WELCOME!

The RGBRT fosters cooperation in Colorado's Rio Grande basin through support of multi-purpose projects that help us manage, protect, and sustain water use for today and into the future. The Roundtable exists to make stuff happen! Check out our website: http://rgbrt.org/

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Upcoming Events:

• RiGHT Headwaters Hoedown & Cornhole Throwdown- Oct 1

The Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) is hosting its second annual fundraiser at the Colorado Farm Brewery. The event will feature live music, local food, and a cornhole tournament! Click here for tickets and more event info!

• RGBRT Meeting- Oct. 11

The next RGBRT meeting will be held on October 11th at the Rio Grande Water Conservation District Office, located at 8805 Independence Way in Alamosa, from 2- 4 PM, with an Executive Committee Meeting starting at 1 PM. Visit the RGBRT website for Zoom link to attend virtually!

• RGHRP's Rio Reels- Oct. 28

Save the date! The Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project (RGHRP) will have its annual film festival fundraiser as a hybrid event. Visit the event page for the latest event information!

• RGBRT Meeting- Nov 8

The November RT meeting will be on the 8th at the Rio Grande Water Conservation District Office, located at 8805 Independence Way in Alamosa, from 2- 4 PM, with an Executive Committee Meeting starting at 1 PM. The Education Committee will meet at 11 AM at the San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District Office, located at 623 4th St. in Alamosa. Visit the RGBRT website for Zoom links to attend virtually!

The Roundtable and Education Committee meet on the second Tuesday of each month. Visit rgbrt.org for meeting times and virtual attendance options.

Innovative land management benefits Valley bird populations

By Peyton Valentine

The waters of the San Luis Valley are a crucial part of life for the people and wildlife that call it home. Particularly tied to these water sources are the multitudes of bird species that reside in the area year-round, seasonally, or even just briefly during migration. As conditions become drier and water scarcer, collaboration and creative solutions on all fronts have grown to make the most of the available water supply. This is particularly relevant for riparian and wetland habitat for bird populations.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) plays an important role in this effort by managing a number of riparian and wetland areas, including the Blanca Wetlands, McIntire/Simpson property and the Rio Grande Natural Area (RGNA). The BLM has many ongoing riparian and wetland habitat improvement projects, including riparian exclosures and fencing on the RGNA to protect portions of these delicate riparian habitats for nesting.

Unsurprisingly, water availability is a concern for even healthy habitats, which is why the BLM uses its water rights to irrigate these lands to mimic natural wetting and drying processes and provide habitat when species need it the most, whether for nesting or migration or other life cycle needs. In addition to the management of its own lands, collaborations with groups such as the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project and others are improving willow habitat along riverbanks, benefitting bird species such as the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. Though there are challenges, the future is hopeful.

Sue Swift-Miller, who has worked as a wildlife biologist in BLM Colorado's San Luis Valley Field Office for about 20 years, says, "It's really exciting getting to work with such great partners and to be providing habitat for these species."
Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), like the BLM, works both independently and with partners to protect and enhance habitat for the benefit of birds. Collaboration with other entities in the Valley has been foundational to CPW's efforts thus far, most notably with Ducks Unlimited and Wetland Dynamics.

These two private organizations help CPW acquire funding for projects, research bird populations, and manage water use in riparian and wetland areas. CPW also works with farmers and ranchers on and near riparian and wetland areas, helping educate and inform them about practices that are beneficial to their production as well as wildlife. While this effort has presented a certain level of difficulty, the results work to benefit everyone involved.

Tony Aloia, wildlife technician with CPW, says, "Seeing [private landowners] sometimes progress away from what has always been to what is obviously a better way is pretty rewarding … to hear your message being heard."

Rotational grazing, preventing overgrazing, and other such practices have helped these landowners get more production value from their land, while simultaneously contributing to wildlife and species preservation through increased suitable habitat and less disturbed nesting periods.

Sometimes these collaborations and projects can be challenging as well, but CPW's staff enjoy the work they do and see the benefits it offers.

Tyler Cerny, who works as a district wildlife manager for CPW, says, "My favorite part of [the job] is seeing the collaboration and people in the community … come together for one common goal, and that is wildlife."
Aloia added that one of his favorite aspects of this work is "seeing the wildlife, and seeing your work actually have some impact."

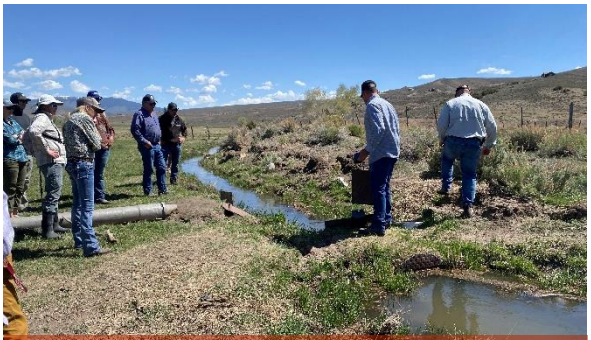
While changes in climate and water supply challenges will continue to be pressing issues, the management of riparian and wetland habitat in the Rio Grande Basin is adapting to meet them through collaboration and innovation.

