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Double Rainbow

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The good work underway by Pacific Northwest salmon people in northeast Oregon
More work has restored the Grande Ronde and Imnaha river areas than any other salmon landscape in the Snake River Basin, writes guest columnist Pat Ford.



Constructing a beaver dam analogue in the Upper Grande Ronde River watershed. (Photo courtesy of Trout Unlimited)

Editor's note: This is the third installment of a four-part series on salmon that will run in the Idaho Capital Sun on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Part One described the [emergency effort to rescue](#) Washington state's last population of Snake River spring and summer Chinook salmon, in the Tucannon River. Part Two explored salmon and steelhead extinction threshold science, showing the Pacific Northwest is [entering extinction momentum](#) that will be very difficult to escape.

For Northwest salmon people, grim news and hope seem always intermingled. My previous [article held grim news](#) – extinction science, and extinction in motion in the Grande Ronde River. In Part Three, I wish to give the Grande Ronde's hope its due.

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Everyone I spoke with in northeast Oregon, native and non-, raised, and praised, the systematic river and watershed restoration underway in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha since the mid-1990s. More such work has been completed, and is underway, in the Grande Ronde/Imnaha than any other salmon landscape in the Snake River Basin.

The good done reaches well beyond healthier streams.

### **Tribal restoration projects are many and often large**

“All of it is a big source of hope for me,” Bobby Fosseck says. “My own project is what I’d call small scale, but I see the connections right up to the biggest ones. At Bird Track Springs, for example, the whole atmosphere of the place is charged now. I can see and feel it, and it’s just beginning.”

[Bird Track Springs](#) is the site of a completed project that is now completing itself in the river, restoring sinuosity, vital winter and summer habitat, and freer passage to a pinched and degraded 1.9 mile section of the Upper Grande Ronde River. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) sponsored and led the work, with nine co-sponsors, including the cooperating landowner, Jordan Creek Ranch. The cost was \$2.5 million.

Bird Track Springs is on Highway 244, just a few miles off the freeway at the Hilgard exit above La Grande. It is signed. The Tribes' scene-setting and description, on the short walk to the river and an overlook, is very good, with tribal, historical, and river/salmon context in map, image, art and word.

"I've seen the project; it looks good," John Appleton told me. "It's going to create cooler water and deeper pools."

With so few salmon in the Upper Grande Ronde now, no hatchery nearby, and little fishing pressure, Appleton says the upper river could almost be called an informal salmon sanctuary for the few salmon that still manage to get there.

The Confederated Umatilla Tribes lead many other restoration projects in the Upper Grande Ronde and Catherine Creek. Rick George calls the Tribes' McCoy Creek project "a phenomenal success."

The Tribes also acquired the Southern Cross Ranch, three miles southeast of Union, on  $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile of Catherine Creek with 68 acres of historic floodplain. It is now being restored for channel function, sinuosity, riparian health, floodplain connectivity, and the benefit of Three First Foods – water, salmon and deer.

## **LEARN MORE**

**For information on the many Confederated Umatilla Tribe projects, see <https://fisherieshabitat.ctuir.org/>.**

In Wallowa Country and the Imnaha, the Nez Perce Tribe leads on similar projects. Emmit Taylor Jr., director of the [Nez Perce Tribe's Department of Fisheries' Resources' Watershed Division](#), offered a quick list.

"There's the Wallowa River work at Tamkaliks, where we put in side channels and revegetated," he said. "There's a half-mile project on the Lostine River, at the town of Lostine. It was straight and constrained, most of the habitat gone. We removed levees, re-meandered, and put in side channels. This year we're planting thousands of trees. It is our goal to see salmon spawn there again."

A larger project is getting close to going in Chesnimnus Creek, tributary to Joseph Creek.

*The Lostine River, near Lostine, Oregon. Post-project conditions after 10 acres of pasture was converted back to floodplain.*

*(Photo courtesy of the Nez Perce Fisheries Resources Management Department, Watershed Division)*

"This is 11 to 15 miles of stream, and a very big deal for fish," Taylor said. "The listed steelhead above it have never been supplemented. We're working with many landowners, and the Forest Service, on many actions – cattle exclusions, riparian plantings, stream reconstruction, putting wood in the streams, and others. Design is underway, we hope to start work in a year or so. Joseph Creek is steep and largely inaccessible; that's why it's a steelhead stronghold. But where it is accessible this work will really improve stream conditions and fisheries habitat."

