

CONSERVATION BENEATH THE SURFACE

Two intertwined stories unfold—one of an endangered native turtle, one of a relentless invasive bullfrog—showing what it takes to restore balance in Gorge wetlands.



PASSAGES



Change. We have the choice to ignore it or embrace it.

- Excerpt from my first executive director letter, November 1998

Dear Friends,

Coming full circle is a peculiar thing, equally familiar and foreign.

Twenty-seven years ago, I wrote my first executive director column as Friends' executive director. This letter marks the 106th time I have written to you in this publication and will certainly be one of my last as I transition into retirement with the hope that Friends will have a new executive director on board by Spring 2026.

When I started writing these columns, I kept in mind my practices from my advertising copywriting days. Write as though you are speaking to one person. Focus on connection before content. And tell a story.

Over the years I tried to do just that and found it helped create connections with many of you that I will cherish forever. When I wrote about the premature birth of my daughter, a member from The Dalles who I hadn't yet met left me a voicemail sharing her story of her premature daughter and assuring me all would be well. When I wrote of sitting on our Founder Nancy Russell's couch as she shared with me her ALS diagnosis, I heard from so many members who worked and hiked with Nancy from the early days. I've received feedback on these columns in airports, on bike rides and of course on Gorge hikes, and whether that feedback was positive or negative, the consistent theme was that people felt a stronger connection to me and to the organization.

Of course, I also wrote about our accomplishments and setbacks in these columns, but I always couched the work around people, be it staff, board members or volunteers. I never wanted Friends of the Columbia Gorge to be seen as a nameless, faceless entity but rather a living ecosystem of ordinary individuals doing extraordinary things.

Now as I write what may be my final executive director letter, the quote above from my first letter rings truer than ever. Change is indeed the one constant in our lives and we have the choice to ignore it or embrace it. And as I said 27 years ago "with a magnificent treasure such as the Columbia Gorge hanging in the balance, I believe it is time (once again) for a warm embrace."

Kevin Gorman, Executive Director

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INVASIVE PREDATOR

INSIDE THE RACE TO CONTROL THE
DEADLIEST THREAT TO GORGE TURTLES



Text by
Sara Woods



Stewardship Manager



Invasive American bullfrogs have devastated populations of the endangered Northwestern pond turtle for decades, swallowing hatchlings whole, and reproducing with exponential speed. By 1990, only two populations of turtles remained in Washington. Since then, Friends and multiple agency and zoo partners have worked together to “headstart” more than 1,800 turtles, with about 95 percent surviving their first year. It’s a battle that can’t stop, even for a season. If it does, bullfrog populations rebound and years of progress unravel.

Bullfrog management in the Gorge moves with the rhythms of the year: winter planning, spring egg-mass searches, and summer and fall nights removing adult frogs. With this issue, we begin a three-part series tracing how this work unfolds seasonally.

This chapter focuses on winter work, when bullfrogs slow into dormancy and we shift to planning, data review, and preparing crews for the coming field season. In the next issue (spring 2026), we’ll highlight early-season fieldwork.

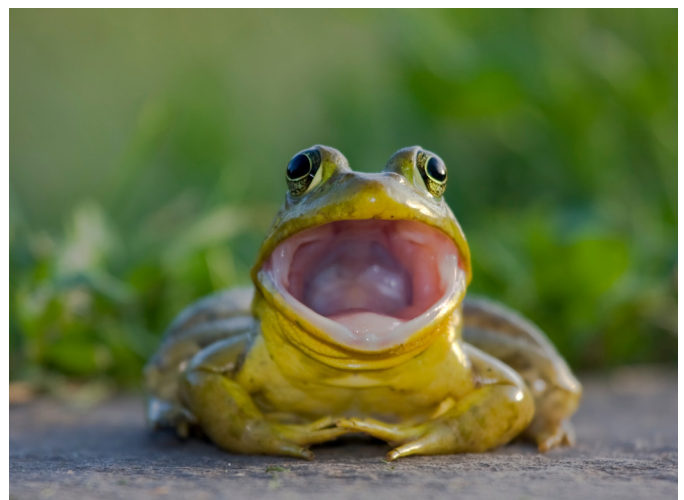
Friends and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) co-manage bullfrog control efforts on our respective lands in coordination with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Since we started this work, we've removed over 16,500 bullfrogs and 200 egg masses out of 32 ponds on USFS lands and Friends' Alashik and Turtle Haven preserves. Of course, bullfrogs do not abide by the human-created concept of legal boundaries and therefore cross-boundary stewardship is critical to their management. This cooperation ensures our efforts are efficient and that we are not leaving any pond lily unturned, but it comes with a hefty price tag.

Each partner contributes in different ways, like land access, night field crews, and data analysis, and

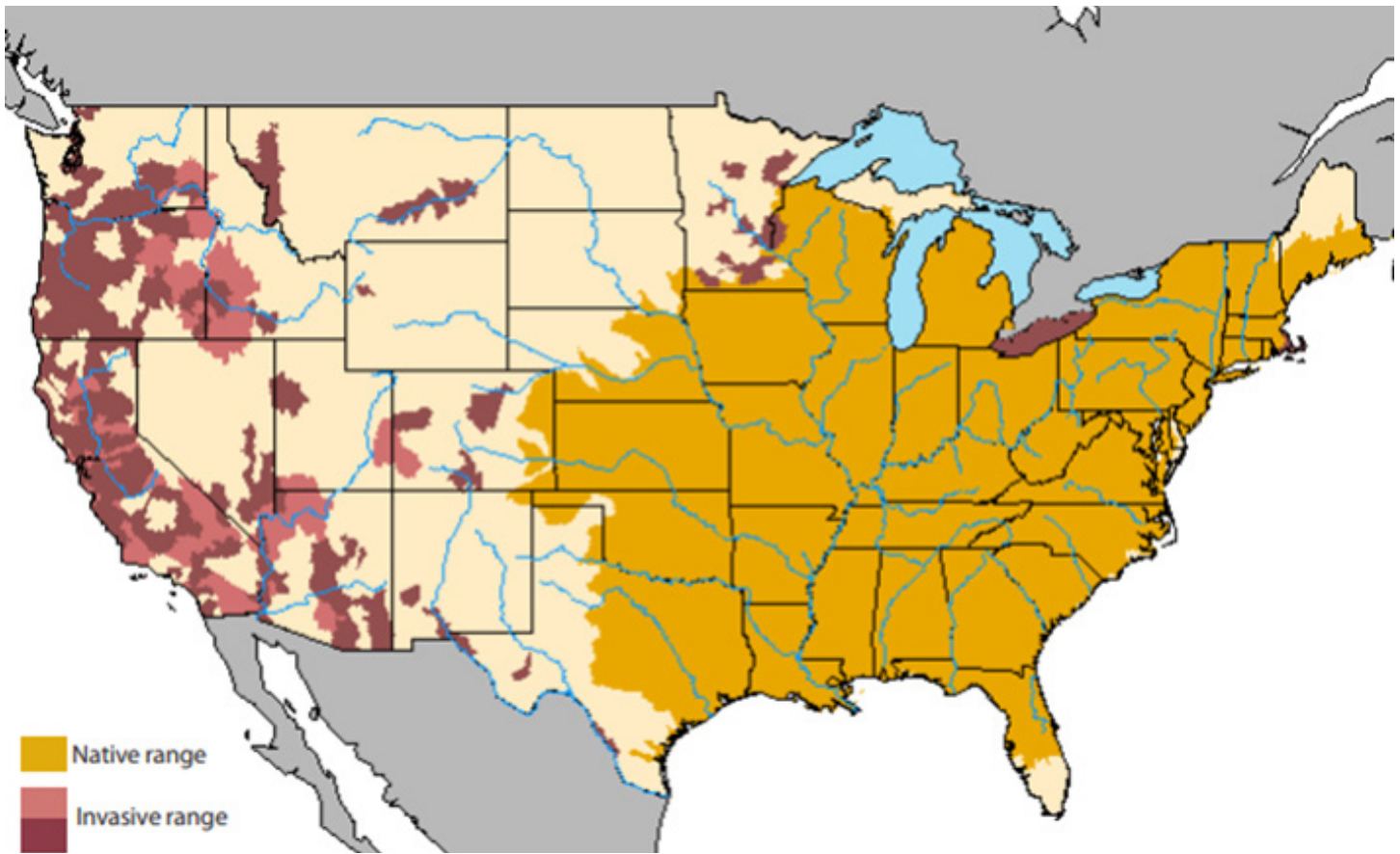
success depends on aligning these pieces each year.

BULLFROG PROBLEMS

Bullfrogs are a “gape-limited” ambush predator, meaning they eat anything that can fit into their open mouths and swallow their prey whole. Their diet consists of invertebrates, birds, bats, rodents, frogs (including bullfrogs), newts, lizards, snakes, and turtles. They are also known to be vectors for diseases such as Ranavirus and Chytridiomycosis that can infect and kill native frogs such as the Oregon spotted frog and the northern leopard frog. Bullfrogs also reproduce on an exponential scale that outcompetes their native counterparts.



As “gape-limited” predators, bullfrogs swallow anything that fits in their open mouths, even baby pond turtles. Cross-boundary stewardship by Friends, USFS, WDFW, and MARS is critical to minimizing their impacts in the Gorge. Photos from Friends' archives.



This map produced by the United States Geological Survey displays the current distribution of the American bullfrog throughout the United States (USGS, July 9, 2016).

Through our collaborative culling work, bullfrog stomach contents were analyzed and unveiled a variety of native species they had eaten. At another Gorge site, one bullfrog's stomach included two quarter-sized pond turtles. In Washington state bullfrogs are classified as prohibited aquatic animal species (WAC 220-12-090) due to the high risk of them becoming an invasive species to new sites.

IDENTIFICATION

American bullfrogs are stout frogs

and adults have been documented to grow up to eight inches in length and weigh over two pounds (that's one third the weight of the average human baby). They have long, hind legs and fully webbed hind feet. Their skin is smooth, and the color on their topside is typically tan, brown or olive-brown with varying amounts of black mottling, and their underside is a light cream color with dark mottling. Females have bigger bodies than males however the most distinguishing feature between sexes is their tympanum (or eardrum; located just behind their eye).

Female's tympanum is approximately the same size as their eye, where in males it's larger in size. The tympanum in males is critical to discern calls from other frogs to attract mates and defend territories. Males emit a loud, deep mating call that sounds like "jug-o'-rum" and "br-rum." Scan the QR code to listen to a sample.



RANGE

Bullfrogs are native to the central and eastern United States (U.S.), southeastern Canada, and have been introduced into the western U.S. in the early 1900s. They were introduced to the west for aquaculture (or frog farming) for food production i.e. frog legs. To a lesser extent they were brought in as a biological control for insects and were released into natural waterways as unwanted pets. Bullfrogs presumably escaped farming operations and spread to natural areas, likely finding that the Northwest is quite hospitable with our mild winters and plentiful water features.

HABITATS

Bullfrog habitats include ponds, wetlands, lakes, creeks, sloughs, and rivers. They generally stick to the shores of ponds and prefer areas with warm water and abundant aquatic vegetation. Hunting, breeding and overwintering all occur in these same types of habitats, but they periodically move over land. Adult males hold territories along the water edges and physically wrestle unwanted males out.

LIFE CYCLE

Bullfrogs go through a metamorphosis that includes multiple life stages: egg, hatchling, tadpole, juvenile, and finally adult. It can take 2 to 3 years of growth as a tadpole before they become a mature frog that's able to breed. Mating occurs in the spring and females lay up to 20,000 eggs in a temporarily floating egg mass in June and July. More on this in the next issue of Passages coming to your mailbox in spring 2026.

Bullfrogs typically stay close to where they were born (1-2 km) and don't technically migrate, yet young frogs do disperse to new habitats partially to evade cannibalistic adults. Dispersal occurs, en masse, on rainy nights. This behavior provides an

opportunity to capture frogs out of water, if timed correctly, yet most bullfrog control efforts happen in a kayak, on the water, at night, with a spotlight and net.

Bullfrogs reproduce rapidly, disperse easily, and can reinvade sites quickly, which means effective control only works when it's sustained over many years without a pause.

WINTER

In winter, bullfrogs are underwater, burrowed into the muddy bottoms of ponds and slow-moving streams. They enter a semi-dormant, lethargic state called “brumation” where they slow down their metabolic rate as ectotherms (from the Greek words “ektós,” meaning “outside,” and “thermós”, meaning “heat”) to retain energy due to the cold and the lack of food. They don't fully burrow in the mud, as they need a portion of their skin exposed to absorb dissolved oxygen in the water to breathe. On warmer winter days bullfrogs can snap out of their catatonic state and sluggishly swim around to feed. Managing an invasive species at this scale involves more than field time. It's a continuous cycle of planning, adaptation, and preparation for the next season.

This time of year, staff from Friends, USFS, WDFW, and Mt. Adams Resource Stewards (MARS; responsible for adult night culling) are discussing the past bullfrog control season and sharing data, highlighting things we've learned and discussing how to improve our work through adaptive management. With limited resources, we are using our results and writing grant applications to hire field crews to continue the efforts for the coming season.

Funding this work is critical as we have come so far with our efforts. If this work paused even for a season, bullfrog numbers would rebound quickly, undoing years of progress and further pressuring native turtles.

This collaboration has been synergistic in the true sense of its meaning; our partnership is greater than the sum of our individual efforts, and we need each other as we bring different expertise and skills. We also need your support to get the work done, so thank you for your time, likes on social media, and donations.

YOUR SUPPORT KEEPS THIS WORK MOVING

*WITH SHORT FIELD SEASONS AND HIGH STAKES FOR NATIVE WILDLIFE,
EARLY FUNDING HELPS US AND OUR PARTNERS STAY ONE STEP AHEAD OF
INVASIVE BULLFROGS.*

Because field seasons are short and highly choreographed, securing resources early is essential. Crews must be hired and trained well before summer. As you've read, this work is painstaking, ongoing, and directly tied to the future of native wildlife in the Gorge. If you'd like to support the next season of turtle restoration and habitat protection, scan the QR code below to make a gift.



the **BULLFROG DIARIES**

Invasive American bullfrogs may look harmless, but they're one of the Gorge's most destructive predators. They eat anything that fits in their mouths, from native frogs to bats, snakes, and even quarter-sized endangered Northwestern pond turtle hatchlings. To protect the turtles, Friends, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Washington department of fish and wildlife, and Mt. Adams resource stewards have built a partnership to remove bullfrogs before they can spread.

Since this work began, partners have removed over 16,500 bullfrogs and 200 egg masses from 32 ponds across Turtle Haven, Alashik preserve, and adjacent USFS lands. As you'll see in "The Bullfrog Diaries" video series, the work is absolutely essential, because skipping even one season could allow populations to rebound and erase years of progress.

This three-part series brings you into the field with biologists leading work from spring scouting and kayak surveys to peak-season juvenile bursts. See what it takes to protect native wildlife, one pond at a time. Scan the QR code on the left to watch all three videos. Scan the QR code on the right to read an article in Columbia Gorge News co-authored by Jack Fogarty: "Bullfrog removal protects vulnerable species in the Columbia Gorge and Glenwood Valley."



