

# Proposed Bear River Watershed Conservation Area

*Conserving Wildlife Habitat on Working Landscapes*



© Hal Reeder

*Mountains and marshes at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge*

The proposed Bear River Watershed Conservation Area (BRWCA) project would work with private landowners to conserve the natural resources and working landscapes of the area. Through the goal of acquiring conservation easements from willing sellers, the project would help maintain important habitat for a variety of fish, mammals, and migratory birds and major migration corridors connecting the northern and southern Rockies. It would also coordinate watershed-wide conservation efforts and protect valuable farm and ranch lands.

The Bear River is the largest river that flows into an inland sea (Great Salt

Lake) in the western hemisphere. It originates in the Uinta Mountains and flows north and west in an arc from Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, and back into Utah.

The wide range of altitudes in the Bear River watershed allows for diverse habitats. Grasslands and shrublands dominate the flats and lowlands, while pinyon-juniper woodlands and pine forests are found on higher slopes. Big sagebrush is common on much of the landscape, although other shrubs, such as rabbitbrush, saltbush, and greasewood, may dominate some areas. Lower elevation areas are predominantly privately owned, with most of the pasturelands in the wide valleys used for agriculture

and grazing. Bear River water is extensively used to irrigate alfalfa, pastureland, and small grain crops.



*Northern harrier*  
Bob Hines/USFWS

## What resources would benefit from the proposed conservation area?

The Bear River provides important wildlife corridors for species migration in the western United States. The small, pristine mountain streams in the forested headwaters are ideal breeding habitat for the Bonneville cutthroat trout, leatherside chub, and blue-nosed sucker, all important native species. Elk, black bear, pika, and marmots use these high-elevation forests and snow-covered mountain slopes.

In the course of its 500-mile journey, the Bear River passes through three national wildlife refuges: Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. The primary routes of migratory birds following the Pacific and central flyways combine in the Bear River watershed. The refuges and adjacent areas provide essential habitat for many species of waterfowl and wading, shore, and upland birds that migrate through on their way to and from Canadian and Alaskan interior and coastal wetlands.

Over 200 bird species have been documented within the project area, with half of them closely associated



*Bear River south of Woodruff Narrows*

with wetlands. Numerous marsh and shorebirds, including white-faced ibis, snowy egret, long-billed curlew, black tern, great blue heron, American bittern, black-crowned night-heron, trumpeter swan, and sandhill crane, along with upland birds, such as the greater sage grouse and Columbian sharp-tailed

grouse, can be found throughout the project area. In addition to the importance of the proposed BRWCA to bird species, a number of mammals are dependent on the blocks of intact habitat and the key migration linkages between these areas. Elk, mule deer, moose, and pronghorn depend on key wintering areas and migration corridors throughout the proposed BRWCA.

## How would the proposed conservation easements work?

To protect wildlife habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) recognizes that it is essential to work with private landowners on conservation matters of mutual interest. The proposed project would use conservation easements throughout the watershed to protect wetlands, grasslands, and agricultural lands that provide important wildlife habitat from being converted to other uses.

As a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and the Service, an easement is a perpetual conservation agreement that the Service would purchase from willing landowners. Conservation easements typically contain habitat protection measures that



*White-faced ibis colony at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge*



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*Landowner and Partners for Wildlife wetland restoration project on Bear River*

prohibit subdivision, but allow for the continuation of traditional activities such as livestock grazing and haying. Land ownership and other property rights, including control of public access, would remain with the landowner. Easement properties would remain on the local tax rolls.

The Service would purchase conservation easements with funds generated by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965. These funds are derived from oil and gas leases on the Outer Continental Shelf, motorboat fuel tax revenues, and sale of surplus federal property. Easement prices offered to willing sellers would be determined by an appraisal completed by an appraiser familiar with the local market. Funding is appropriated by Congress to use for a specific project, such as the proposed BRWCA.

The Service works with numerous partners, including The Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, local Audubon chapters, PacifiCorp, conservation districts, State agencies (Department of Natural Resources, Department of Fish and Game), and Federal agencies (U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service) on conservation throughout the watershed.

## What are the next steps in the process?

The Service will be holding public meetings in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming to discuss the proposed Bear River Watershed Conservation Area project. At the meetings, you will be able to meet with Service personnel, learn about the proposal, and tell us what you think. We also encourage you to comment through letters, emails, and phone calls to the contacts listed on the back page.

