

Ranchers create ponds, wetlands in Owyhee County in partnership with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

By Steve Stuebner

In the arid West, water is key to the survival of everything. That's why early-day pioneers staked out the river-bottoms when they settled the West. It was all about water.

In recent years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been partnering with ranchers in Owyhee County to create more ponds and wetlands on private lands.



Wetlands workshop participants included Owyhee County ranchers, Art Talsma of the Nature Conservancy and Dustin Miller, administrator of the Governor's Office of Species Conservation. Below, a Columbia spotted frog.



"Initially, the project was focused on Columbia spotted frogs, which were a candidate species, but we recognized that many species would benefit from the creation of wetlands," says Kristin Lohr, a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho, in Boise.

"These wetlands provide habitat for not just Columbia spotted frogs, but also other animals such as amphibians, birds, bats, deer and antelope."

"As we're standing here, we see red-winged blackbirds in the cat-tails, and we heard a Pacific chorus frog calling from the edge of the wetland. So animals are already moving in and using these wetlands."

The Fish and Wildlife Service wants to create more habitat

for birds and wildlife -- that's a key part of their mission. But Tom Biebighauser, a national authority on wetlands who taught a workshop in Owyhee County, said the projects can have a dual purpose.

"The message he gave is we can do both. You can create some wildlife-friendly improvements on your property, and at the same time, make an improvement for your operation," says John Romero, co-owner of the ZX Ranch with his wife, Cathy, and the Richards family.

Owyhee County Rancher Chris Black dug a series of ponds in two different locations to create meadow habitat for wildlife and cattle.



One of the ponds on the ZX Ranch enlarged an existing wetland to create more wildlife habitat.



This is one of many frog ponds that have been created on Jerry Hoagland's ranch, creating more habitat for Columbia spotted frogs and other wildlife.

"I wanted to create the meadow habitat because water is so scarce in the West, and water is critical to life," Black says. "So if I can create a meadow habitat, I can create a place for sage grouse to come in, pronghorn to come in, all wildlife to use, plus my cows have a habitat they can use. So it's good for everything in the system."

During a wetlands field workshop held by Tom Biebighauser in the Reynolds Creek area of Owyhee County, they dug a new wetlands pond on John and Cathy Romero's ranch. Through the Fish and Wildlife Service's "Partners for Fish and Wildlife" program, 50% cost-share funds are available to assist with the cost of pond construction.

"With the help of the Fish and Wildlife Service, that cost-share, particularly for any farmer or rancher who's interested, it makes it an attractive feature," John Romero says.

Biebighauser recommends a shallow pond design to maximize on wildlife habitat. Kristin Lohr explains.

"The way to do it and have more wildlife, is you get away from the cereal bowl and go with a satellite dish, with more gently sloping edges, and it provides more nesting cover and hiding cover for animals," Lohr says. "Plus, you have open water, so things like bats that like to take water on the wing, they have access to water."



Chris Black has built a series of ponds in the Toy Meadows area for wildlife, cattle and water storage. The ponds help sub-irrigate the meadow, growing tall grass for cattle, while also providing habitat for frogs and other wildlife.



Wetlands expert Tom Biebighauser talks about the design features of the Hoagland pond in the Reynolds Creek area. The pond is located near a sage grouse lek, and it also will be valuable for waterfowl and other critters.

"The population is gradually growing. We counted over 120 juveniles and I don't know how many adults in that pond. A beaver turned 4 small ponds into one large pond. That was absolutely amazing! That's wow! We're finding more frogs and we'll help keep it off the (endangered species) list."

Chris Black agrees. "It becomes important to have different types of habitat. We need to have shallow water, and we need to have deep water for frogs. The shallow water is where they breed. The deep water is where they go to escape. The shallow water is where most of the insects thrive."

Rancher Jerry Hoagland has dug many ponds in upper Reynolds Creek for spotted frogs in partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"We dug about 20 ponds for the Columbia spotted frog to their design, and we've been monitoring them for the last three years," Hoagland says.

During the wetlands workshop, Hoagland made some more land available on his Dry Creek ranch for a pond.



Art Talsma of the Nature Conservancy thinks the Hoagland pond will create valuable habitat for wildlife and livestock.

"Reynolds Creek is kind of famous, its watershed has been well-studied, but there aren't many pondage places in this stretch of land," Talsma says. "The first species that I think of as benefitting is sage grouse. We have a sage grouse lek above here in the distance, we have sagebrush in the background, that's where they nest, but where they raise their broods is next to these wet meadows and small wetlands."

"And of course waterfowl come into this," he continues. "Waterfowl in the Owyhees migrate through and need a high-energy source of food when they're passing through, and that's what shallow wetlands give you. Sometimes you'll see thousands of ducks landing on that, feeding intensely, and then heading up to Canada."



California quail, pronghorn antelope, red-winged blackbirds and bats are among the species that benefit from wetlands.

The Romero family enjoys seeing waterfowl and other wildlife using the ponds as well.

"We are in tune with the wildlife scene," John Romero says. "And we do like wildlife around us. We have sandhill cranes, lots of waterfowl, pheasants, quail, badgers, coyotes, Canada geese, a variety of songbirds and things like that."

Chris Black has created pond habitat for wildlife and as a place for his cattle to drink. But his overall objective has been to create wet meadow habitat for multiple species. "I try to manage holistically, which means I try to consider everything when I manage," he says. "I'm managing for wildlife, I'm managing for recreation, I'm managing for all of the things that are out there."

Another reason that Black set up his ponds was to sub-irrigate the meadows. "I wanted them to leak, I wanted them to recharge the system," Black says. "In the early spring, when we have runoff in this particular area, we



Sage grouse like to raise their young in wet meadows, where the chicks feed on insects and grow up quickly.

have 3-5 days of heavy runoff, an immense amount of water coming down. But then we don't have any water. So, my idea was to hold that water in the system, longer, so it can build these meadows and recharge the aquifer, instead of running off."

Black brings his cattle into the Camas Creek meadows in the spring when the meadows are full of water. "It enables me to use pastures more effectively, and it enables me to time my use a lot more effectively," he says. "I can use the pastures if they have water in them, use them for a short amount of time, and move onto another one."

In Toy Valley, Black grazes his cattle here in the fall, after it has been rested all summer. "As you can see, everything is at seed ripe and at its biological potential here. As you can see from the tall (head-high) grass."

All of the ranchers who have worked on enhancing wetlands recommend it for other landowners. A key aspect is that it's much quicker and easier to make conservation improvements on private lands.

"Especially here in Owyhee County, water is the key thing," Romero says. "In the West, particularly in the drier parts of the West, the valuable lands for wildlife and livestock are on the private ground. So to make improvements for wildlife, a lot of people are just discovering that if we can help out the private landowner, then we can also help wildlife."

Indeed, a recent public opinion poll conducted by the University of Idaho for the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, found that 84 percent of the public recognizes that private ranchlands provide important wild-life habitat. On a scale of 1-7, 68 percent rated the value of private farms and ranches for wildlife as being a 5 or higher.

"The more habitat we can create, the better we are off in the long run," Black says. "More habitat for wildlife, the more profit you can make from cattle if you can enhance a meadow like this, or have a clean drink of water for your cow. Yeah I would recommend it for other ranchers."

"I think it's positive for everybody," Hoagland adds.

Steve Stuebner is the writer and producer of Life on the Range, an educational project sponsored by the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission.