

# Mountain-Prairie Region

## Year in Review 2012



*The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.*



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## From the Regional Director...

It is my distinct privilege to serve as the recently-appointed Regional Director for the Mountain-Prairie Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Region includes eight states and three distinct landscapes – North and South Dakota; Montana and Wyoming; and Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, and Kansas. The eastern portion of the region is comprised of the short-grass prairies of the Great Plains. To the west rise the great Rocky Mountains and the intermountain area beyond the Continental Divide, including parts of the sprawling Colorado plateau and the Great Basin. The Region's Prairie Coteau, an area in eastern Montana and the Dakotas, features ponds and wetlands left by the last glacier that are among the most important nesting habitat for waterfowl in North America. The Region is home to 61 federally threatened and endangered species and an array of other federal and state protected species including the grizzly bear, gray wolf, golden eagle, and whooping crane. The Rocky Mountains are well known for big game species such as moose, elk, mule deer, mountain goats and bighorn sheep.

Our special agents in this region work closely with state and federal counterparts to protect these native species. They investigate violations committed by industries or individuals whose activities conflict with Federal wildlife laws and hinder conservation



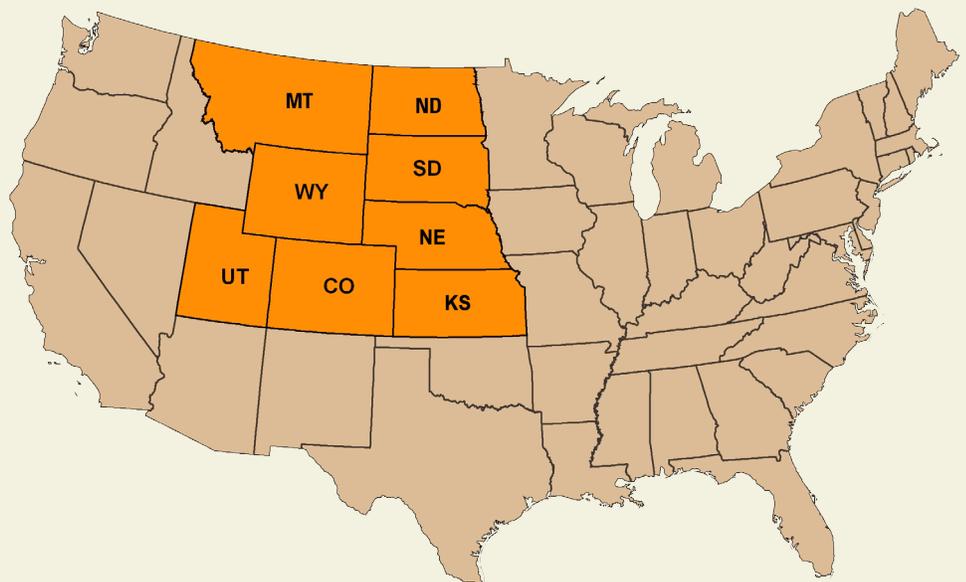
USFWS

*Noreen Walsh, Regional Director*

efforts. Wildlife inspectors monitor wildlife trade at the international airport in Denver and along an extensive expanse of the Nation's northern border.

In the face of escalating challenges such as land-use conversion, invasive species, water scarcity, and a range of other complex issues, the Region and its conservation partners strive to achieve sustainable wildlife populations through the implementation of strategic habitat conservation. Most recently we introduced an adaptive management method known as the surrogate species approach. Identification of surrogate species representing landscape function will lead to projects where progress can be made on conservation of multiple species.

It is my firm belief that by working together, we can effectively address the new challenges to our natural resources in the Mountain-Prairie Region and across the nation.