PART 1



Join Riley Janquart of WDFW as he tracks invasive bullfrogs across Friends' Alashik Preserve, showing how one missed egg mass can derail years of restoration work.

PART 2



Friends' Kenzie Hammond uses her kayaking and surveying skills to search ponds where bullfrogs outcompete native species.

PART 3



Mt. Adams Resource Stewards Field Biologist Jack Fogarty documents the challenges, techniques, and partnerships needed to protect turtle habitats.

NATIVE PREY

INSIDE A 30-YEAR CONSERVATION
PARTNERSHIP TO SAVE A SPECIES



Text by
Hannah Anderson-Dana



Member & Public Engagement Specialist

The Northwestern pond turtle has survived for more than 200 million years, yet in the Columbia Gorge today its future is perilously uncertain. Habitat loss, disease, and—most critically—the explosive spread of invasive American bullfrogs have pushed this ancient reptile to the brink. Protecting it is work that can’t slow for even a season; recovery depends on steady monitoring, habitat restoration, and the persistence of people committed to giving this species a fighting chance.

At Friends’ Turtle Haven and Alashík preserves, that commitment is unfolding pond by pond. These protected landscapes—once degraded and fragmented—now serve as vital strongholds where biologists track turtles, restore wetlands, and search for individuals across a connected network of ponds. This article takes a closer look at that work: how decades of field science, cross-agency partnerships, and careful stewardship are helping rebuild one of the Gorge’s most vulnerable native populations—and why the future of the species may well hinge on places like these.

On a rainy Friday in June, I drove out to Friends' Turtle Haven preserve to meet with Carly Wickhem and Matt Monteith, wildlife biologists from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), who were on the property to conduct population surveys of the endangered Northwestern pond turtle. I looked on as they set turtle traps in the ponds which, once installed, stay in place for three weeks while biologists check them daily to identify and tag any trapped turtles.

This strategy plays out at 64-acre Turtle Haven, which Friends purchased in Skamania County, Washington, in 2015 as part of our Preserve the Wonder capital campaign, to protect the



Carly Wickhem demonstrates the tagging process of Northwestern pond turtles. Photo by Hannah Anderson-Dana.

Northwestern pond turtle and its habitat. For many years, Turtle Haven

was surrounded by hundreds of acres of U.S. Forest Service land, all speckled with small ponds and inviting to the pond turtle. Given that turtles don't understand property boundaries and can move up to three miles overland, having access to the land around their habitats is crucial to monitoring and boosting the populations. When Friends purchased the 120-acre Alashík Preserve in 2024, wildlife biologists are now able to explore its many ponds to find even more turtles.

On these properties, which are closed to the public, you get the feeling of a return to the wild—aside from the biologists' stowed kayak for getting out on the pond and their materials to tag the turtles, you can't see any structures or our cars parked on the adjacent road. No signs of human interference. A reminder that this place isn't ours; we just play a role in this ecosystem that was here before us and will continue on long after us.

It's a thrill being here—to see and feel the scope and impact of the work—but this feeling was not always palpable at Turtle Haven. On my first visit back in 2021, dilapidated structures, rusting cars, and piles of unidentifiable materials dominated



Alashik Preserve (left; Monique Trevett) and Turtle Haven (right; Cate Hotchkiss) are adjacent Friends properties in Skamania County that protect wetlands, ponds, and forested areas that support pond turtle recovery and other wildlife like birds, deer, elk, bobcats, and bears.

the landscape. Now four years later, it's incredible to see the tangible effects of Friends' work restoring habitat and giving the turtles and other wildlife on these properties space to roam. Check out the QR code on page 13 to watch a before-and-after video.

I'm excited to be getting a behind-the-scenes look at this work at Turtle Haven. But first: counting turtles. I try not to focus on how wet my socks are and zero in on the beautiful markings of the male Northwestern pond turtle Matt has just handed Carly. For a species that has survived for over 200 million years and outlived the dinosaurs, it's sobering that their greatest threat, and the thing most likely to bring their eons of existence as a species to a close, is human impact.

The Northwestern pond turtle used to range from British Columbia to Baja California, an expanse of over 1,400 miles. But loss of habitat from development—like the construction of railroads, highways, and dams—and the draining of wetlands for urban and agricultural development had such a drastic effect on the population that when WDFW went looking for turtle populations in the 1980s in Washington state, they found just two groups—a population in the Puget Sound area and one in the Columbia Gorge—totaling 150 turtles.

While tracking and marking turtles within those populations, WDFW scientists made an ominous discovery: many of the turtles were sick and malnourished. Too weak to

Once found from British Columbia to Baja, the Northwestern pond turtle has disappeared from much of its range. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is reviewing whether to list the species as federally threatened, a step that would bring stronger protections and federal funding. Photos by Vince Ready.



TURTLE HAVEN RESTORATION: Scan the QR code to see how Friends transformed Turtle Haven by removing old structures, abandoned cars, appliances, and invasive plants to make way for healthy wetlands and endangered turtle habitat.



submerge, they faced an existential threat—a species that can only feed underwater cannot survive exclusively on land. The sick turtles were brought to the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, where just 15 of the 40 females survived.

Once strong enough to be released to the Sondino Ponds outside of Lyle, Washington, WDFW hired Kate



Slavens, who, along with her husband Frank—the then-reptile curator at the zoo—was instrumental in starting the turtle conservation program. Kate and Frank would drive 500 miles round-trip to monitor the surviving turtles.

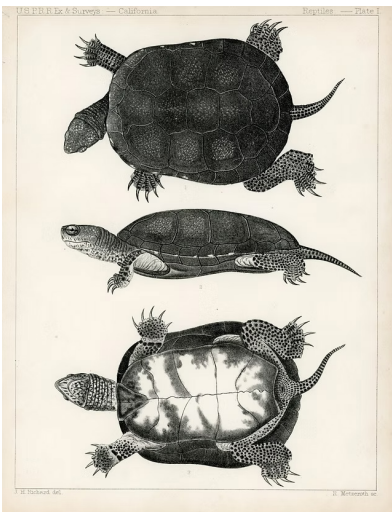
During this monitoring period, six turtle nests were found. Those babies were taken to a former pheasant holding facility in South Puget Sound to grow big enough to survive at the zoo and then on their own.



These young pond turtle specimens show just how small hatchlings are. Until their first year of growth, they're too tiny to outswim or avoid invasive bullfrogs, making head-starting a critical part of recovery.



DISCOVER ALASHÍK: Acquired through the generosity of our members in the Share the Wonder campaign, Alashík Preserve spans 120 acres of wetlands, streams, and forest habitat. Visit gorgefriends.org/Alashik or scan the QR code below to explore drone footage, a guided walk, an interview with WDFW biologist Stefanie Bergh, a clearcut comparison video, and more.



“Illustrating Ecosystems” at the Columbia Gorge Museum explores the stories of native plants and the endangered Northwestern pond turtle, showing how centuries of documentation—from vintage field journals to modern conservation work—help us understand and protect life in the Columbia Gorge.

This process, known as “headstarting,” involves placing a transmitter on female turtles in April, searching for and finding their nests through July, and coming back in September to dig up the nests. The baby turtles are then reared in captivity for the first 10 months of life until they’re large enough to defend themselves against predation by bullfrogs—when they’re too small, baby turtles make prime snacks for bullfrogs, since they can’t swim well enough to escape and are tiny enough to swallow.

This process continued for some time—track the female turtles, find their nests, and dig up the hatchlings to rear for 10 months. Turtle release sites expanded to two in Puget Sound and four in the Gorge. The Oregon Zoo got involved in 1998 with headstarting turtles and Friends started releasing

turtles on our properties in 2019.

