



| 2025 Park County Open Lands Newsletter

Open Lands



Dear Supporters

In less than three years, local Park County Open Lands staff have met with more than 140 landowners at kitchen tables across the county and worked closely with 18 families in pursuit of a shared vision: a Park County full of life — both wild and domestic — where rural livelihoods and wildlife can thrive for generations to come.

These 18 families are more than partners. Because conservation easements can take years to complete, we’ve grown together as friends. And as Park County Open Lands continues to grow, these families will form the main branches of our land trust family tree.

Our work grows from relationships, because every conservation easement begins with people who care deeply about their land. And through this work, one truth has become clear: The land



itself is kin. Like family, if we care for it, it will care for us. As one local rancher put it, “You’re just a steward for your lifetime. You just well do the best you can.”

The land gives back every day — a quiet river bend, the smell of sagebrush after a summer shower, a herd of mule deer grazing in a green hayfield. It is why so many of us call this place home. And protecting it is why Park County Open Lands was founded by our dedicated advisory council, rooted right here in communities across the county.

Together with our landowner partners, we have completed four conservation easements, protecting 725 acres of ranchlands, barley fields, wetlands, and sagebrush shrublands, as well as more than 3.5 miles of rivers and streams, and over 500 acres of crucial mule deer habitat.

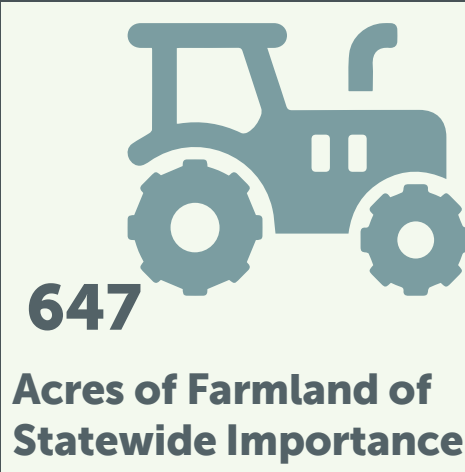
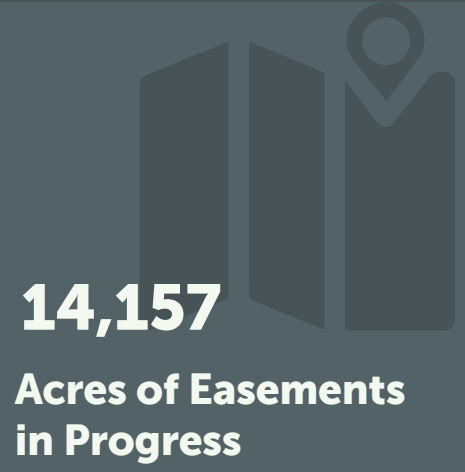
Looking ahead, we are working with 12 more families to safeguard an additional 14,157 acres of farms, ranches, and riverbanks from Sunlight to the Southfork and Wapiti to Powell. With most of these projects already funded, the pace of conservation here is accelerating.

And that is thanks to your partnership. Every acre protected is a promise — that future generations will inherit a Park County as full of life as the one we know today. We invite you to continue walking alongside us: come to an event, share our work with a neighbor, or make a gift to keep this momentum going. However you choose to be involved, you are part of this growing family, and together we can ensure that Park County’s land, water, and way of life will endure.

