy, though, she said. Certainly, the ranch may face regulatory issues from time to time, but the biggest struggles are all too common for private landowners today.

"It's the development pressure and trying to hold everything together," she said.

She added that about 50% of their land is protected through conservation easements,



Credit: Ladder Ranch

◀ Ranching is a family affair on Ladder Ranch.

ensuring it stays intact in perpetuity. "But there's also no financial reward from taking care of the land," she said. "You do it because you love it. You have to balance increasing costs, increasing taxes and trying to take care of the resource that is our ranch. It's all a balancing act."

While the family keeps everything in order, the legacy of the ranch seems to be in good hands.

Lally's mother, Sharon, is an essayist and a poet, writing extensively on western issues and the relationships between the landscape, animals and people. She details day-to-day operations on the Ladder Ranch's blog. It's here that readers can see photos of Lally and her brother teaching their kids how to keep the property working, just as her parents did.

"What we're doing is holding it in trust for the next generation," Lally said. "That's what our ancestors did for us." ■



**TWS MEMBER** Megan Radke is a staff writer for The Wildlife Society.