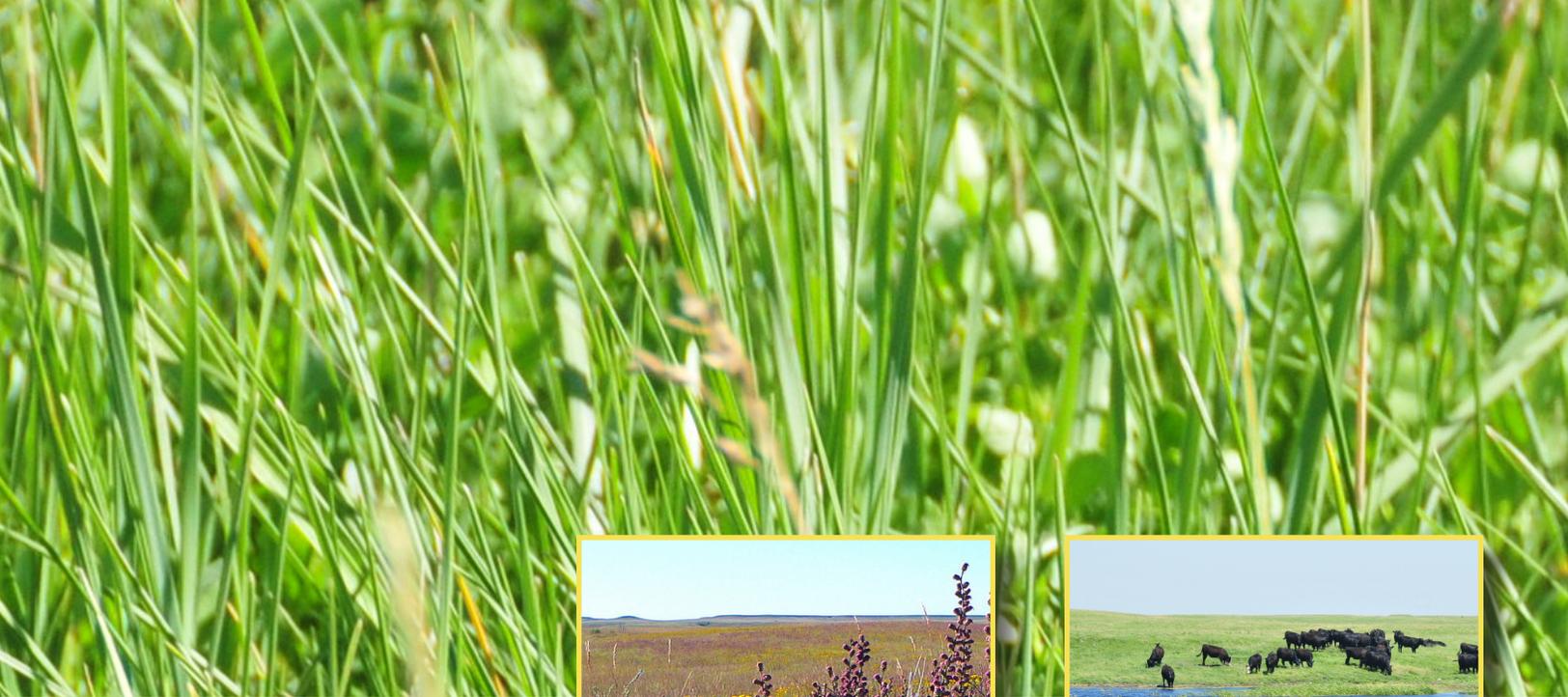
*Wind turbines*

## DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO ENERGY DEVELOPMENT

### **LEAP and Science Applications**

The Landscape-scale Energy Action Plan (LEAP) provides a suite of web-based tools, data, and analyses to facilitate proactive conservation planning by project proponents and Service staff. The State of Wyoming is piloting LEAP analyses, which will inform the responsible siting of energy projects by identifying important trust resources and habitat features on the landscape. It will also assist in evaluating the potential effect of proposed project actions and conservation measures on those resources. LEAP has partnered

with the Service's online environmental data base system to deliver these assessments and other information on trust resources to staff and partners.



# CONSERVE & RESTORE NATIVE GRASSLAND ECOSYSTEMS

## Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Program

We continue to look forward to playing a role in keeping working ranches on the landscape while conserving habitat for wildlife and this area's unique tallgrass vistas. This year we made significant progress assisting landowners interested in having their properties appraised for potential inclusion in the easement program. Easement contracts specify perpetual protection of habitat for trust species but the land remains in private ownership.