As the years went on, those involved in turtle conservation learned more about how best to protect these reptiles. It quickly became apparent that the American bullfrog, North America's largest frog, was the turtle's biggest threat. Kate and Frank would walk around the Sondino ponds and count upwards of 100 bullfrogs, waiting for a tasty turtle snack.

In order to have the turtles reach the stage where they can hatch eggs that succeed and survive (also known as recruitment), they would need to manage the bullfrog problem.

They started by removing bullfrogs they could see, capturing hundreds at a time (and these bullfrogs can be huge!). But they quickly shifted the focus to all life stages, as an attempt to eradicate the problem from the beginning by removing bullfrog egg masses from the ponds.

Bullfrogs present a tricky issue. Hatched bullfrog eggs in a pond can set a turtle population back three to five years, since a female American bullfrog lays thousands of eggs (between 5,000 and 20,000).

WDFW District Wildlife Biologist Stefanie Bergh alluded to this added challenge at these particular sites because it's not just bullfrogs staying in the borders of one site: they can hop across properties from pond to pond and ignore the boundaries of land ownership. They also end up in places biologists haven't gone to yet to scout turtles and bullfrogs.

In the coming years, bullfrog removal will continue to be a priority for turtle conservation, along with learning more about the shell disease that's affecting mostly the headstarted turtles, and managing effects from climate change-related drought on the turtles' ponds.

For this piece, I spoke with Matthew Bettelheim, a wildlife research biologist whose work documents the Northwestern pond turtle populations in California. Matthew remains optimistic about protecting the species, given the proven resiliency of the turtles. He says that witnessing the community of passionate, curious, and determined conservationists and turtle enthusiasts working together for more than 30 years is a great sign that this work can go far (and already has!).

A fun and frustrating part of turtle conservation, Matthew says, is that “every time we thought we learned something new, we had five more questions to ask.” Stefanie from WDFW echoed that sentiment, that new knowledge about the turtles “keeps us on our toes.” Frank and Kate Slaven were motivated by the continued success year after year—going from 150 in the 1980s to over 800 at the last count—and the ongoing opportunities to learn more about the turtles, like observing how they make their “perfect nests, shaped like upside-down lightbulbs.”

Something that I keep returning to is the longevity of this problem-solving and the commitment from so many different people to play a part: Kate driving 500 miles round-trip to count turtles, the biologists at WDFW going out to sites every day for weeks, the Columbia Gorge Museum in Stevenson, WA, devoting an entire exhibit, “Illustrating Ecosystems: Native Turtles and Plants of the Gorge” to the history of this conservation (the new exhibit is now open indefinitely).

This exhibit and my interview with Morganne Pockels, the then-Collections Manager at the Museum, was my introduction to Frank and

Kate’s work and planted the seed of exploring the many moving parts and partnerships of turtle observation and conservation over the past century and the role this small species plays in our ecosystem. The exhibit displays not only turtle specimens (I recommend going if you want to see how many baby turtles a bullfrog can fit in their mouth) but also railroad survey illustrations from the 1850s and preserved plant samples.

Sara Woods, Friends’ Stewardship Manager, highlighted the uniqueness and power of this partnership work with multiple organizations and agencies, as it pulls together different breadths of knowledge, funding, and capacity. It displays the strength of like-minded organizations with similar goals doing great work.

But learning never stops. This collaboration shows what focused partnerships can achieve for a single species and its habitat. Visiting Turtle Haven, I’m reminded of the legacy that collective effort leaves behind—and that even though we may see ourselves as separate from the ecosystem, our impact is undeniable.



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Editor's Note



With this issue of Passages magazine, we're delighted to debut a new content partnership with Columbia Insight, the PNW's leading independent environmental news outlet. Through this collaboration, Friends will feature select Columbia Insight stories that spotlight the most pressing conservation, climate, and community issues facing our region. We'll also explore additional collaborations, from amplifying each other's work in digital newsletters to partnering on webinars with reporters. By sharing Columbia Insight's rigorously researched, locally grounded journalism, we hope to support more informed, nuanced conversations about the present and future of the Columbia Gorge.

First up: Columbia Insight reporter Nick Engelfried's look at the decline of Washington's endangered Western gray squirrel and the controversy surrounding two proposed logging projects in Klickitat County. It's a timely piece that sheds light on a little-known species, the pressures it faces, and the questions environmental groups—including Friends—are raising about how state agencies weigh habitat protection in their management decisions.



LOGGING PROJECTS IMPERIL ENDANGERED WESTERN GRAY SQUIRRELS

Critics say Washington's Department of Natural Resources is moving ahead with timber projects that will destroy crucial habitat.

By Nick Engelfried/Columbia Insight

Washington's Western gray squirrels are in trouble.

The tree-climbing rodents, not to be confused with invasive Eastern gray squirrels, have just three populations in the state. Each faces threats to survival.

This hasn't stopped the state's Department of Natural Resources from permitting two new logging projects in Western gray squirrel habitat in Klickitat County in

southern Washington, a stronghold for the species.

About two miles north of Lyle, Wash., in the Columbia River Gorge, the Q Tidyman sale involves logging conifer-oak forest, home to one of the highest concentrations of Western gray squirrel nests in the state.

DNR says trees will be harvested in a way that protects the species, but environmental groups are skeptical.

About an hour's drive north, the Gotchen sale has drawn criticism from locals who say DNR failed to adequately account for the imperiled squirrels' presence.

Western gray squirrels were listed as a state-endangered species in 2023, but DNR has not designated critical habitat for them on its lands.

"As an agency, DNR has yet to really acknowledge the specific habitat needs of this species," says Ryan Ruggiero, director of the Friends of the Columbia Gorge Land Trust. "They should try to avoid disturbing Western gray squirrel habitat at all costs, with so few left in the state."



Historic (light) and current (dark; estimated in 2010) range of the Western gray squirrel in Washington (WDFW).

SQUIRRELS IN DECLINE

With long, bushy tails, silver-gray backs and white underbellies, Western gray squirrels once ranged

across much of the state. Only about 400-1,400 survive.

"The threats to this species are many," says Bill Weiler, a former Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist who chairs the board of Friends of the White Salmon River. "You've got logging, development, climate change and competition from squirrels that aren't native to this region."

Unlike introduced Eastern gray squirrels, Western gray squirrels don't occur in urban areas. They dwell mainly in mixed conifer-oak woodlands, an ecosystem that has suffered since the arrival of European settlers.

One Western gray squirrel population persists west of Washington's Cascades, on the Lewis-McChord military base, about 12 miles south of Tacoma. Two others survive east of the mountains, one in Okanogan and Chelan counties and another in Klickitat County.

The Q Tidyman and Gotchen sales affect this last population. Q Tidyman encompasses 114 acres of Douglas-fir, Oregon oak and Ponderosa pine forest. This is ideal Western gray squirrel habitat.

“The area has one of the largest populations known in the state, with 80-85 confirmed nests,” says Weiler, who began studying Western gray squirrels in the 1990s when Washington listed them as threatened.

In preparing the Q Tidyman sale, DNR noted the presence of Western gray squirrels. The agency described plans to protect them, including leaving nest trees standing, not logging during nesting season, and harvesting 50% fewer trees than would be cut if the species wasn’t present.

Weiler still has concerns.

“Any timber sale comes with an incredible amount of unknowns,” says Weiler. “There’s noise from logging equipment, and falling trees hitting and affecting other trees in ways that are difficult to predict. This all has an impact on Western gray squirrels.”