The presence of wetlands is critical for migratory bird species such as the Greater Sandhill Crane (pictured above) and White Faced Ibis (pictured below). Photo Credits: Cary Aloia

RGBRT Hosts Educational Basin Tours *By Erin McWilliams*

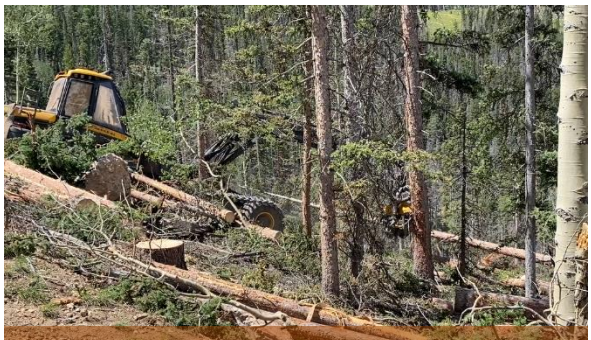
Nothing beats learning through seeing and experiencing on a field trip, especially with free lunch involved! Through the Rio Grande Basin Roundtable's (RGBRT) Community Education Initiative Grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board, the RGBRT has been expanding education efforts through day tours to showcase the innovative water projects being implemented in watersheds around the state. To date, the RGBRT has taken community members and water professionals alike on tours of the Gunnison Basin, Trinchera Blanca Ranch, and the Culebra Watershed to highlight the creative ways water users, conservationists, and recreators are collaborating to preserve, manage, and restore our natural resources. Read below to get a recap on tour activities and takeaways!

The tour of the Gunnison Basin included visiting Cranor Ranch, where automated flood irrigation technology, called auto-tarps, and Long Range Low Power Area Networks (LoRa) Stations have been implemented to optimize flood irrigation operations. The auto-tarp and LoRa systems are connected to an electronic device, which provides soil moisture levels and water flow rates to irrigators, as well as the power to automatically close gates for flood irrigation. This cuts down on time spent in the field and reduces overwatering, in turn increasing efficiency while still providing important wetland habitat. The next stop highlighted the improvements at the Trampe Ranch diversion, which help mitigate trash and sediment build-up and increase efficiencies. In the afternoon, Colorado Parks and Wildlife gave an overview of its partnership projects with Trout Unlimited (TU) to improve wildlife habitat in the Gunnison Basin, and Colorado Agricultural Water Alliance described its edge-of-field water quality data collection program. This initiative aims to better quantify the effects of conservation practices on water quality and quantity by monitoring water parameters before and after agricultural application. The tour concluded at Tomichi Creek, a stream supporting Rio Grande cutthroat trout, where TU described their efforts to reintroduce native cutthroat to streams across the Basin, and underlined the importance of suitable habitat for these species to survive.

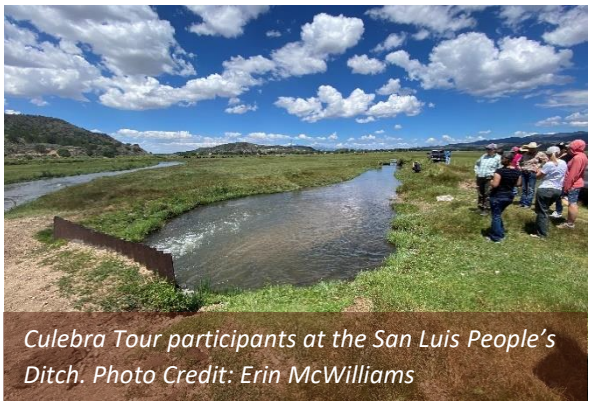


Automated irrigation demonstration in the Gunnison Basin. Photo Credit: Erin McWilliams

The Trinchera Blanca Ranch (Ranch) tour highlighted the history of the ranch, which includes 172,000 acres protected in perpetuity by U.S.Fish and Wildlife Service and Colorado Open Lands (COL) conservation easements, as well as the adaptive management strategies in place to best conserve the land and ecology. Participants witnessed the logging of dead trees, killed by beetle infestations, to reduce crowding and mitigate wildfire severity, giving way to healthier and more resilient forests. The cut logs are measured and sorted by a mechanical harvester, with larger logs sent off to Blanca Forestry Products' sawmill and smaller material used for firewood or fencing materials. In fact, some of this wood material was repurposed to enclose young aspen groves on the Ranch, protecting them from browsing elk and allowing for healthier regrowth, a critical aspect of bolstering forest diversity and resiliency. In addition, the Ranch is employing strategies to utilize the potential of animals to help manage the land. This includes implementing new technology that offers increased control and flexibility for grazing management. The technology allows livestock managers to outline grazing areas on a map application and, with collars placed on livestock, electrically enforce those boundaries. Ranch staff are also working to install temporary wood and mud structures at key points along tributary streams to mimic and encourage beaver activity, which facilitates riparian and wet meadow restoration, reduces sediment inputs, bolsters aquatic habitat, and enhances watershed health.

