The Art & Soil of Open Space
The first time Bob Peters set foot on the Circle Shoe Ranch, it was for a fishing lesson. He didn’t know it at the time – he had dropped in to visit friends Tom and Birdie Rossetter and check out their newly purchased ranch on the outskirts of Wilson, Wyoming, and had brought his fishing gear just in case. A short walk from where the main house would someday be, a path led away from the main channel of Fish Creek, over to a slow, deep, and clear side channel that would be known for years to come simply as “the Oxbow”. On this particular late August day, trout were literally bubbling up all around him to feed on the PMD hatch (a type of aquatic insect). But he couldn’t catch a single one. Birdie stepped in, encouraging Bob to “mend” his fishing line a few times before she realized that he didn’t know what she meant. She took it upon herself to teach Bob, an Iowa native accustomed to fishing in lakes and ponds, how to mend – a flick of the rod to correct the drifting line so that the fly floats naturally towards an unsuspecting trout – and above all, fishing as one in a friendship between Bob and Birdie that has spanned over 35 years, with adventures, the Circle Shoe, and above all, fishing as the main reason that drew the Rossetters to the property in 1985. They had moved to Teton Village in the late 70s from Chicago, first part-time, then permanently. Embedding themselves in community life, they made fast friends in the valley – among them a young ski guide, Bob, and his wife Ruthie. Tom was a mentor to Bob, and they spent a lot of time together, fishing, skiing, and going on adventures where they would often get lost or stuck and have to find a way to extricate themselves. “Tom was one of the most fun and lively people I ever met, and I hugely admired him,” Bob remembers. As for the Circle Shoe, Bob notes with a grin, “I was down there fishing as often as they’d let me.” When Birdie found the Circle Shoe Ranch, she fell in love with it for the creeks and the fishing they promised, but Tom thought it was too expensive. However, her persistence paid off, and as Birdie likes to tell the story, she “cried and whined until Tom gave in, and then he thanked [her] for the rest of his life.” As they lived there, they discovered how important it was for wildlife - moose, elk, deer, coyotes, osprey, herons, eagles, otters, migratory birds, and once, even a pair of orphaned mountain lion cubs. Tom was passionate about protecting the character of Jackson Hole, and became involved with the Jackson Hole Land Trust board to help with the Hardeman Barns and Meadows campaign, later serving as board president and emeritus board member. He and Birdie placed the Circle Shoe under easement with the Land Trust in 1989, the same year as the Hardeman Barns and Meadows, and the Fish Creek Ranch, their direct neighbors to the east and south. “Having the Circle Shoe and adjoining properties in easements means that the incredible views and wildlife habitat around Wilson are protected forever. This place has given me and my family so much joy over the years, and it’s deeply important to me to have been able to pass that on for the future,” reflects Birdie.

After Tom passed away in 2005, Bob became Birdie’s main fishing partner. He wanted to make sure that she was still able to get out and do what she loved, and so he makes sure they get to fish together each week that she’s here during fishing season. These days, he does the driving, scouts out friendly water for wading, occasionally ties flies on for her, and gives her a steady arm to lean on in the current. Sometimes, he even gets to remind her to mend – and that it was she who taught him to mend so many years ago. At 83, Birdie still savors the beauty of Jackson Hole, and her love of fishing, of the Circle Shoe, and of Tom remain as strong as ever.

Special thanks to Open Space Council chair Bob Peters for his contributions to this story.
Horses have always been a big part of the Rocking H story. Before Coulter and Margaret Huyler moved with their family to Jackson Hole, they lived in New York City. As a child, Coulter had a pony and would ride uptown on Fifth Avenue towards Central Park, watching out for chickens and pigs when the street turned to dirt past 57th street. He purchased the Bear Paw Ranch, near the mouth of Granite Canyon, on his first trip to Jackson in 1925, then purchased several hundred acres on the west bank of the Snake, south of the Bear Paw, to create the Rocking H Ranch for breeding and raising horses. In 1928, he enlisted Mel Amin to build the red barn which still stands today, and the following year, he had a herd of wild horses brought to the ranch. Jack, who was a young boy at the time, lights up at the memory of the thrilling day spent watching the herd get split into the 40 they would keep, saying, "it was one of the most dramatic days of my life, it was really something".