We are excited about the program and look forward to even more success in 2013. Ranching plays a major role in preserving the tallgrass prairie by conserving valuable fish and wildlife habitat through grazing, managing tree encroachment and burning. This project will help keep working ranches on the landscape while continuing to conserve habitat for wildlife, which future generations of Americans can enjoy.

## Dakota Grasslands

In 2012 the Mountain-Prairie Region saw significant increased easement acquisition in the Prairie Pothole Region of the Dakotas and Montana due to an increase in the Migratory Bird Conservation Funds. Protecting this important waterfowl production area is essential because thousands of acres of native grass and wetlands are being plowed and drained for agricultural conversion. Approximately 35 acres of native grass and wetland are lost to conversion every hour.

A funding level of just over \$22 million was used to acquire grassland and wetland easements totaling 47,387 acres. Funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund totaling \$4,050,775 was used to acquire an additional 11,090 acres of grassland and wetlands. Partners including Ducks Unlimited, Inc., Pheasants Forever, the Northern Prairie Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, and the Conservation Fund were vital in assisting us with the protection and preservation of these important habitat areas by securing an additional 25,200 acres of grasslands and wetlands. In total 83,716.14 acres were protected valued at \$35,399,144.00.

*Top photo: Upland sandpiper in the Dakota Grasslands /USFWS*

*Photos left to right: Flint Hills tallgrass prairie and wildflowers, Native prairie and wetlands, Lesser prairie chicken displays on a lek, Gunnison sage-grouse, Greater sage-grouse*



### Conserving Sage Steppe Ecosystem

Launched in 2010, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a highly targeted and science-based landscape approach to delivering enough of the right conservation practices in the right places to elicit a positive sage-grouse population response to management. SGI uses dedicated Farm Bill conservation program funds at appropriately large scales to alleviate threats that otherwise fragment habitats, the primary reason native species become candidates for Endangered Species Act protections. SGI targets Farm Bill resources to high sage-grouse abundance centers or "core areas" to maintain large and intact habitats rather than providing palliative care to small and declining populations.

The Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program continues to cooperate with the NRCS on initiatives funded under the Federal Farm Bill. The SGI and Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative have been extremely successful throughout the Mountain-Prairie Region. The Service and NRCS are working together to target, fund, and deliver conservation for a number of candidate and federally listed species.

### Gunnison Sage-grouse

The Service's decision to propose the Gunnison sage-grouse for addition to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife is based primarily on ongoing threats to the species' habitat and population declines. Habitat fragmentation resulting from residential and road development in all populations, including the largest population in the Gunnison Basin, is the principal threat to Gunnison sage-grouse. These types of development and their impact on sage-grouse habitat are expected to increase as human populations continue growing in size. The species currently occupies approximately 7 percent of its historic range. Although the largest remaining sage grouse population has remained roughly constant over the past 11 years, population trends in the other 6 remaining populations are in decline. We are working with our conservation partners, especially the Bureau of Land Management and Colorado Parks & Wildlife to ensure adequate protections are reached.

### Greater Sage-grouse

In January 2012, a federal and state task force was created at the urging of Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar to develop recommendations on how to best move forward with a coordinated, multi-state, national effort to conserve Greater sage-grouse, a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act. One task assigned to this group was the development of conservation objective recommendations that if met would ensure long-term conservation of the species. Recognizing the management expertise and authorities of state wildlife agencies, we convened the Conservation Objectives Team (COT) comprised of state and Service experts in sage-grouse management, landscape conservation, and recovery.

The purpose of the COT was to define the degree to which the threats to Greater sage-grouse need to be ameliorated in order to conserve the species so that it is no longer in danger of extinction or likely to become in danger of extinction. The final report expected in late January 2013 will assist federal land management agencies, state sage-grouse teams, and others in focusing efforts to achieve effective conservation for this species by providing quantified conservation objectives.