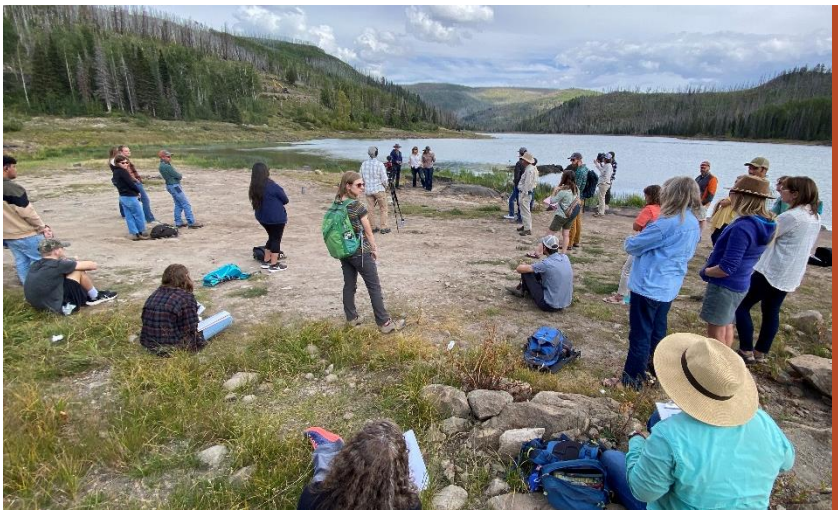


Mechanical harvester cutting and measuring logs at Trinchera Blanca Ranch. Photo Credit: Erin McWilliams



Culebra Tour participants at the San Luis People's Ditch. Photo Credit: Erin McWilliams

The Culebra Basin tour began at the Costilla County Conservancy District (CCCD) office, where COL gave an overview of acequia history and its acequia initiative. Acequias, meaning "water bearer" in Arabic, were irrigation ditches used by the Hispano settlers who established the town of San Luis in 1851. Land was distributed in segments along the Rio Culebra, called vara strips, which extend for miles perpendicular to the river to allow for mixed land use and equal access to water. From above, these strips resemble ribs, or costillas in Spanish, which inspired the county's name. *(Continued on page 4)*



Participants gather at Shaw Reservoir for the Basin Tour of the Rio Grande. Photo Credit: Erin McWilliams

(From page 3) Through efforts of the CCCD, acequias became a legal entity in Colorado in 2009 under the Acequia Recognition Law, which grants acequias the power to incorporate and qualify for loans and grants while also preserving traditional practices and identity. These practices include distributing water equitably in times of drought through a shared scarcity approach, maintaining a one-landowner-one-vote voting system, and allowing a right of first refusal to sell water rights along the acequia. To supplement this, COL's acequia initiative works with the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association to conserve acequia traditions and customs by facilitating legal support, conservation easements, infrastructure improvements, education initiatives, and watershed assessments. This included assisting the CCCD and Tailwater Limited in completing the Upper Culebra Watershed Assessment, which was drafted over the course of this past year. Tailwater Limited presented on the process of developing and completing this report, which involved data collection and survey information to characterize the conditions of the basin, and also identify needs and priority projects to improve infrastructure, water management, and watershed health. The final stop brought tour participants to the San Luis People's Ditch acequia diversion, with the only streamflow gauge in the Culebra Basin located just upstream. This acequia, established in 1852, holds the oldest water right in Colorado. Adding more stream gauges to measure flows is one of the identified needs in the recently completed watershed assessment draft. The final report is expected to be published in September 2022.

Through these tours and the support of partners and presenters, the RGBRT intends to get folks engaged in and connected to the innovative projects and progress that are making water work harder in Colorado. In partnership with Water Education Colorado and in support of their Water '22 Basin Tour initiative, the most recent RGBRT tour featured sites on the mainstem and tributaries to the Rio Grande: the Del Norte Riverfront Park, Shaw Reservoir, and the Consolidated Ditch. A variety of water leaders and perspectives from across the Basin came to give their insights and illustrate the water picture in the Rio Grande. Email info.rgbrt@gmail.com to be added to our email list for future tour opportunities. And follow us on Facebook!

Roundtable Member Highlight:

Greg Higel

Rio Grande Water Users Member at Large

Greg Higel is an At Large Water User on the Roundtable. He has served since 2006. He currently resides near Alamosa, CO. Greg has been a farmer for 36 years and is the President of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District Board and the Rio Grande Water Users Association. He enjoys fishing and outdoor life.

Water Views: "Everything I have done in my life has depended on water."

Want to stay up to date? Subscribe to our newsletter at info.rgbrt@gmail.com and follow us on our Facebook Page!

We're also happy to share statewide initiatives, events, and other water-centric programs on our Facebook Page, website calendar, and in this newsletter! Email info.rgbrt@gmail.com with content you wish to share!