Q Tidyman doesn’t contain much valuable timber, and the sale has been expected to generate little revenue. An October timber sale auction for Q Tidyman produced zero bidders.

Meanwhile, a plan is in the works to transfer management of the land from DNR to the state’s Department of Fish and Wildlife, whose chief goal would be habitat conservation.

This would help complete a patchwork of protected lands spanning some of the area’s most valuable ecosystems.

“Q Tidyman doesn’t have much good timber, but is important for wildlife,” says Ruggiero. “It would make more sense for DNR to swap out this sale for one on lands without the habitat value it has.”

At a DNR auction on Nov. 20, Interfor U.S.A. Timber, Inc. purchased logging rights to the Q Tidyman parcel of primarily Douglas-fir with a bid of \$52,599.15, or \$16.11 per ton with an estimated tonnage of 3,265 tons. It was the only bid received for the parcel.

NESTS PHOTOGRAPHED

The Gotchen timber sale includes 979 acres of forest dominated by Douglas-fir, with some other conifers and Oregon oak. DNR’s environmental review noted Western gray squirrels in the sale’s Unit 2, but not the 890 acres of Units 1 and 3.

Local environmental groups have documented the squirrels and their nests in these other units, however, and say DNR didn't conduct a thorough survey.

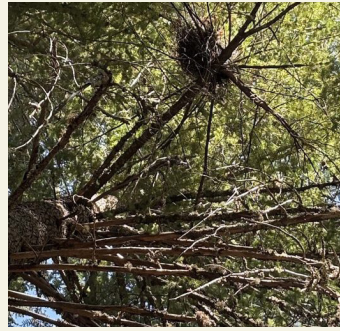
"It seems they didn't expect to find Western gray squirrels, so they didn't look hard," says Joshua Wright, programs director at the Legacy Forest Defense Coalition.

Wright visited Gotchen Unit 3 in May, after a local community member alerted him to the presence of the squirrels. Wright found and photographed four Western gray squirrel nests there, and since then the local tipster captured videos of the squirrels in Units 1 and 3, including near the nests Wright located.

One video shows what appears to be a lactating female squirrel.

In a letter to DNR, Wright said he could survey only a small part of Gotchen, and Unit 3 likely contains "dozens" of Western gray squirrel nests.

DNR replied, saying the agency's staff found "no signs of active use of any of the potential nests" Wright identified.



Western gray squirrel nest in the Gotchen timber sale Unit 3 (left). Photo by Joshua Wright. Western gray squirrels rely on mixed oak-pine-fir woodlands as both nesting sites and a food source. On the right, a Western gray nest rests in the branches of a ponderosa pine. Photo by Gary Bell, WDFW.

Weiler, who has also seen Wright's nests and has studied Western gray squirrels as extensively as anyone in the state, doubts whether DNR could know this.

"It's a pretty difficult thing to say a Western gray squirrel nest is no longer active," says Weiler. "They are bigger than basketballs and almost impossible to see into from ground level. Given squirrels have been filmed close by, you have to ask what nests they are using? Probably the ones we found nearby."

Ryan Rodruck, DNR's communications manager for eastern Washington, told Columbia Insight in an email the presence of Western gray squirrels in the area prior to logging shows the agency

has done a good job looking out for the species.

“[The Gotchen] sale meets the legal requirements for the protection of Western gray squirrels and will help ensure the continued viability of this forest stand,” wrote Rodruck. “The presence of foraging Western gray squirrels in the vicinity indicates the Department of Natural Resources’ successful long-term sustainable stewardship of this land.”

DNR did not respond to specific questions about the presence of Western gray squirrels in Unit 3, or whether the agency has thoroughly assessed for the species within the Gotchen sale.

CO-EXISTING WITH LOGGING

Those who worry about timber sales in Klickitat County impacting Western gray squirrels don’t necessarily oppose all logging there.

“It’s important Klickitat County maintain our forest resource economic base, for many reasons,” says Pat Arnold, executive director of Friends of the White Salmon River.

In Arnold’s view, the worst threat to Western gray squirrels isn’t logging

alone, but also habitat fragmentation caused by roads and sprawling urban development. However, she is concerned by what she sees as DNR’s reluctance to ensure logging projects protect a state-endangered species.

“I’ve seen a lot of timber harvest projects that are intensely destructive of Western gray squirrel habitat,” says Arnold.

Like other Washington counties with state trust forestlands, Klickitat County receives revenue from timber sales in its boundaries. The Klickitat County Board of Commissioners did not reply to requests for comment for this story.

The Q Tidyman sale has earned some good marks from environmental groups for taking Western gray squirrel habitat into account. However, the concentration of the squirrels in a relatively small area raises inherent risks.

“It’s just the wrong place to have a timber sale,” says Weiler.

Wright believes the larger Gotchen sale could move forward while protecting the squirrels, but it would require DNR taking a step back to

thoroughly re-evaluate the species' presence.

"They should pause the sale, determine what areas Western gray squirrels are using, then work to preserve the species from there," says Wright. "They would have to avoid logging certain areas, but they could still have a perfectly viable timber sale."

So far, DNR isn't following this advice. In May, the agency held a successful timber sale for Gotchen. Road-building activity in preparation for logging appears to have already started.

Emails between DNR staff, obtained



A Western gray squirrel carries an acorn through the snow. Photo from Friends' archives.

as part of a public records request by a member of Friends of the White Salmon River, suggest the agency felt urgency to move the Gotchen sale forward to meet timber harvest goals.

In a Dec. 2, 2024, email to other staff, Southeast Region Proprietary Manager Kevin Alexander noted that DNR had so far put up 13,089 million board feet (mmbf) for sale in the 2024-2025 biennium. Alexander said Gotchen would produce "just over 6,996 mmbf," allowing DNR to hit its biennium target of 20,000 mmbf.

DNR has done little to protect Western gray squirrels in Gotchen Unit 3, beyond marking the specific trees where Wright photographed nests as "leave trees."

Surrounding trees, which would provide forage and habitat for any squirrels using the nests, remain set to be harvested.

"There are Western gray squirrel nests in that forest which DNR never looked for," says Weiler. "We found them, they're on camera and DNR should be taking adequate steps to protect them. But they're not."

This story was originally published in Columbia Insight, a nonprofit environmental news website based in Hood River, Ore., and covering the Pacific Northwest. Read more stories at columbiainsight.org.

UPLIFT LOCAL BRINGS NEW ENERGY TO GORGE JOURNALISM, AND YOU CAN BE PART OF IT BY BECOMING A DOCUMENTER

Across the Gorge, local news remains essential, but increasingly scarce. While outlets like The Columbian, Columbia Gorge News, Columbia Community Connection, and the Goldendale Sentinel provide strong coverage within their core communities, certain areas of the Gorge still go largely unreported. County commissions, planning boards, and other public bodies make decisions that shape our landscapes, economies, and daily lives, yet many of these meetings happen with no reporters in the room. Skamania County, in particular, has become a “news desert,” a place where critical civic information is rarely covered and often difficult for residents to access. In this vacuum, one Skamania resident has launched a county-specific outlet that has repeatedly circulated misleading claims about conservation, land use laws, the National Scenic Area, and Friends of the Columbia Gorge, showing how vulnerable news deserts can be to misinformation.

A new nonprofit newsroom, Uplift Local, is stepping forward to help change that. Launched in 2024, Uplift Local aims to reinvent community news in the Columbia River Gorge by pairing professional reporting with a network of trained “**Documenters**” who attend and summarize public meetings. Their mission is to make local government transparent and accessible by ensuring residents can easily find out what’s happening in the rooms where decisions are made.