With Gratitude,

Alex Few
Park County Open Lands Director

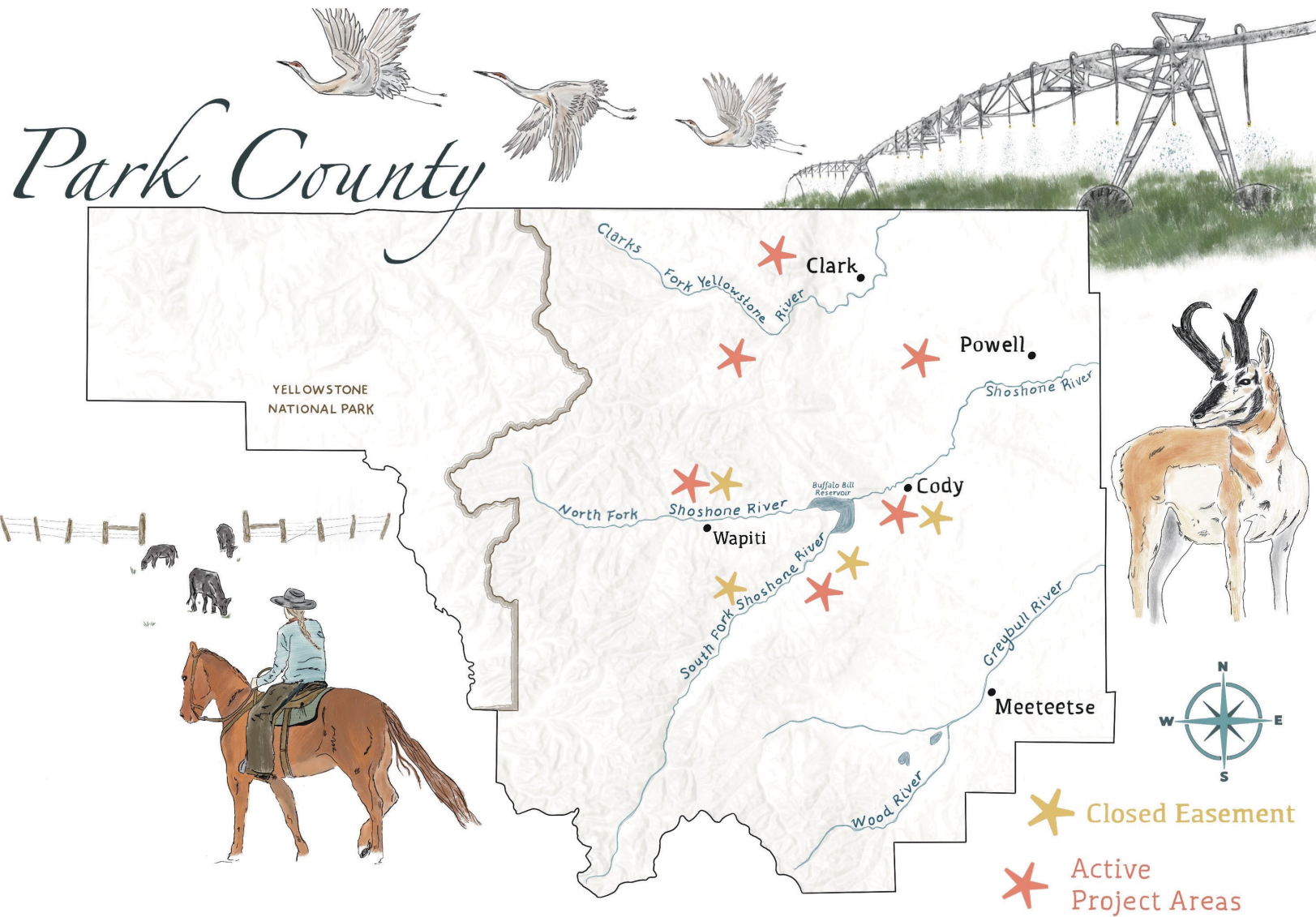
By the Numbers



Three New Easements

In the past year, Park County Open Lands has partnered with three local families to complete our latest conservation easements, protecting a total of 362 acres. From the North Fork to the South Fork and Sage Creek, these conserved acres represent a lasting step toward permanently protecting Park County’s iconic open space and the agricultural land base and irreplaceable wildlife habitat it supports.

Whether 100 acres or 1,000 acres, privately held conservation easements ensure connectivity in an otherwise fragmented puzzle of different ownerships between our parks and other public lands. Park County Open Lands is proud to bring together these landowners (and many others in progress!) to achieve landscape and community-scale conservation.



“We wanted to guarantee it stayed in agriculture. The riverfront, views, and wildlife make it vulnerable to subdivision.” -Mark and Jamie Ohl, Ole Wiley Conservation Easement Landowners

Sage Creek Wetlands Conservation Easement

132 Acres | Protected by the Park County Open Lands Program of the JHLT Since November 2024

The Sage Creek Wetlands Conservation Easement protects a rare and ecologically rich landscape just outside Cody. This unique area features sub-irrigated wetlands, a pond, irrigated hay meadows, and a long stretch of Sage Creek. Its diverse mix of vegetation, water features, and topography creates critical habitat for migratory birds, shorebirds, waterfowl, songbirds, and large mammals. As nearby development expands, this easement preserves essential habitat connectivity and protects a valuable wetland ecosystem. The easement supports long-term biodiversity, safeguards water resources, and helps maintain Park County’s iconic open space.



Patchwork Place Conservation Easement

84 Acres | Protected by the Park County Open Lands Program of the JHLT Since December 2024

Patchwork Place Conservation Easement protects a landscape of sagebrush shrublands, creek corridors, and rocky outcroppings along the North Fork. This area serves as a critical winter range for the Cody elk herd and the Upper Shoshone mule deer herd, ensuring connectivity remains between summer and winter ranges. It also provides habitat for moose in the spring, summer, and fall, while supporting birds like the sage thrasher and Brewer’s sparrow. As the organization’s first project in the North Fork, Patchwork Place lays the groundwork for future conservation of agricultural lands and key wildlife migration corridors.



Ole Wiley Conservation Easement

146 Acres | Protected by the Park County Open Lands Program of the JHLT Since May 2025

The Ole Wiley Conservation Easement protects productive farmland and wildlife habitat, consisting of hay and barley fields and half a mile of the South Fork of the Shoshone River. The landscape supports a range of wildlife, including elk, mule deer, nesting birds, and migrating grizzly bears. This diverse property reflects a balance between agriculture and conservation, ensuring the land remains open and working. By placing a conservation easement on their land, the Ohl family is safeguarding the South Fork’s agricultural character and vital wildlife habitat for future generations.



Stepping Stones of Life

As a land trust program, Park County Open Lands’ mission is permanent land conservation. In conservation circles, “landscape-scale conservation” often refers to conserving vast acreages and protecting big blocks of land. Those are critical wins. But connectivity isn’t only about size. It’s about how species — large and small — move through, use, and depend on the landscape.

For some species, like pronghorn or mule deer, connectivity means miles of open range linking seasonal ranges. For other species, it’s something more subtle: a chain of wetlands stitched together across valleys and foothills. To migratory birds, these wetlands function as stepping stones — refueling stations that sustain them on journeys stretching from the Arctic to Mexico. To amphibians, they are nurseries. To insects and pollinators, they are grocery stores providing critical food from diverse flowering plants.

The Beck Lake Complex — Beck Lake, Alkali Lake, Buchanan Lake, New Cody, and Markham Reservoirs — illustrates this role. In a high desert ecosystem in the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains, open water can be scarce, yet these wetlands serve as critical stopover sites for migratory waterfowl. “We know how important these wetlands and lakes are because of citizen scientists,” said Corey Anco, curator of the Draper Natural History Museum at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

For 20 years, volunteers have been recording the abundance of shorebirds, waterbirds, and waterfowl there. Each spring and fall, species such as American avocets (*pictured*), northern pintails, and sandhill cranes depend on the Beck Lake Complex as a seasonal stopover. Shorebirds in particular rely on shallow waters to feed and rebuild energy reserves before continuing migrations that may stretch from Arctic breeding grounds to wintering areas as far south as Central and South America.

What began with the Meadowlark Audubon chapter has continued thanks to dedicated local residents. Today, 20 years of data they’ve collected provides a window into long-term trends, and a new group, led by Sue Consolo-Murphy, is restarting the Audubon chapter to ensure data collection efforts will continue. The original Beck

Lake Complex Bird Survey Protocol put it simply: “Data gathered may be used to analyze impacts on bird populations and possible need for protection.” Protecting smaller parcels — especially those with wetlands — can play an outsized role in supporting migratory birds and local biodiversity.