# CONSERVATION DELIVERY IN AMERICA'S GREAT OUTDOORS

## Crown of the Continent and Northern Grasslands Initiatives

The Crown of the Continent and the Grasslands of the Northern Great Plains Initiatives are two large-scale projects accomplished under the America's Great Outdoors vision of President Obama and Interior Secretary Salazar. These projects span five states and many diverse ecosystems. They have brought together many landscape-scale conservation partnerships and community-based conservation efforts involving federal and state partners, non-governmental organizations, Tribal entities and private landowners.

Conservation efforts within the Crown of the Continent [list states], through perpetual conservation easements and habitat restoration, have provided opportunities for the Service to successfully reintroduce trumpeter swans into the area. With this successful reintroduction, all historic native species within the ecosystem are again present on the landscape. Through the Grasslands of the Northern Great Plains AGO initiative [list states], we have been able to perpetually protect large tracts of native prairie, while also restoring and enhancing these grasslands to benefit high priority federal trust species, as well support viable cattle operations.

## Rocky Mountain Greenway, Colorado

In addition to working on protection of large intact landscapes, we are also very interested in providing opportunities to urban communities to view wildlife. To support this effort, the Mountain-Prairie Region worked closely with partners to literally blaze new trails for urban wildlife viewing through the Rocky Mountain Greenway trail project. The new trail system will provide wonderful opportunities for families to view wildlife by connecting public access to the three units of the National Wildlife Refuge System in metropolitan Denver - the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, and Two Ponds, and Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuges - and other existing and emerging regional trails and open space networks.

## Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area, Colorado

The Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area was established by a two-part acquisition which, when completed, will comprise the largest single easement donation ever received by the Service. This will protect a wildlife corridor in the Southern Rockies that spans some 170,000 acres. The success of this project has built an enduring relationship with private individuals, counties, states, and other agencies which will facilitate a substantial benefit the Service's entire National Wildlife Refuge System.

Top photo: Trinchera Bottom / © Trinchera Blanca Ranch

Photos left to right: Trumpeter swans with signets at the Black Valley, Rocky Mountain Greenway sign, Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge in the spring, Grazing management school for ranchers in South Dakota, White-tailed deer



### **Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado**

We completed a complex land exchange analysis at the Rocky Flats NWR. The Refuge was required to divest a small parcel for regional transportation improvements in order to comply with a congressional mandate; this proved controversial both due to the history of the refuge and because of the proposed transportation use of the property. Through this process, the Refuge will permanently protect ten times the area being exchanged. The new lands will include hundreds of acres of globally rare xeric tallgrass prairie and over 200 acres of important habitat for the threatened Preble's meadow jumping mouse.

### **Swan Valley Conservation Area, Montana**

The Swan Valley Conservation Area established in 2012 is a project that outlines a conservation strategy to protect one of the last undeveloped, low-elevation coniferous forest ecosystems in western Montana. The Swan Valley is situated between the roadless areas of the Glacier National Park/Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, the Mission Mountains Wilderness, and the Bitterroot/Selway Wilderness Complex to the southwest. As such, it will provide an avenue of connectivity between the Canadian Rockies and the Central Rockies of Idaho and Wyoming.

### **Land Protection Planning**

The Region has made significant progress on several landscape level plans that will further the Service's conservation efforts. The draft plan for the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area was developed in coordination with Idaho, Utah and Wyoming state wildlife agencies, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, The Nature Conservancy, and many interested stakeholder groups. A draft plan was also developed for the Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs Conservation Areas which is being designed to work alongside the National Park Service, to provide conservation benefit for threatened and endangered species like least terns, piping plovers, and pallid sturgeons.

### **Comprehensive Conservation Plans**

The Region completed Comprehensive Conservation Plans that will guide refuge management at the Charles M. Russell, UL Bend, and Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuges; and also the Huron, Madison and Sand Lake Wetland Management Districts.

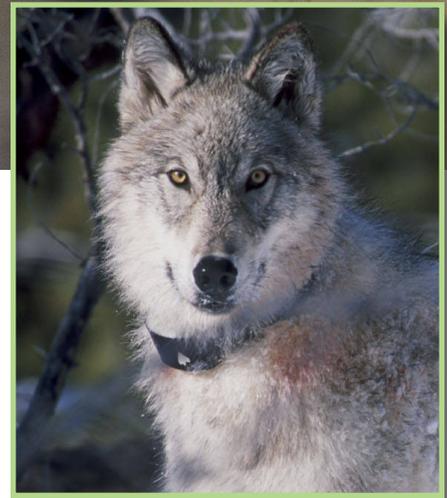
### **Law Enforcement**

Through enforcement of wildlife laws, such as the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty, and Lacey Acts, our law enforcement officers ensure that fish, wildlife and plants are protected for future generations of Americans to appreciate.