Taylor and his team are also part of the Tribe's long effort, with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and others, to secure fish passage at Wallowa Lake Dam. That is the only large dam in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha basins.

In addition to Tamkaliks, the Tribe has acquired or been gifted other properties – for example, 140 acres near Joseph, at what Mr. Taylor calls the Place of Boulders. From its Joseph office, Nez Perce Fisheries staff work across Wallowa Country to keep water in streams, repair habitats, restore fish passage and rebuild Nez Perce use of these homelands.

### **A restoration and a journey at Ascension School Camp and Conference Center**

Bobby Fosseck's project at Ascension School is small in comparison, yet large on its terms.

Ascension School Camp and Conference Center, in Cove, Oregon, is the spiritual center of the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon. The diocese includes 19 churches in eastern, central and southern Oregon.

"Ascension's mission is to be a place apart, to connect with God's sacred mystery," said Amy Jayne, a priest, who serves as the center's director. "Our principles are human dignity, creation care and spirituality. Our summer camp for children is 100 years old. We are a full-service outdoor facility, a retreat and conference center, and a community center to serve Cove."

Three Catherine Creek tributaries – Duncan, Hulick and Mill creeks – roughly bound the School's 100 acres. Eighty acres are being restored.

"Ascension sits on an old village site called Wiweeletitpe, Place of Many Streams," Fosseck said. "It has been farmed since the mid-1800s, much of the native flora and fauna removed, and the anadromous fish streams straightened and diverted into irrigation ditches. We are working to restore many of the First Foods, Medicines and Materials that historically grew here and that our people have a deep relationship with. Along with it, we are revitalizing skills and lifeways that are part of this landscape, with tribal cultural skills camps on the site."

Ascension Camp and Conference Center, in Cove, Oregon, on the right, with some of the area being restored by Caretakers of the Land in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Megan Cox/ Ascension Camp and Conference Center)

Camas Camp, for example, immerses young native people in gathering, cooking, and sharing camas. A public nature trail also now ribbons the site.

Fosseck attended Ascension Camp as a boy and was maintenance man when Amy Jayne became its director six years ago.

"Bobby led us to see we can't heal the land without assisting the healing of its original caretakers," Jayne said.

This led to a relationship with Caretakers of the Land, which Fosseck and Brosnan Spencer founded "to steward and strengthen the lifeways, languages, habitats, and traditional ecological knowledge of the Blue Mountain bioregion ..."

*Bobby Fossek, a resident of Cove, Oregon, manages an 80-acre restoration project on tributaries of Catherine Creek. The land is owned by the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon. (Photo courtesy of Bobby Fossek)*

“We provide Caretakers administrative support, but they have considerable autonomy,” Jayne says. “They have a deep relationship with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and those Tribes have events here. There’s a three-day CTUIR symposium this year. The Nez Perce have had an event here too, through Caretakers. I hope the elders and others visiting will recognize Ascension as a shared space. We want to help native people live again in their seasonal rounds.”

For the diocese, it is a journey. In 2022, at its annual convention, the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon formally repudiated the “doctrine of discovery,” the religious and legal basis upon which the Grande Ronde and Wallowa Country, including Ascension Camp’s 100 acres, were taken from tribal people by the United States and its citizens.

“There is wonderful support here,” Jayne says. “But there is also pushback. Absolutely nothing is settled in this work. The past systems are massive and in place. It takes a lot of work so people understand what we’re doing, and so we understand them. We forge ahead, and go slowly.”

I asked Fossek if it is fair to see his work, including the Ascension restoration, in three parts: restoring health to ecosystems, building relations with neighbors and communities, and restoring tribal presence and use: “Yes. They are branches from the same tree – the web of life in this valley.”

### **A small project gives young fish a place to ‘rest and grow’**

David Baum’s little project on Catherine Creek is the first restoration I heard about. Mr. Baum is a retired lawyer, fisherman and kayaker.

*A footbridge crosses Catherine Creek at Catherine Creek State Park near Union, Oregon. (Jesse Stephens/Getty Images)*

He vividly remembers salmon coming steadily through his grandmother’s place on Catherine Creek in the 1950s. A decade ago, he did a five-acre restoration on the creek, at a different property he owned.