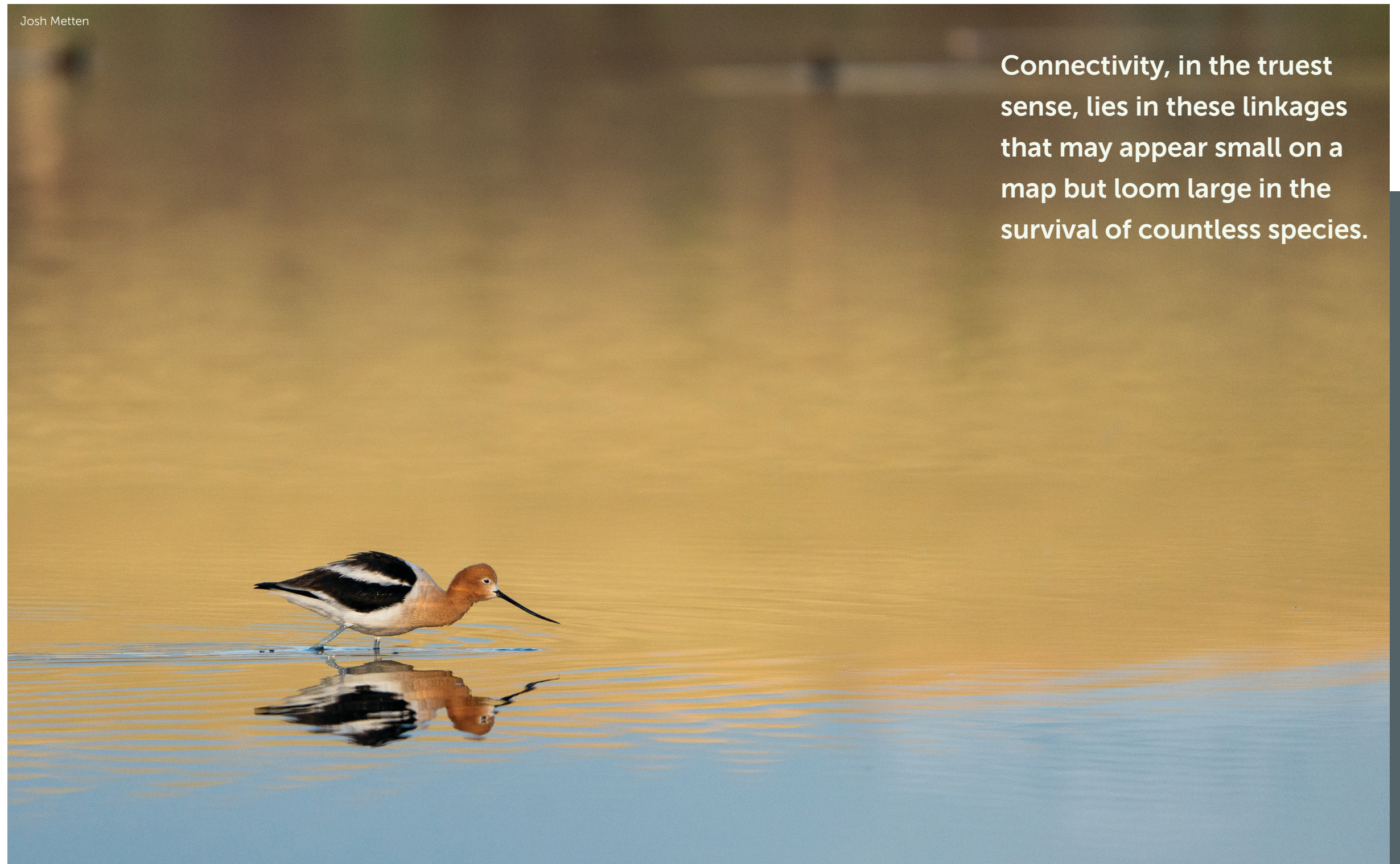
These pockets provide critical refuge for migratory waterfowl and songbirds: a place to rest, to feed, or to nest along long journeys. Connectivity, in the truest sense, lies in these linkages that may appear small on a map but loom large in the survival of countless species.