Law enforcement accomplishments include the undercover investigation into the killing of and trafficking in eagles for the "parts" trade. Operation Rolling Thunder resulted in 14 felonies and nine misdemeanor violations. Defendants will collectively serve 55 months in custody, 16 months in home or community confinement, and 15 years on probation. Fines and restitution exceeded \$102,000.

Operation Cimarron, a five-year Service/State investigation, exposed a ring of poachers responsible for the largest illegal commercial killing of whitetail deer in the history of the State of Kansas. Service agents and officers from Kansas, Texas, and Louisiana secured the successful prosecution of 27 wildlife law violators, including two commercial guides who charged clients as much as \$5,500 to poach trophy deer. One was sentenced to 41 months in prison and the other to 27. In total, Operation Cimarron resulted in five felony and more than 20 misdemeanor convictions.

# THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES RECOVERY



## Black-footed Ferret Recovery

We continue to work with our partners toward comprehensive recovery of the endangered black-footed ferret, one of North America's most imperiled terrestrial species. We aim to achieve recovery and delist the species by creating secure populations in the wild. To this end, partners are working to address the species' primary need of adequate prairie dog populations as prey to support ferret populations in the wild.

In 2012, we made progress toward creating incentives for landowners to conserve ferret and prairie dog populations, and developing an effective plague vaccination to better manage prairie dogs for cyclical outbreaks of sylvatic plague. In coordination with our partners, we are developing a programmatic Safe Harbor Program which would minimize regulatory considerations for landowners to have ferrets on their land. We are optimistic that through all of our coordinated efforts, recovery of the species is achievable in the foreseeable future.

## Northern Rocky Mountain Gray Wolves

Wolf recovery is an Endangered Species Act (ESA) success story in the Northern Rocky Mountains (NRM). This wolf population has exceeded recovery goals for more than a decade. In January 2012, more than 1,727 wolves in at least 277 packs (including at least 106 breeding pairs) inhabited most of the suitable habitat in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Wolves throughout the NRM were delisted in 2012 after 39 years of protection under the ESA. In September 2012, the Service issued a final rule to delist wolves in Wyoming and is working closely with Wyoming Game and Fish Department biologists to ensure a smooth transition from federal to state management. Except in national parks and national wildlife refuges, NRM wolves are now managed by state and tribal game agencies using Service-approved management plans combined with our 5-year post-delisting monitoring plan. We are confident that state management will maintain a stable and sustainable wolf population into the foreseeable future.

*Top photo: Black-footed ferret*

*Photos left to right: Black-footed ferret kits, Gray wolf, Female grizzly bear and cubs / National Park Service, Nick Berndt holding a Colorado pikeminnow / Utah Division of Wildlife Resources*



### **Grizzly Bear Conservation**

More than 1,700 grizzly bears live in the four states of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. This is three times as many grizzlies as lived in these areas when the grizzly recovery program started in 1981. The grizzly population in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem including Glacier Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness continues to expand in numbers and range at 3% per year - more than 950 grizzlies live in this area. The Yellowstone population, numbering more than 700 bears, is now stabilizing as the population fills the available habitat in the ecosystem. State and federal agencies are cooperating to produce a comprehensive scientific synthesis of the food habitats of the Yellowstone bears and the relationship of the health of the population to changing food availability. When completed in the fall of 2013, this synthesis will help decide whether we should again propose removing federal protection of the Yellowstone population. In the Cabinet/Yaak ecosystem, augmentation of the population continues to increase the number of females and the production of cubs.

