

LIVING LANDS

Helping Land Trusts Conserve Biodiversity



NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2008

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Touch-Me-Not Mountain Preserve

Photo courtesy of Taos Land Trust

CONSERVING TOUCH-ME-NOT MOUNTAIN PRESERVE

An update from a 2007 Living Lands Biodiversity Grant Recipient

By Ernie Atencio

When Taos Land Trust was contacted in 2006 about a conservation easement on beautiful mountain land near the village of Eagle Nest, New Mexico, the staff knew right away that this would be one of their most important projects. Sharing a five-mile border with the 33,000-acre Colin Neblett State Wildlife Refuge, and with exceptional wildlife habitat and dramatic northern New Mexico views of its own, there was no question of the importance of protecting this property. Its location in the middle of an area quickly being carved up with vacation homes, next door to Eagle Nest Reservoir and just a few miles from a popular ski resort, underscored the value of this conservation opportunity.

A 12,000-foot mountain that looms dramatically just above the property inspired

the name of the wildlife preserve the landowners envisioned—the Touch-Me-Not Mountain Preserve—which is now the trust's largest project dedicated exclusively to wildlife habitat. The land is relatively pristine and wild—over 1,800 acres near the top of a watershed—with diverse habitat ranging in elevation from about 8,200 feet to 9,200 feet.

A comprehensive wildlife survey is currently underway, but the property is known to support a healthy large-mammal population, including great herds of elk grazing the open montane grassland, deer, mountain lions and black bear. Numerous smaller mammals, raptors, songbirds and possibly several listed and at-risk species are also found.

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Like all of northern New Mexico, the landscape here has a deep cultural history, along with its natural history. It was once part of the extended hunting territory of the Taos Pueblo Tribe and probably used by other Southern Plains tribes. In 1841 it became part of a 1.7-million-acre land grant under the Mexican government, where local Indo-Hispano settlers would graze livestock, hunt, fish and gather wood. One of the few land grants that survived after this territory was annexed by the U.S., most of it has remained in private ownership ever since.

With the potential scale of the project, the neighboring state wildlife refuge and a slew of conservation plans for the region, it seemed a perfect place to put into practice some landscape-scale habitat protection and management concepts.

With the help of a Living Lands grant from Defenders of Wildlife, the Taos Land Trust is developing a habitat and wildlife conservation plan, an annual monitoring plan, and clear biodiversity and habitat protection language in its conservation easement that will refer specifically to the conservation plan.

The landowners have been engaged and enthusiastic about wildlife conservation on their property for some time. Before Taos Land Trust even got involved, these landowners had already started progressive habitat management activities —thinning overgrown stands of small-diameter timber and developing solar-powered wells to create water sources on the property so wildlife would not have to cross a highway to get to the reservoir. With a portion of the Living Lands grant, the trust is happily contributing cost-share directly toward these on-the-ground habitat enhancement projects.

Although these accomplishments are worth celebrating, it is the rare conservation project that goes through without any hitches. Due to the ever changing real estate market,



View of the Preserve

Photo courtesy of Taos Land Trust

some of the most exciting long term goals for the area have recently become uncertain.

“Initially, the landowners had planned to protect most of the 1,800 acres with easements. They started with the best and wildest 554 acres of habitat, completed in 2006, and hoped to add more over time,” said Ernie Atencio, executive director of Taos Land Trust, “but with a fickle real estate market, the landowners have unfortunately had to put the property up for sale.” There is a good chance the buyers will be similarly interested in permanently protecting the property, but for now, nothing beyond the 554 acres is certain.

Nevertheless, 554 acres of pristine wildlife habitat embedded in such a wildlife-rich landscape are nothing to sneeze at. So, until more is certain on the real estate front, the land trust is focusing its attention on improving and stewarding the existing easement to ensure that the wildlife value is retained in perpetuity. The area has now become one of the trust’s primary field-trip destinations for showcasing the dazzling result of habitat conservation and good stewardship to funders and supporters.

To be true stewards of the land is one of the fundamental goals of the Taos Land Trust. “When I started working for a land trust five years ago and learned that the annual monitoring of conservation easements was called ‘stewardship,’ I thought, ‘that’s not stewardship, that’s policing,’” says Atencio. “I always felt that by using that word we were taking credit for more than we actually did. So I’m very happy to be building our capacity to do more genuine stewardship.”

Through this project the trust is not only ensuring that the land will stay open and undeveloped forever, but also that biodiversity and habitat will thrive in the long term.

Ernie Atencio is the executive director of the Taos Land Trust in New Mexico. For more information, please visit <http://taoslandtrust.org>



Photo courtesy of Taos Land Trust

Atencio (far right) and the landowners overlooking the Preserve