In a world increasingly crowded with subdivisions and the activity they bring, we are fortunate in Park County to have functional blocks of habitat, even amid spreading rural residential sprawl. Their habitat value may only grow as the surrounding lands are developed. Connectivity, then, is not just the “big picture” of large blocks of conserved land — it’s also the small, seemingly disconnected places that, when linked, often by flight, make the

whole system work.

Visionary landowners are ensuring their acreage remains open, productive, and alive. The first four easements completed with Park County Open Lands range in size from 84 to 364 acres, and together these easements protect more than 3.5 miles of rivers and streams. Each of these properties provides a refuge for wildlife because of the water they safeguard, and because landowners chose to keep them intact for generations to come. Protecting these pieces ensures that the chorus of birds in the cottonwoods, the cranes in the barley field, and even the deer in the pasture remain part of our shared landscape for generations to come.

Josh Metten



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Water Makes It Work

Packing up their fourth-generation farm and moving north to Powell, Wyoming, the Stromberger family didn't let encroaching development end their farming legacy. Windsor, Colorado, sandwiched on the Front Range between Fort Collins and Denver, was an agriculture-based community where Harold Stromberger grew up and managed a farm operation he intended to eventually pass on to his son, Adam. Unfortunately, surrounding development and inaccessible water caused the family to look elsewhere.

When Harold and his wife, Debbie, first visited Powell, it reminded them of what the Front Range used to be like. "We started coming in this direction, and we noticed all the farm ground and thought, wow," Debbie says.

One of the distinct differences between these communities is their water laws. In Windsor, Colorado, water rights can be sold separately from the land. "I farmed a lot of places that the water had been sold off of, so I was having to rent that back. And it was getting expensive to do that," Adam recalls. "And now, from what I've heard, since we've left, it's impossible to get any water rented back, because the cities need it all now."

While some might respond to encroaching development by ending their farm operation altogether, farming has been the only path for the Strombergers. When faced with the choice of doing something other than farming, Adam stands firm that it was "not an option."

In 2020, Harold and Debbie moved to Powell to continue farming in an area that would be supportive of agricultural producers. After finishing the harvest on their leased land, Adam and his wife, Katie, (*pictured*) followed. Now the four of them live on and operate their new farm growing corn, beans, sugar beets, and barley. Although they considered moving to other neighboring states, they decided on Park County, Wyoming, to uphold many of their previous farming practices with better local support.

"The availability of water in Windsor, Colorado, was a lot shorter than what we experience here in Powell, Wyoming, too," Katie compares. "We only had a couple of months of water down there in Windsor, compared to April through October here."

The Wyoming Constitution and state law declare that rights to water "shall attach to the land." Colorado's water law

treats water rights as a distinct property interest that can be bought, sold, or transferred separately from the land, leading to the "Buy and Dry" bleeding of water from agricultural lands for city expansion.

The decision to move wasn't just about water. With development surrounding the farm, it was difficult to drive a tractor down the road. "My biggest nightmare in the whole wide world is to see what happened to us down there happen here," Debbie states. "To just see it totally enclose in development and have absolutely no way and no power to stop it."

Encroaching development decreased the number of agricultural producers in Windsor, which

negatively impacted the Strombergers' sense of community. But with a stronger agricultural community in Powell, the Strombergers can truly belong and participate in their community. "You can usually walk in anywhere here and see somebody you know in the ag community. Down there, you don't know anybody anymore," Adam says.

Through resources like conservation easements and intentional succession planning, agricultural producers can take steps to help protect their land from subdivision and development. Park County Open Lands is committed to protecting and stewarding the landscapes of Park County for current and future generations by working with local agricultural producers.