In the 30s and 40s, the height of activity at the Huyler ranches, the Bear Paw became a dude ranch and the Rocking H bred horses for the U.S. Army Remount Service. Jack recalls that “dude ranching was the best life I could imagine. You could spend all day riding with interesting, nice people. And I fell in love with one of those nice people.” He married Margaret Appenzeller, the daughter of family friends and a Bear Paw guest, in 1962. After Jack returned from Princeton University and service in the U.S. Army, he began a lifelong career of teaching, coaching, and school administration, returning to Jackson in the summers to hay and run the ranch.

Jack and Margaret moved out to the Thacher School in Ojai California in 1949, driving straight from the Bear Paw with their small children and two horses in tow. Alongside teaching English at Thacher, Jack used his experience from the ranch to inspire and build the horseback riding program there, specializing in a form of competitive riding known as gymkhana. He would take the riding team to competitions all over California, often competing -and winning- him-andself. “I was pretty good at horses,” he says matter-of-factly. Jack estimates that as many as 1,000 ribbons decorate the walls of the Rocking H barn - it’s on his list to count someday. Over the years, he’s brought the joy and life lessons of horsemanship to countless students, and although he stopped competing and riding when he turned 85, he still coaches students at Thacher, where he is known affectionately as “Uncle Jack”.

Jack and Margaret bought about 50 acres—the nucleus of the original Rocking H spread—from the Coulter Huyler estate in 1957 after he passed away. The Bear Paw had been sold in 1950 to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., for his private ranch, which later would be donated to Grand Teton National Park. In the 80s, to keep the ranch together for the family, Jack and Margaret began transferring ownership of the ranch to a partnership formed for their three children, John, Ruth, and Stephen, completing the process in 1995. Then, the Huyler family, led by John Jr., made a collective decision to protect the entire Rocking H Ranch through a conservation easement with the Jackson Hole Land Trust.

Jack is quick to answer what the easement means to him: “Nobody can ever come in and mess it up, not even one of my own descendants, if they were so inclined.” He can remember a time before the creation of Grand Teton National Park when billboards “full of all kinds of junk and advertisements” used to line the road between Jackson and Moose. Without the legacy of land conservation in the area, past and present, Jack believes the place would have been exploited to every last inch. His son John adds that “the easement is important to our family on principle. We felt compelled and lucky to be able to contribute to the conservation of the valley and to be a part of protecting the wildlife, history, and land here.” Thanks to the thoughtful way in which the Huyler family has conserved the property, the land is in the process of once again being passed down to the fourth generation -granddaughters Hillary, Allison, and Jesse, who love the ranch and create new memories and stories when they visit it each year.

It’s a matter of pride to Jack that the ranch looks very similar to how it always used to be. And why would he want it to change? From the northwest corner of his porch, his favorite view, he can see clear across to the Tetons and the Sleeping Indian. Like the barn, the inside of the historic main cabin is full of a lifetime and more of memories, including one of Jack’s greatest thrills, “the time [he] walked out in the kitchen and saw four bull moose laying in the front yard, 25 feet from the house.”

Many thanks to Jack Huyler for sharing these special memories and stories with us.
POISON CREEK: A Piece of the Puzzle

An inholding – a privately owned parcel amidst public lands – is like one of those missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that beg to be completed. You notice them as you drive: a cluster of houses in the middle of miles of unbroken forest, or on a topographic map as a white shape in a sea of green. The Poison Creek property was one such inholding, a once privately-owned 37-acre parcel inside the boundaries of the Bridger-Teton National Forest about 20 minutes south of Jackson, the last along Highway 189/191 before it enters the Hoback Canyon to the east.

A special piece of the puzzle, Poison Creek was first identified as a conservation priority in the 1990s. Blanketed by sagebrush and bisected by Poison Creek, the largely undeveloped property was known for offering critical winter habitat for bighorn sheep, elk, and mule deer as well as important habitat for many other species.