The Service will use your input to determine the appropriate level of environmental analysis required by the National Environmental Policy Act for developing a land protection plan for the proposed Bear River Watershed Conservation Area. The land protection plan and an environmental document will highlight the resource values of the project area; present alternatives for the project that address issues the Service, our conservation partners, and the public identify; and evaluate the environmental, social, and economic effects that could occur if the proposal is carried out.

We will make the draft land protection plan and environmental document available to those who would like to review and comment on them. The Service

will consider all comments in the preparation of the final land protection plan.

## How can I be involved?

We want to hear from you. There are a variety of ways to provide your comments and questions to the Service about the proposed Bear River Watershed Conservation Area.

- Email ([brwca\\_comments@fws.gov](mailto:brwca_comments@fws.gov)), call, or write us with questions and comments (see contact information on back page).
- Add your name to the project mailing list. Since the mailing list is subject to the Freedom of Information Act, your permission is needed to place your name on the permanent mailing list. To continue receiving planning information, please contact one of the planning leaders (see contact information on the back page) and request that your name be placed on the mailing list. If you do not make this request, we will assume that you do not wish to receive further information on the planning process.
- Attend a public meeting coming up this spring.

There will also be opportunities to comment on the proposed project during the public comment period for the draft land protection plan and environmental document.



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*American avocet at Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge*

## Contact Information

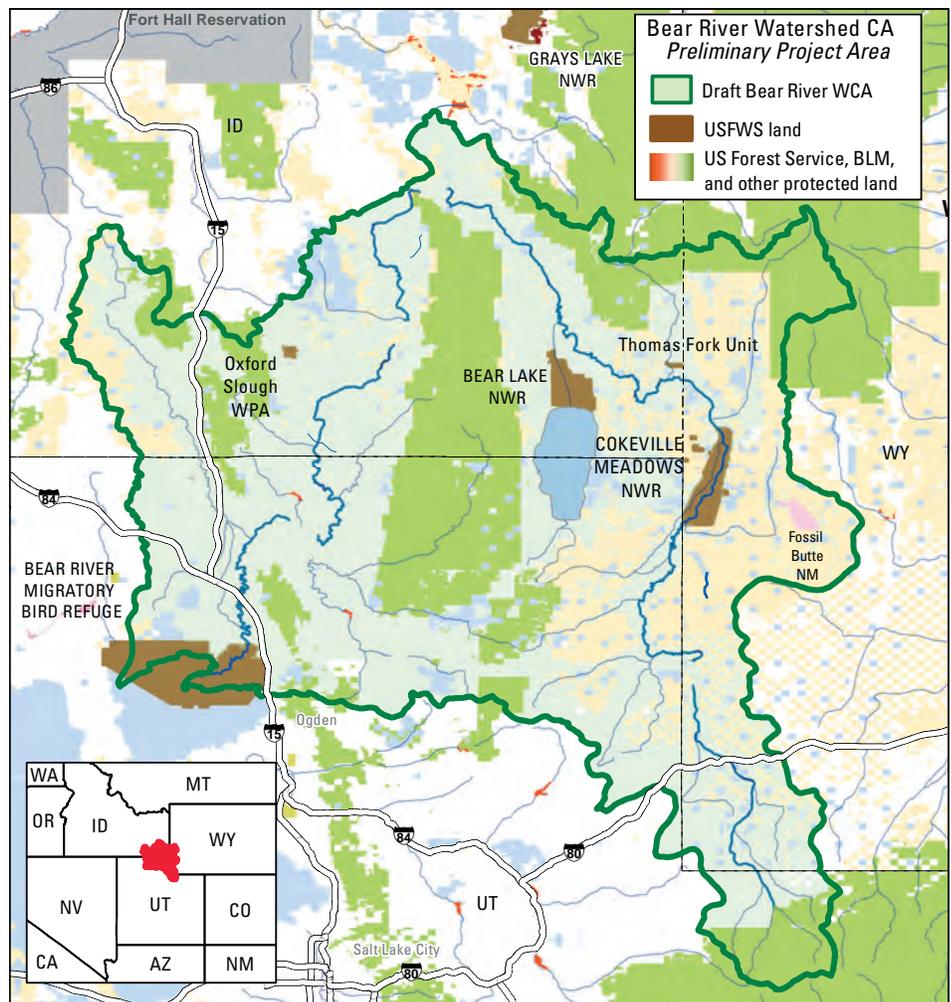
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Project area

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