The Documenters program is open to anyone in the Gorge. Participants receive training, earn stipends for attending meetings, and help produce public notes that are free for all to read. The role doesn’t require prior journalism experience—just curiosity, commitment, and a belief that informed communities make better decisions. In a region where so many local governments operate without watchdogs or consistent media attention, even a single meeting recap can fill a major information gap.

As Friends continues to track and influence land use issues, advocacy efforts, and conservation policies across the National Scenic Area, we’re excited to see Uplift Local strengthening civic participation in the Gorge. If you’ve ever wished your community had more reliable coverage—or if you’ve wondered what really happens at county or commission meetings—consider becoming a Documenter and helping to make public decision-making doesn’t happen in the dark.

Learn more about Uplift Local at upliftlocal.news/columbia-gorge. While you’re there, tap the teal “Subscribe” button to get the latest news from Uplift Local delivered to your inbox. You can also learn about how to become a Documenter by scanning the QR code on the right.

SCAN TO BECOME
A DOCUMENTER



DEFENDING THE GORGE IN A TIME OF UNPRECEDENTED THREATS

In a year defined by federal rollbacks, budget cuts, and proposals to dismantle critical conservation laws, Friends, alongside our community of supporters and citizen activists, has led efforts to protect the landscapes and communities that depend on a healthy, resilient Gorge. From advocating for the Gorge Commission's budget to helping to stop the largest proposed public lands selloff in U.S. history, it's now clear that the future of this place depends on all of us showing up. in 2025, you did just that.

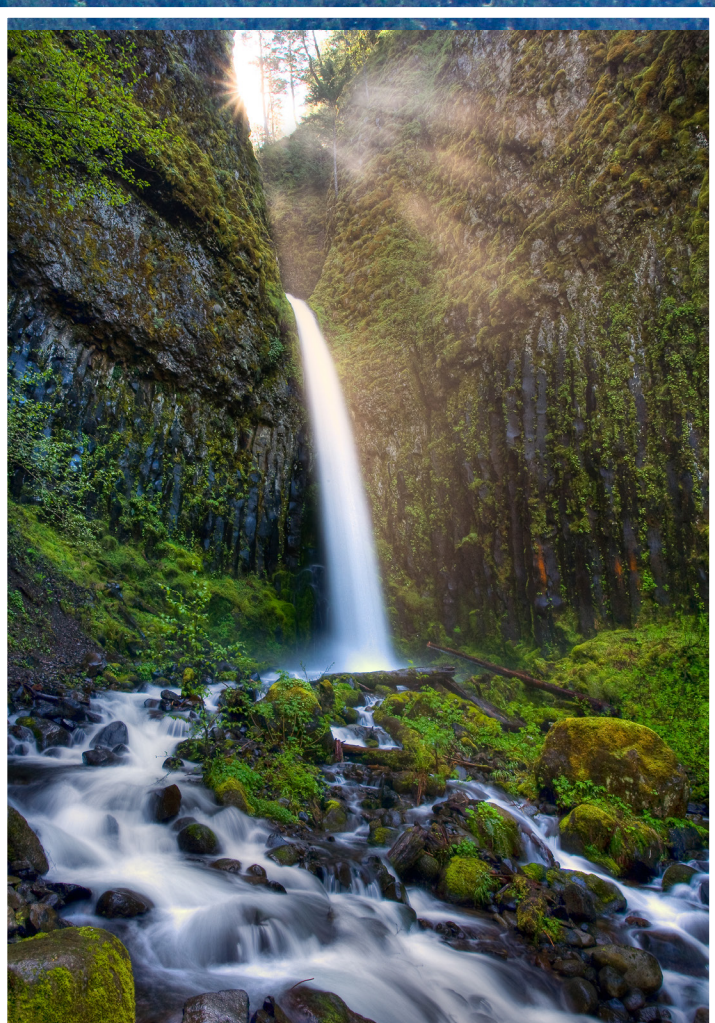


by Renée Tkach, Conservation Director, and
Madison Kenney, Advocacy and Policy Coordinator

The work we do at Friends goes far beyond protecting scenic views. Our work is about protecting the future of this landscape in a changing world. Every effort we make, from defending the Columbia River Gorge Commission's budget to protecting the Land and Water Conservation Fund and pushing back against attempts to sell off public lands, is rooted in one core belief: a healthy, protected Gorge is essential to our region's climate resilience.

These are not isolated fights, but hit at the core of conservation in the Gorge. Together, they ensure that forests can recover from wildfires, that clean rivers and habitats remain intact, and that future generations have access to the lands that sustain both wildlife and communities.

In an era of unprecedented wildfires and climate challenges, this work matters more than ever. By standing up for the laws, funding, and protections that keep the



Gorge whole, we're ensuring the resilience of a landscape that is essential to the ecological and cultural health of the PNW.

This year began with the Trump Administration ushering in a series of attacks on our environment and public lands. After the November election, it was clear that new threats were coming, as promises of deregulation were central to the campaign.

However, the scale of attacks was overwhelming, as the administration used the tactic of "flooding the zone" by announcing countless policies all at once, in hopes that advocates and

Dog Mountain (header; Laura Kneedler) and Dry Creek Falls (above; Daniel Rappaport) were two iconic Gorge sites that would have been eligible for sale if the public lands selloff language had not been removed from the Big, Beautiful Bill. In total, more than 22,000 acres of Gorge landscapes could have been put on the auction block, including other beloved places like Catherine Creek, Eagle Creek, Larch Mountain, Memaloose Hills, and Mt. Defiance.

organizations would have inadequate time and resources to respond to them.

The first sign of worse to come was the massive reductions to the federal workforce, hitting natural resource

agencies at all levels: D.C. policy offices, regional field offices, and rangers on the ground protecting our public lands. They also announced plans to vastly increase logging of our federal public lands, as well as other extractive industries like oil and gas drilling. This summer, many organizations launched campaigns opposing the rescission of the Roadless Rule, a policy which has protected non-wilderness National Forest lands.

We've also seen the withdrawal of the federal government from the Resilient Columbia Basin Agreement, an accord promoting salmon recovery signed in 2023 with the four Columbia River treaty Tribes and the states of Oregon and Washington, marking yet another broken promise made to Tribes in the United States.

Friends has focused our advocacy efforts around three main campaigns that directly tie into our work: defending the Gorge Commission's budget, opposing the federal lands selloff proposal, and advocating for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

GORGE COMMISSION FUNDING

2025 marked "long sessions" for both the Oregon and Washington

legislatures. In long sessions, both states' legislatures must pass a budget for the upcoming biennium, a two-year period beginning July 1, 2025 and running through June 30, 2027.

Entering the Washington legislative session, the state was facing a significant budget shortfall, and legislators knew that rather significant cuts would need to happen to programs. Additionally, the Trump Administration's promises to cut federal programs in order to deliver tax cuts created a highly uncertain environment for state budgets, as there could be a need to redirect funds to fill gaps created by the federal government.

During a long meeting of the House Appropriations Committee, where committee members were reviewing and proposing amendments to the state budget, Ranking Member Representative Travis Couture (R-35) proposed an amendment to fully eliminate funding for the Gorge Commission. As the Gorge Commission was a relatively unknown agency among Washington legislators, no one objected to this proposed cut, and the House version of the budget bill passed out of committee with no funding for the Gorge Commission.

If this had gone forward, the Commission would have been unable to carry out its essential mission of protecting scenic landscapes, wildlife habitat, farmland, and cultural resources across the six Gorge counties. Rural communities would have been left without coordinated land use oversight, leaving the Gorge vulnerable to real estate pressure from outside money, sprawling residential and commercial development, and large-scale industrial projects that would forever alter the character of this treasured landscape.

Friends immediately launched a public campaign, mobilizing advocates, business owners, and community members to contact state legislators to demand that funding be restored in the final budget.