Various public agencies had sought to purchase the property for acquisition because of its strategic position and high conservation values, but the cost of the property had been prohibitive. That is, until the Jackson Hole Land Trust stepped in, leading an effort to purchase the property in anticipation of an eventual transfer to the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

Thanks to generous funding support from the Wolfensohn Foundation, Scott Opler Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a conservation lender, and private donors, the parcel was purchased in 1997.

Following its purchase, the Land Trust worked to prepare the site for public access. Members of Boy Scout Troop 268 helped rehabilitate native vegetation on the site and built a trail to connect the Poison Creek trailhead with the adjacent National Forest and Gros Ventre Wilderness.

Poison Creek – concentrating use to minimize impacts on vegetation and wildlife. The trailhead was enjoyed by hikers, hunters, and horseback riders in the summer and fall, with access closed during the winter and spring to protect wintering wildlife.

Over the years, the Bridger-Teton National Forest had pursued funding to purchase Poison Creek from the Land Trust and complete the transfer. This May, they received notice from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – a federal program that receives a percentage of proceeds from offshore oil and gas royalties for the protection of irreplaceable lands and improvement of outdoor recreation opportunities across the nation – that funding would be available for the project. By August, thanks to a partnership between the Jackson Hole Land Trust and The Conservation Fund, Poison Creek officially became part of the National Forest.

"Poison Creek has been a top priority for us for years, so when we found out that the LWCF funding would be available for use in the Greater Yellowstone Area, we moved quickly," said Michael Schrotz, Bridger-Teton National Forest Planning and Lands Staff Officer. Advocates of LWCF funding for the project included the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Snake River Fund, Wild Sheep Foundation, Wyoming Wild Sheep Foundation, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, and Teton County Commissioners.

Negotiating and completing the complex land deals within an expedited time frame was an exciting challenge. The Conservation Fund helped facilitate the swift land transfer, contributing their experience working with private-to-public land transfers at the regional and national levels. "Partnerships have always been essential to the success of this project, and we are incredibly grateful to The Conservation Fund, the Bridger-Teton National Forest – as well as our original partners – for all that they contributed to see this LWCF project to completion and fulfill the original intent of this conservation project," reflects Laurie Andrews, executive director of the Jackson Hole Land Trust.

What’s next for Poison Creek, now that it’s been colored Forest Service green on the map? To the public, the transition from Land Trust management should be seamless. From the management side of things, it has now become part of the 3.4 million acres of public lands managed by the Bridger-Teton National Forest and guided by BTNF’s Forest Plan, which means that wildlife habitat will remain unfragmented and public access for a variety of users has been ensured.

The Jackson Hole Land Trust plans to commit the funds from the Poison Creek sale towards priority Forest Service inholding conservation projects in the 18 million-acre Greater Yellowstone Area – other puzzle pieces that we hope to help color green. Like Poison Creek, such projects have incredible value for keeping this important ecosystem intact and for inspiring partnerships.

The Poison Creek View22 painting session was a special outing for artist Jennifer Hoffman: she and her daughter Amelia are well-connected to the area, as they live south of Jackson and visit the trail frequently. Through the View22 project, she discovered the Land Trust’s role in protecting Poison Creek and providing public access. From a vantage point up the hillside, in a small grove of aspens, Jennifer set up shop to face a view across the Hoback River to a small pastoral valley of its own, Bryant Flats, where several JHLT easements also forever protect the scenic views of the area.
Clayton Verheul carries generations of outdoor traditions and ethics in his two year old soul. Like his father Ben, and his grandfather Tom, Clayton is happiest outside. The Verheuls come from a long line of men who made their living with boots on the ground. Tom’s great granddad was a market hunter in Minnesota who instilled in his sons the principle, “honor the game.” Tom lives by that code, passing it on to his children, and now to his grandchildren.