“I worked with [Grande Ronde Model Watershed](#) to put in a side channel,” Baum says. “I wanted to build some habitat where overwintering juvenile salmon can rest and grow. It’s still there.”

Bonneville Power Administration ratepayers contributed \$117,000 of the project cost, and Baum \$3,000, says the project description on the Grande Ronde Model Watershed website.

**(LEARN MORE: To get a feel for all the restoration work done and underway across 3.1 million acres of land and water over three decades, visit the Grande Ronde Model Watershed website: [www.grmw.org](http://www.grmw.org).)**

In Catherine Creek alone, 38 separate projects, including Baum's, are listed on the Grande Ronde Model Watershed website from 1995 through 2021. The Confederated Umatilla Tribes are a frequent lead and partner on Catherine Creek, as is the Union County Soil and Water District.

Projects include restored fish passage, restored seasonal flows, riparian habitat re-creation, re-meandered channels, restored pools, better irrigation systems, bridging/fencing/culverting and more.

Kyle Bratcher's agency is active as well.

"In my Wallowa and Imnaha territory, the main restoration practitioners are Grande Ronde Model Watershed, the Nez Perce Tribe, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Trout Unlimited," he said. "We were a lead on the McDaniel Ranch project, as of course was Doug McDaniel, who did so much for restoration in Wallowa Country."

McDaniel helped begin Wallowa Resources, which is also active in land and water restoration; Joe McCormack serves on its board.

"Trout Unlimited has done a lot of work in the upper Grande Ronde," says Noel March, who grew up in La Grande and now works for the group. "In Sheep Creek, for example, about an hour upstream of La Grande, we've reversed a lot of historical damage.

*Sheep Creek restoration by Trout Unlimited in the Upper Grand Ronde watershed. (Photo courtesy of Connor Stone/Grande Ronde Model Watershed)*

"Among current projects, we're in Chesnimnus Creek too, just above the Nez Perce project, working with the [Wallowa-Whitman National Forest](#). In six miles of stream, we're removing levees, returning those spawning gravels to the stream, and depositing large wood. It will give beaver a leg up."

Together, says March, the Nez Perce and Trout Unlimited projects "will soon be a large, connected corridor of high-quality steelhead habitat." March gives particular credit to the many landowners working with the Nez Perce, and to Mr. Taylor's field staff.

Land and canal owners are often, like Mr. Baum, project sponsors.

"It is real," says Rick George, "how many landowners are now giving permission to restore waters on their lands, and are supportive of salmon. They want to reconnect land and water. There are still gaping wounds on this landscape; nothing can turn around all the water conversion and draining in the valleys anytime soon. But there is also change."

The Grande Ronde Model Watershed calls itself "the primary entity coordinating habitat restoration on private and public lands within the Grande Ronde Basin." It was created in 1992-3, when the [Northwest Power and Conservation Council](#) chose the Grande Ronde as Oregon's "model watershed" for spawning and rearing habitat restoration.



Bonneville Power Administration ratepayers were starting then to extensively finance such work. Grande Ronde Model Watershed has been a conduit for millions of Bonneville ratepayer dollars to repair Grande Ronde and Imnaha watersheds, while developing funding from other sources too.

*Reconnected wetlands in Sheep Creek, in the Upper Grande Ronde River. (Photo courtesy of Sam Bango/Anabran Solutions)*

The CTUIR and Nez Perce Tribe each have seats on the Grande Ronde Model Watershed board. Joe McCormack represents the Nez Perce.

“In the early to mid-2000s, GRMW studied all the streams,” he said. “The Upper Grande Ronde and Catherine Creek were in the worst shape, and needed habitat work the most then.”

Kyle Bratcher says: “ODFW helped develop the restoration atlases that prioritize watersheds and places. The Model Watershed holds monthly meetings of the implementors. It is a very big group and a very collaborative effort.”

The Model Watershed also engages students, volunteers and organizations in citizen science.

Ascension School students are in the program. It helps that one week of outdoor school is a fifth grade requirement in Oregon. Kyle Bratcher’s wife, Emily, organizes and teaches youth science education, separately but overlapping with the Model Watershed’s program.

“She takes kids to the projects,” he said. “It’s a great way to teach them about fish and rivers, and spark their interest. They see fish spawning.”