As we look ahead to next year, federal cuts to programs like Medicaid are requiring the states to revise their budgets during the upcoming “short session.” Friends staff will be actively engaging in both states’ legislatures to protect the current funding level for the Gorge Commission from any further cuts.

FEDERAL LANDS SELLOFF

In early summer 2025, a provision in the “Big, Beautiful Bill” threatened the largest public land sell-off in U.S. history, mandating the sale of 2.2 to 3.3 million acres without public input or environmental review. While national parks and wilderness areas were protected, National Scenic Areas, including the Columbia River Gorge, were at risk. Over 22,000 acres—home to iconic sites like Dog Mountain and Eagle Creek—could have been sold to developers, damaging critical habitats and recreation areas.

Friends of the Columbia Gorge quickly rallied, teaming up with national conservation groups. More than 4,000 people voiced their opposition to Congress, and a powerful social media campaign brought national attention. In July, the Senate parliamentarian ruled the provision violated Senate rules, effectively blocking it. This grassroots victory highlighted the importance of public pressure and collective action in preserving our public lands.

LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) has been the cornerstone of American

conservation for more than 60 years, protecting treasures like the Gorge while supporting local parks in nearly every county. In 2020, the Great American Outdoors Act ensured \$900 million in permanent annual funding. Signed into law by President Trump, this bill was a bipartisan victory designed to protect LWCF's mission of conservation and public access. Despite President Trump's prior support of LWCF, his administration's Fiscal Year 2026 budget proposal sought to divert \$387 million in LWCF funding from its core conservation mission to instead fund deferred maintenance, including projects to support timber production. During the Congressional budget process, both the House and Senate strongly rejected this proposal and protected LWCF funding in the federal budget.

But now, the Administration is implementing new attacks on LWCF. Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum recently released Secretarial Order 3442 which contains provisions that will halt LWCF projects and undermine this program. The order allows states and counties to veto projects, restricts partnerships with nonprofits, and even opens the door to selling off federal lands by letting states use

LWCF funds to buy "surplus" federal property. These changes undermine the law's intent, jeopardize conservation gains, and risk stalling projects that support rural economies and public access to the outdoors. While SO 3442 does not attempt to reallocate LWCF funds to deferred maintenance—a sign that strong advocacy helped deter that move—its provisions still pose a serious risk to conservation efforts nationwide.

In September, Friends staff traveled to Washington D.C. to meet with House and Senate offices, urging lawmakers to uphold LWCF's mission, oppose SO 3442, and ensure the program remains a tool for conservation and public access rather than land disposal. Scan the QR code on the right to watch a video recap of our meetings with legislators.



LOOKING AHEAD

Friends is prepared to continue our strong advocacy during the Oregon and Washington short legislative sessions. We will continue to oppose any attacks on our public lands and successful conservation programs from the Trump Administration.



Throughout its 20-year history, Friends' Land Trust has played a key role in fortifying the network of public lands in the Gorge. How? Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, Friends is able to move quickly and nimbly to secure important lands that might otherwise end up developed or used for something other than conservation. Public agency partners are unable to act as quickly, so Friends plays a unique role in ensuring that priority lands are secured for conservation. Through a competitive, nationwide ranking process, federal agencies then jockey for Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) dollars—which are generated by offshore oil and gas royalties—to purchase priority properties from groups like Friends.

Friends works closely with public agency partners to identify properties critical to them and their mission. In some cases, these are properties needed for an important restoration effort, or to support an important trailhead or recreation opportunity. And in some cases, Friends is able to step in to opportunistically secure properties identified long ago for protection.

In the case of the Catherine Creek property, which Friends sold to the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in September, all three of these factors were in play. The property was identified at least 25 years ago for protection. It is a critical inholding surrounded on all sides by USFS land, which includes nearly two miles of a universal access trail. And it will enable USFS to expand parking needed to support recreation access at one of the Gorge's premier spring wildflower hiking locations.

Visible from several key viewing areas on both sides of the river, the property has been a source of visual impacts for years. It contained a house, garages, barns, various sheds, and multiple debris piles. In preparation for the sale, Friends removed all of it, consistent with USFS requirements.

It's reasonable to ask why Friends would sell this property to USFS at this moment since the proposed federal land sell-offs (more on page 23) were focused on increased development (i.e., more logging, mining, etc.). This property has been mined repeatedly and has just a handful of trees, so its only value to USFS is in expanding the recreation opportunities at Catherine Creek and supporting the natural environment of the area. As the property sits in the center of a treasured botanical and hiking destination, it has a built-in groundswell of public support to maintain it exactly as is. With that in mind, we chose to transfer the land and continue to work with local USFS to steward the land and eventually improve the recreation amenities.

As with any funds Friends receives from selling lands to public agencies, 60% of the proceeds funnel directly back to our land acquisition fund, with the remaining 40% going to our stewardship endowment fund to help maintain the lands Friends continues to hold.

Ryan Ruggiero
Land Trust Director

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES THROUGH DIGITAL CREATOR PARTNERSHIPS



by Monique Trevett, Digital Content Producer

Thanks for the update. Eek for using an influencer

A long-time follower of Friends' Instagram wrote the comment above on a video collaboration we produced with outdoor digital creator "Voyages with Val" (Scan the QR code at left to watch the video).



These collaborations, which we piloted with a small group of local creators in 2025, are a brand new endeavor for Friends, and one that we know not all folks are yet comfortable with. And part of the discomfort comes down to language. So first, it's important to state that we are not working with "influencers." We're working with digital creators.

That distinction matters. "Influencer" suggests someone focused on selling products or promoting brands through using trends, memes, or their own unique personality. Digital creators, on the other hand, build their communities around authentic

storytelling, education, photography, videography, and experience sharing.

Their work is rooted in craft and passion, not promotion, which is exactly why their audiences trust them, and why that style of content aligns so naturally with outdoor recreation and conservation.

So with that in mind, let's explore the question further: why work with digital creators?

When I joined Friends in fall 2023, I had an idea: What if we could connect new and younger audiences to the Gorge through creators, and how could that support Friends' work?

In short: we're sitting on untapped potential to help Friends grow and, frankly, to ensure the organization can be financially sustainable decades from now.

Younger audiences aren't reading email newsletters or visiting our website. They're watching Instagram Reels and TikToks. The most forward-thinking nonprofits have already recognized this, and we can't afford to fall behind.

Here's the truth about my generation. I'm 28, and we don't open a browser to research anymore. We open social media on our phones. I planned most of my European holiday last summer using other people's videos as "inspo" (digital shorthand for inspiration).

But this isn't just about travel inspo and food reviews. TikTok has become one of the most powerful storytelling platforms for environmental and political activists of all types.

We started locally, searching platforms for Gorge-based outdoor creators. To our surprise, there really weren't any with large followings. So we expanded, but only within the Pacific Northwest. If this was going to work, it needed to stay rooted in regional identity and values.

With a tiny budget and a lot of cold emailing, we didn't know if we'd even hear back. But within 24 hours, we heard back from someone I had watched online for years during the

pandemic. And suddenly the idea became reality.

Since launching the pilot program in spring 2025, we've been on quite a journey in the online conservation advocacy space. In just a few months, we've watched proposals surface to sell off public lands, seen renewed attacks on the Roadless Rule, followed efforts to roll back DEIJ policies, and tracked BLM land sales—alongside plenty of other threats that didn't make headlines but still demanded attention.

Launching a brand-new program in the middle of that landscape was, admittedly, a leap of faith. But even in this unpredictable climate, the results have already shown us why this work matters.