The Lander Fish & Wildlife Conservation Office continued cooperative efforts with the Shoshone and Arapaho Tribal Fish and Game Department and the Wyoming Game & Fish Department in assessing and managing the grizzly bear population on the Wind River Indian Reservation, including monitoring radio-collared bears and conducting aerial surveys and monitoring whitebark pine cone status in grizzly habitats.

### **Colorado River Endangered Fish**

The Colorado River Fish Project Offices in Grand Junction, Colorado and Vernal Utah continued population monitoring to evaluate the success of recovery efforts for the four native fish species listed under the Endangered Species Act in the Upper Colorado and San Juan river systems. We also continued efforts to control non-native species that interfere with recovery of the four native fishes. Specific work in 2012 included completing population estimates for humpback chub, razorback sucker and Colorado pikeminnow as well as the operation of fish passage structures on the Gunnison and Colorado rivers to facilitate upstream movement of native fish to important habitat areas.

Endangered fish in Utah's White River are being tracked using a remote sensing antenna which documents fish movement to help researchers determine population sizes and survival rates. The White River is designated critical habitat for endangered Colorado pikeminnow, razorback sucker, humpback chub and bonytail.



# CONSERVE NATIVE CUTTHROAT TROUT

## **Conserving Native Cutthroat Trout**

Our Fisheries Program field stations completed a range of activities involved in conserving native cutthroat trout populations, from assessing the health status of captive and wild populations to implementing fish passage and other habitat restoration projects. Stream habitat and population monitoring continued in key areas of Rocky Mountain National Park through a cooperative program with the National Park Service to restore Colorado River and recover greenback cutthroat trout populations.

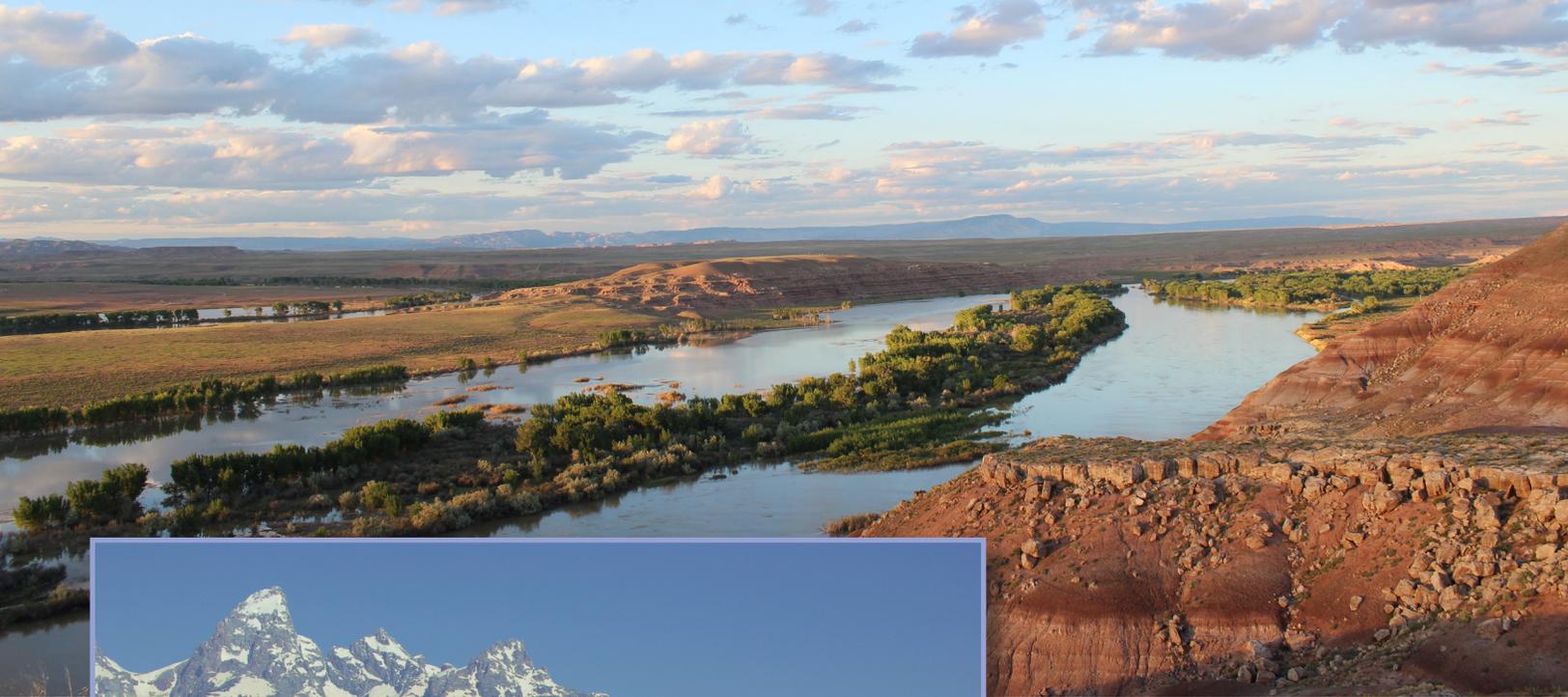
Our hatcheries stocked almost 542,000 adult and juvenile cutthroat trout as part of efforts to restore native populations and provide recreational fisheries. Jackson National Fish Hatchery (NFH) continued maintaining Snake River cutthroat trout broodstock and shipped over 400,000 eggs to state and federal fish hatcheries. Leadville NFH maintained two refugia populations of cutthroat trout, one representing a putative population of the greenback cutthroat trout, currently listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, and another of the Bear Creek population, which may be the last true remnant of greenback, which were native to the South Platte River. These refugia populations will likely be important to future restoration and recovery efforts.