Altogether, an impressively broad local network – tribes and tribal people, agencies local state and federal, ranchers and other landowners, fishers and the conservation-minded, churches, schools, businesses and nonprofits – is restoring waters and lands, public and private, at scales small to large, in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha watersheds. (The [Powder River Basin Watershed Council](#), does similar work with far less resources in the Snake River watershed adjacent on the south. The Powder is without salmon, thanks to impassable dams constructed in Hells Canyon 60 years ago.)

### **How to restore both salmon habitats, and salmon**

Salmon have this quality: People come to them by many paths, and are hooked.

If, as seems likely, federal investments in northeast Oregon now shrivel for a time, it is plain the local restoration work will continue even if slowed. The tribal, community and economic investment is too rooted, and the local good being done too substantial.

But the extinction threshold analyses make a second plain fact plainer. Watershed repair and renewal in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha will restore natal *salmon habitats*, but under current conditions in migratory habitats *outside* the Grande Ronde, it will not restore *salmon*.

*It is real how many landowners are now giving permission to restore waters on their lands, and are supportive of salmon. They want to reconnect land and water. There are still gaping wounds on this landscape; nothing can turn around all the water conversion and draining in the valleys anytime soon. But there is also change.*  
– Rick George

The riches salmon once gave the Grande Ronde and its people, Rick George's ocean nutrient freight train, are close to disappearing despite three decades of sustained local river restorations. If all this good work is to achieve its harvest, and community goals for salmon in the Grande Ronde, off-site restoration of equally vital habitat – in this case, over-dammed migratory habitat – must occur soon.

Here I believe the Nez Perce Tribe and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife have the right three-part response.

They are leading in extinction science and its applications for salmon and steelhead populations at extinction's door.

They are leaders to responsibly restore 140 miles of the lower Snake River and its habitats, by removing the earthen sections of its four dams, within an inclusive and phased Columbia Basin-wide approach developed by the "Six Sovereigns": the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation, Nez Perce Tribe and Oregon, plus the Yakama Nation, Confederated Warm Springs Tribes, and Washington.

And they are active co-collaborators restoring health and habitats in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha watersheds.

**Editor's note:** Part four of this four-part series will be published by the Idaho Capital Sun on Friday. It will show how public and political awareness of the fishes' dire condition is not optional if the Snake River is to be restored.

1. [Salmon Videos](#)

2. [2:23](#)

[How salmon shaped the Northwest -Superabundant S1 E6](#)

[6:23](#)

[First Salmon Ceremony | Oregon Field Guide](#)

3. [31:48](#)

[A History of Salmonids in the Columbia River Basin and ODFW's Chum Salmon Reintroduction Project](#)

[39:02](#)

[Indigenous History of the Pacific Northwest Coast](#)

[24:47](#)

[Wherever the salmon can get to | The Evergreen | OPB](#)



[28:54](#)

[After the dams: What's next for the Klamath River? | Oregon Field Guide](#)

[3:00](#)

[The Life Cycle of Pacific Salmon | Fascinating Nature Explained](#)

[9:59](#)

[The rewilding of the Elwha River: 12 years after dam removal | Oregon Field Guide](#)

[26:19](#)

[Salmon People: A Native Fishing Family's Fight to Preserve a Way of Life | OPB | ProPublica](#)

[4:45](#)

[Largest dam removal project in U.S. history aims to help revive America's salmon population](#)

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### **Salmon and steelhead extinction threshold science, and the ocean fish of northeast Oregon**

For Pacific Northwest steelhead and salmon populations, we are entering extinction momentum that will be very difficult to escape, writes guest columnist Pat Ford.

[idahocapitalsun.com/2025/08/20/salmon-and-steelhead-extinction-threshold-science-and-the-ocean-fish-of-northeast-oregon/](https://idahocapitalsun.com/2025/08/20/salmon-and-steelhead-extinction-threshold-science-and-the-ocean-fish-of-northeast-oregon/)

### **How a dime-sized bone rewrote the story of human evolution**

In “The Secret History of Denisovans,” Silvana Condemi and François Savatier trace the story of our mysterious hominin ancestor.