It’s an attitude about land stewardship which serves Ben and Tom well in their jobs as managers of easement protected ranches in the Wind River Valley. Tom and Ruth Verheul manage the Three Spear Ranch in the foothills of the Wind River Range south of Dubois. The 1,200-acre ranch was has been protected since 1995, and is a haven for wildlife, particularly in winter. Little Warm Springs Creek runs through the ranch, a source of open water even in the most frigid winters. The sagebrush slopes, sheltered draws, and irrigated meadows provide plentiful forage. “Of course I like seeing the elk and deer and antelope”, Tom says, “but waterfowl and birds have always been special. My favorite wildlife on the ranch has been the avocet brood this year. They’re not common, and I’m lucky to have a chance to watch them just doing what avocet families do.” Ben nods, adding, “It’s an honor, a privilege, to care for a permanently protected piece of property.”

Ben would know. Like his father, and grandfathers, Ben is a keen wildlife observer, an avid birder, and a disciplined hunter. Two years ago Ben dropped everything to rescue a young osprey tangled in power lines and fences, is the wildlife acts like they’re supposed to?”

The osprey rescue took place on Ring Lake Ranch where Ben is the caretaker, his wife Amanda is the business manager, and where Clayton and his baby sister Dayla are growing up. A stone’s throw from their cabin on the lakeshore is the compost where Ben’s parents fell in love with the valley on their honeymoon in the early 70s and decided to make the move.

The 420 acres of Ring Lake Ranch were protected by an easement in 1995. It too is critical winter habitat for a long list of wildlife, but is particularly important to the Whiskey Mountain big horned sheep herd which winters on the adjacent Wyoming Game and Fish property.

Ben’s voice carries the conviction of men who live close to the land, observe wildlife daily, and honor the game.

I feel honored to be addressing you as the new President of the Jackson Hole Land Trust. A stroke of luck brought me to Jackson Hole in August of 1965 for my first teaching job, which I had accepted, sight unseen, as a fresh graduate of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. It was quite a sight to behold—this valley—and I can still remember the feeling of driving over Togwotee Pass and looking out at the Tetons and these wide open spaces for the very first time.

Since then, I’ve made Jackson Hole home. Together with my wife Jeannie, I’ve raised two daughters here, taught math at the high school, and been known to many as “Coach Staehr.” This landscape—the trees and streams and mountains—have been a part of every season of every year I’ve spent in this valley, and I feel very close to this place. I spent many years getting to know it as a fishing guide on the Crescent H Ranch, I hunted in the area for years, and I’ve spent countless days skiing, hiking, and camping in this valley. It is a place that I care very deeply about.

By another stroke of good fortune, I was asked to join the Land Trust board in 2008, a few years after I’d retired from teaching. It has been an incredible experience to be a part of this organization and learn about the many ways in which land conservation is accomplished. Like the art of the View 21 project featured in this issue, my involvement with the Land Trust has given me yet another way to see the people and places of this valley. This is a phenomenal place, where a culture of land protection and community giving has guaranteed that many of open spaces that I saw when I first descended into the valley continue to be open, beautiful, and wild. The opportunity to give back to this place is truly an honor, and I look forward to working with the outstanding staff, board, and supporters of the Land Trust to ensure that this legacy continues into the future.

Fred Staehr

FROM THE PRESIDENT
A CELEBRATION OF COMMUNITY

Thank you to the over 700 community members that attended our 33rd Annual Picnic this year, held at the beautiful Bar BC Ranch open space. The celebration was a memorable evening, with music by Anne and Pete Sibley, booths by TravelStorysGPS and Rendezvous Park, a live raptor demonstration by the Teton Raptor Center, a kids’ art activity by the Art Association of Jackson Hole, a Wyoming Whiskey tasting booth, and painting demonstrations by the artists of Trio Fine Art. Kathryn Turner spoke on behalf of the View22 project, and we were fortunate to hear stories and remarks from David MacKenzie and Carolyn MacKenzie Stimmel as they accepted a gift in recognition of a legacy of conservation at the Red Rock Ranch.

Special thanks to Wells Fargo Bank for their contribution in support of this year’s picnic.

Save the Date for next year: Sunday, August 10th

Keep up with our work and sign up for our email list at jhlandtrust.org