One of our core goals was to reach younger and more diverse audiences, and we're beginning to see that shift take shape. Both Instagram and TikTok are showing steady growth among younger users, especially those who are engaging not just with our videos, but with the issues behind them. A great example: a young woman who had lived in Beaverton her whole life discovered our work through a video from a digital creator, joined our Mindfulness Walk, and told us she had never even

heard of Friends before—and had never been farther into the Gorge than Multnomah Falls. That is the exact awareness gap we set out to bridge.

This month, newly published academic research in *Sustainable Futures Journal* supports what we've begun to see in our own program.

A 2025 study of Gen Z social media users in Italy found that exposure to pro-environmental campaigns on social media significantly increased participants' environmental commitment.

And a 2025 global survey of young digital activists conducted by researchers in India concluded that social media offers a unique and effective avenue for environmental activism, with young people deploying visual storytelling, hashtags, and platform-tailored content to bridge online engagement with offline environmental action. The study also found that campaigns connecting online visibility with real-world mobilization are especially successful.

The program has also helped us rebuild and expand community connection. This type of storytelling

has opened real conversations with people who assumed Friends was simply a hiking group, not a conservation and advocacy organization fighting policy battles on their behalf. Now, when people encounter us online, they're seeing the connection between public lands, legislation, lived experience, and the places they love to explore.

And perhaps one of the most unexpected outcomes has been the way this work has changed our visibility within the conservation world itself. Earlier this year, a partner organization told us they'd been talking internally about whether to try working with digital creators but didn't know anyone who had actually done it. For the first time, we were able to say "We have, and it's already making a difference." Being early adopters in this space hasn't just helped us reach new audiences; it has positioned Friends as a model for others who want to connect conservation to culture in new and relevant ways.

In a world where public lands are on the chopping block, DEIJ policies are being dismantled, and misinformation is moving faster than the facts, we can't afford to sit out of the digital conversation.

Digital creators aren't the future. They are the present. And when they care about the Gorge—and bring thousands of others with them—that is a huge win for Friends.

We're inspired by the wave of outdoor creators speaking up for conservation. The more we work together, the more people understand that you protect what you know and love. You know what you experience. And you experience what someone invites you into.

As we look ahead, we plan to keep growing this program, not with whoever has the biggest following, but with people who care deeply, tell stories authentically, and can help the next generation fall in love with the Gorge the way all of us already have.

Because the Gorge isn't just beautiful. It's ours to defend. And there are millions of people who haven't met it yet—but will.

A YEAR OF IMPACT ROOTED IN YOUR SUPPORT

1

SHARED PURPOSE

Protecting the Gorge forever

TOGETHER, YOUR GENEROSITY RAISED

\$3.06 MILLION TO PROTECT, PRESERVE, AND STEWARD THE COLUMBIA GORGE.



5,000+

Members
Protecting the Gorge



450+

Conservators & Guardians
of the Gorge Giving Circles



408

New
Donors



91%
of Share the Wonder
campaign goal achieved

225

Share the Wonder acres
protected at Heartleaf
Bluffs and Alashík

1,200

Students
experienced the Gorge through
youth education programs.

A MESSAGE FROM LORI WARNER, DIRECTOR OF PHILANTHROPY



Every conservation win in these pages, from wildlife recovery to policy progress, grows out of steady, community investment in this place. The Gorge asks us to pay attention to its pressures, its resilience, and the work required to care for it. As you consider your year-end giving, I hope you'll continue investing in the protection of the Columbia Gorge and everything it holds. Thank you!

A large flock of sandhill cranes is captured in flight over a field of tall, golden grass. The cranes are white with long, dark wings and distinctive red patches on their foreheads. They are flying in various directions, some with wings spread wide, others in more compact formations. The background is a soft, out-of-focus field of grass, and the lighting suggests a late afternoon or sunset setting, with a warm, golden glow. In the top left corner, there is a yellow rectangular box with the text "WILDLIFE SPOTLIGHT" in black, bold, uppercase letters.

WILDLIFE SPOTLIGHT

by Kenzie Hammond, Youth & Community Education Specialist

As you spend time in the Columbia Gorge this winter, take a look at nearby wetlands, especially Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge, as you might get lucky and see a sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis*). While these elegant birds are found throughout the Gorge for several months out of the year (October-April), spotting them is still very exciting! They rely on a wide variety of wetland habitats, including shallow marshes, wet meadows, and agricultural fields, but avoid areas with heavy disturbance when possible. Sandhill cranes are opportunistic foragers, but most of their diet consists of seeds, grains, and small invertebrates. They use their long bills to search for food. Sandhill cranes are also known to eat small vertebrates, berries, and plant roots.

During nesting season, cranes build shallow nests made of grasses and plant material, usually placed in wetlands with standing water for protection from predators and to raise their young. Adult cranes are monogamous, and both parents will take part in caring for their offspring. Sandhill cranes hatch after around 30 days, and parents typically raise one or two chicks. By the fall, the young cranes will follow their parents on migration routes that can span hundreds of miles. Sandhill cranes live on average 20 years in the wild, and some individuals have been recorded living more than 30 years! While Sandhill cranes are of least concern under the Endangered Species Act, their biggest threats include habitat loss, disturbance in breeding areas, and changes to wetland ecosystems.

TOGETHER IN THE GORGE: REFLECTING ON A YEAR OF CONNECTION AND COLLABORATION

As the year comes to a close, I've been reflecting on the connection, learning, and joy that shaped our 2025 guided outings. None of it would have been possible without the partners who helped create welcoming spaces and meaningful experiences alongside Friends. In a year marked by rhetoric and legislation challenging diversity initiatives, we're proud to stay the course by working to make the outdoors more equitable, inclusive, and accessible. The reflections below from two partners capture the impact of this work and why it matters for our communities and the future of outdoor access.

- Melissa Gonzalez, Public Engagement & Outdoor Programs Manager



Nature journaling (top left), biking Wyeth to Viento State Park (bottom left), and hiking to Dry Creek Falls (right) with People of Color Outdoors. Photos by Melissa Gonzalez.

Working with Friends has been nothing short of exhilarating. I've not only been able to watch one of our community's largest organizers create inviting spaces, but also be a part of bringing those to fruition. The work we've done has made long-lasting impacts for participants as well as for underserved communities that are now more encouraged than ever to find comfort and enjoyment in the Gorge.

Working with Friends was something I had been looking forward to for years, and this year showed me exactly why. Their care for each member shines through, and it was especially fun to work alongside Melissa, who is never short of positive spirit during our outings. Whether it was sunny days at Dry Creek Falls or, quite the opposite, a stormy day on Larch Mountain, there was abundant room for knowledge sharing and smiles all around.

It's been a privilege to be a part of promoting the mission of this amazing organization. I'm excited for the coming year to continue to nurture exploration and connection for our Gorge community and beyond.



Jayson Moorman
Outdoor Guide & Friends Board Member

Our partnership with Friends has been one of the true highlights of our year. Melissa has guided our community with so much joy, compassion, and intention—whether we were discovering new waterfalls, exploring forest trails, or slowing down together through nature journaling and gratitude practices.

One of the most memorable experiences was our first e-biking adventure. For many People of Color Outdoors (POCO) members, it was their first time riding an e-bike, and exploring four stunning waterfalls together created a sense of magic none of us will forget. We bonded while riding, laughing, facing fears, and seeing parts of the Gorge we would not otherwise have found.

Friends, and Melissa, are incredible partners. They're professional, welcoming, knowledgeable, fun to be around, and always go above and beyond for our community. I look forward to continuing to build on this partnership with an e-biking series through the seasons, more waterfall hikes, and journaling or painting in the Gorge.

Ashley Slaughter
Program Manager, POCO