## **Greenback Cutthroat Trout**

Service staff played a key role in completing and publishing a major genetics study in the journal *Molecular Ecology* that helps to clarify taxonomic relationships among populations of cutthroat trout in Colorado, which will lead to more effective future conservation efforts. Our biologists coordinated closely with the other members of the Greenback Cutthroat Trout Recovery Team (Colorado Parks & Wildlife, US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service) and genetic researchers at the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU) towards resolving the taxonomic question regarding the identity of the greenback cutthroat trout – Colorado’s state fish. Genetic research conducted by CU yielded significant results, including the fact that only one population of greenback cutthroat trout remains in existence; this population is located in Bear Creek on Pikes Peak.

Other significant results include the identification of a previously unknown lineage of native cutthroat on the western slope of Colorado. Prior to making any changes to Endangered Species Act listing status, we will conduct a scientific review workshop of genetic and taxonomic experts to evaluate this and other research. We are working closely with our partners to provide further habitat protection for greenback cutthroat trout in Bear Creek.

*Top photo: Greenback cutthroat trout /  
Colorado Parks and Wildlife*



## CAPITALIZING ON THE STRENGTH OF OUR LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION COOPERATIVES

### **Landscape Conservation Cooperatives**

The Mountain-Prairie Region hosts two Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) serving as a forum for our science based partnerships including federal, state, tribal, local government and nongovernmental partners. The LCCs are aligned around geographically similar landscapes and they are true cooperatives formed to identify best practices, information gaps and to avoid duplicative efforts through partnership based conservation planning and design.

During 2012, the Southern Rockies Landscape Conservation Cooperative collaborated with the Navajo Nation and entered into cooperative agreements with Shivwits Band of the Paiute and the Pueblo of Jemez to facilitate tribal identification of priority conservation issues, data gaps and science needs. The tribal discoveries will be included in the larger strategic synthesis for science delivery.

The Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GNLCC) implemented a strategic conservation framework and outreach strategy during 2012. To support on-the-ground landscape conservation, GNLCC committed over \$1 million to 16 conservation projects that meet science priorities outlined in the strategic framework. The funded projects will address transboundary and shared data needs while building capacity towards a collective vision of the landscape.