- In 2010, scientists extracted DNA from a fingertip bone in Siberia that belonged to a previously unknown human species, now called the Denisovans.
- The discovery rewrote human prehistory to show how Denisovans shaped the genetic landscape of eastern Eurasia.
- Denisovans weren’t just another extinct species; they interbred with humans, and today many people have Denisovan DNA.

[https://bigthink.com/books/denisovans/?utm\\_source=firefox-newtab-en-us](https://bigthink.com/books/denisovans/?utm_source=firefox-newtab-en-us)

[Do you have a compelling personal story you’d like to see published on HuffPost? Find out what we’re looking for here and send us a pitch at \*\*pitch@huffpost.com\*\*.](#)

The Washoe County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) Search and Rescue team is inviting the community to a recruitment event for its Special Vehicles Unit (SVU)... (X: [WashoeSheriff](#))

### **In 1916, Woodrow Wilson signed an act establishing the National Park Service**

### **RESTORE THE DELTA: Tribes and advocates expose Newsom's political maneuvering to reintroduce Delta tunnel trailer bills**

<https://mavensnotebook.com/2025/08/16/restore-the-delta-tribes-and-advocates-expose-newsoms-political-maneuvering-to-reintroduce-delta-tunnel-trailer-bills/>

San Carlos Apache: "We the People Rise"

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### **Historic deal, part of \$100M program, returns ancestral lands to Calif. tribe**

"The Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel recently reacquired more than 1,000 acres of its ancestral land in San Diego County, the tribe announced Tuesday. The historic deal returned 1,107 acres of land on the eastern side of the Volcan Mountains, the tribe wrote in a news release. The property is about 45 miles east of San Diego, close to the town of Julian and directly adjacent to the Iipay Nation's existing Santa Ysabel Reservation. The returned land supports a mix of habitats, including oak woodland, native grassland and mixed hardwood and conifer forest. It's home to several protected and endangered species, including the golden eagle and arroyo toad. ... " [Read more from SF Gate](#).

### **How a 'good fire' in the Grand Canyon exploded into a raging inferno**

"When lightning sparked a small fire amid the stately ponderosa pines on the remote North Rim of the Grand Canyon last month, national parks officials treated it like a good thing. Instead of racing to put the fire out immediately, as was the practice for decades, they deferred to the doctrines of modern fire science. The prevailing wisdom says the American West was forged by flames that nourish the soil and naturally reduce the supply of dry fuels. So officials built containment lines to keep the fire away from people and the park's historic buildings and then stepped back to let the flames perform their ancient magic. That strategy worked well — until it didn't. A week later, the wind suddenly increased and the modest, 120-acre controlled burn exploded into a "megafire," the largest in the United States so far this year. As of Saturday, the blaze had burned more than 145,000 acres and was 63% contained. ... " [Read more from the LA Times](#).

**Jean-Michel Cousteau visits Lake Tahoe: Education is key to protecting our waters** ([kunr.org](https://www.kunr.org)) — Oceanographer Jean-Michel Cousteau visited Lake Tahoe, emphasizing the connection between the lake and ocean health. He highlighted the importance of education in protecting water systems, which is critical for both local and global ecosystems.

## **Court delays land transfer that would enable copper mine at Oak Flat**

The Western Apache and a coalition of environmental groups have fought for years against the Resolution Copper mine, which would become one of the country's largest at the cost of a site revered by the tribe.

BY MIATT MESSER | AUGUST 21, 2025 | ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Repeat:

## **Land-grab universities**

Expropriated Indigenous land is the foundation of the land-grant university system.

[Robert Lee](#) and [Tristan Ahtone](#) March 30, 2020

<https://www.hcn.org/issues/52-4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities/>

## **Salmon breed in river for first time in 200 years**

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly7gqx2zw0o>

## **Clues to the Lives of North America's First Inhabitants Are Hidden Underwater**

Submerged prehistory holds insights on the first humans to live in North America.

[https://getpocket.com/explore/item/clues-to-the-lives-of-north-america-s-first-inhabitants-are-hidden-underwater?utm\\_source=firefox-newtab-en-us](https://getpocket.com/explore/item/clues-to-the-lives-of-north-america-s-first-inhabitants-are-hidden-underwater?utm_source=firefox-newtab-en-us)

## **Health Secretary RFK Jr. visits Idaho Tribe, discusses food sovereignty and Tribal treaty rights**



National Geographic/Yellowstone