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Leading Locally

Park County Open Lands is led by an advisory council of long-time residents who ensure all conservation work is rooted in local values.

Park County Open Lands is thrilled to welcome two new members to the advisory council, Donnie Gillett and Chuck Walker.

Donnie grew up on a farm and ranch on Heart Mountain. After graduating from high school, he married his wife, Dana, and the couple farmed for 10 years. He later left farming to work in environmental cleanup on Superfund sites before moving into the oil and gas industry. He founded an underground drilling business and sold it to a pipeline company, where he went on to serve as construction manager for the pipeline division.

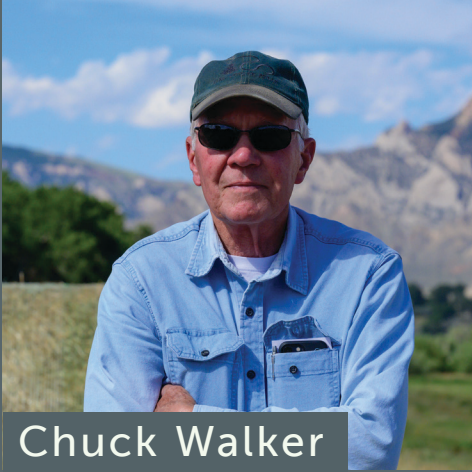
Now retired, Donnie enjoys time with his wife, children, and grandchildren. Retirement has also given him the chance to build a small ranch on the river in Powell, spend time at the family's cabin in Crandall, fishing and exploring trails, and pursue hobbies of golfing and helping friends with seeding and harvesting.



Donnie Gillett

Chuck's inspiration for preserving open space in Park County stems from his personal experience of watching subdivisions surround and eventually consume his family's ranch in Texas. After selling the last remnants of that ranch, Chuck used the proceeds to purchase a property on the Southfork 30 years ago.

He feels a deep obligation to preserve this open space for future generations and for the people who travel from around the world to see these remarkable animals. His Texas family ranch motivated him to ensure that his Wyoming ranch would not face the same fate. Chuck and his wife, Marilyn, placed an easement on their property in 2024, which they believe is the best way to ensure their inherited legacy continues.



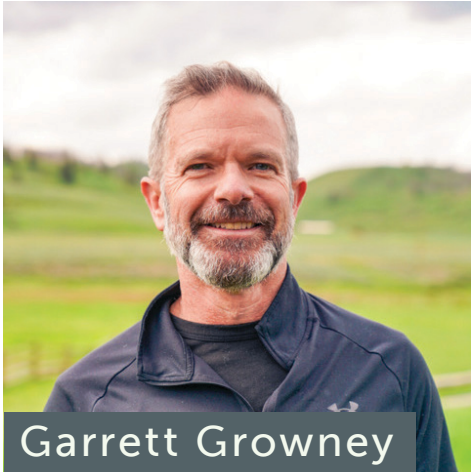
Chuck Walker



Jarren Kuipers
Advisory Council Chair



Mark Fisher
JHLT Board Member



Garrett Growney
JHLT Board Member



Buzzy Hassrick



Allen Hogg



Tiffany Manion



Abby Scott



Kelly Spiering



Anne Young

| Donor Spotlight

Anne Young

Anne Young, a true champion of conservation work in Wyoming, serves as a Park County Open Lands Advisory Council Member, holds a conservation easement, and is a committed donor to conservation causes. After rehabilitating Sage Creek Ranch to wondrous wildlife habitat, Anne knew she wanted to take the next steps to protect it in perpetuity with a conservation easement.

"I'm so glad we can keep this small patch of land open. It's such an important riparian area for all the wildlife," Anne says.

Finding involvement on all levels, Anne ensures that her impact will be felt in Park County for generations to come.



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Call

(307) 202-8762

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PO Box 266

Cody, WY 82414

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Suites 3163-3168

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PO Box 266

Cody, WY 82414

Erika Quick

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