*Top photo: Green River running through Ouray National Wildlife Refuge*

*Bison grazing near the Teton Range / Steve Torbit*

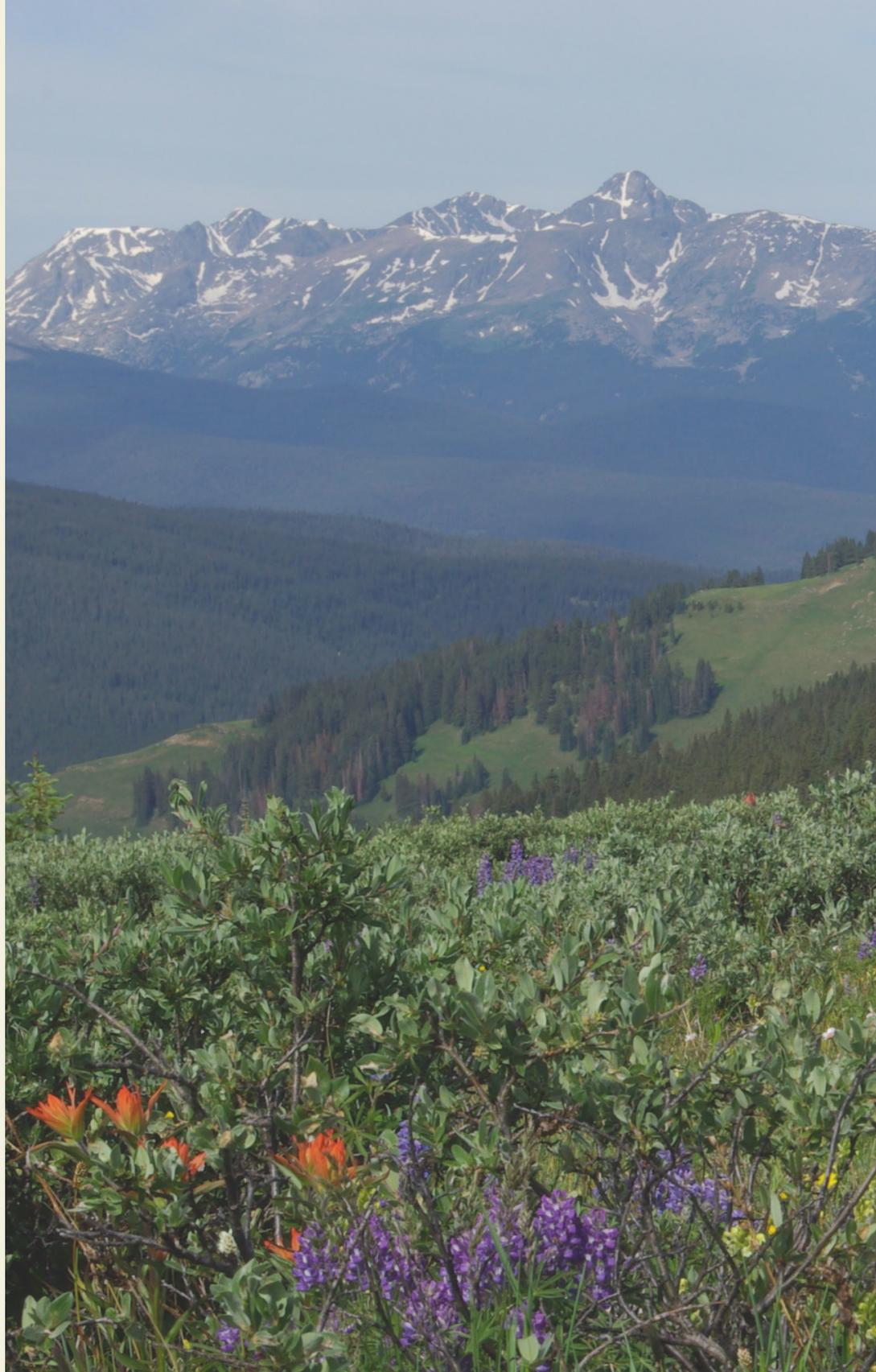
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**January 2013**



*Cover: Northern Rocky Mountain  
landscape / Steve Torbit*

*Page 1: Photos top to bottom: Wind  
turbines in Wyoming, Pasque flower  
in the Dakota Grasslands, Trinchera  
Bottom / © Trinchera Blanca Ranch,  
Whooping crane, Greenback  
cutthroat trout / Colorado Parks and Wildlife,  
Bison grazing near the Teton Range /  
Steve Torbit*

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