

FALL/WINTER TIDINGS



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH SODJA

Inside

Board Message.....page 2
New Employees.....page 4
Field Notes.....page 6



Bear River
LAND CONSERVANCY

A Message From **THE BOARD**

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended much that we may have taken for granted. From our personal and work lives, to medical care, to supply chains. As the board of the Bear River Land Conservancy focused on personal, family and community health over the last 20 months, we also took a closer look at the way we nurture our organization and the lands we steward.

In the fall of 2020, the BRLC board began a six-month strategic planning process. A year later, we're happy to share progress toward implementation. Key objectives from the strategic plan include:

- Ensure we have the staffing and resources to help landowners in the Bear River region achieve their long-term visions for conserving agricultural and sensitive lands
- Actively engage with fellow conservation stakeholders, including the community, conservation partners, land managers and landowners
- Strengthen board participation and recruitment.

We're excited to welcome our new Development Director, Scott Gibbons, who joined our team in early October. He will greatly increase the capacity of BRLC. We are also excited to welcome Matt Coombs as our new Bear River Watershed Coordinator, who will be active throughout the greater Bear River region in a joint position with our Idaho-based colleagues, the Sagebrush Steppe Land Conservancy. Read more about BRLC team updates in the following pages.

We are also happy to welcome two new board members. Carly Lansche, trails coordinator for Cache County, and Kelly Bradbury, faculty member in the department of geosciences at Utah State University.

Casey Snider, BRLC's first Executive Director, has accepted a new role with a sister conservation organization and will step down as Executive Director this year. As we congratulate him in his new role, we can't thank him enough for his excellent service in the last two years.



PHOTO BY SCOTT SMITH

As executive director, Casey helped elevate conservation as a critical land use management tool in northern Utah. He set BRLC on solid financial footing by leveraging your donations and in-kind contributions as matching funds for grant monies to secure new easements and ensure their long-term stewardship.

While details can't be shared until easements are finalized, we are currently in the process of helping landowners secure 26,910 acres in conservation easements in Box Elder, Cache and Rich Counties by 2024. We're grateful Casey will continue to serve as a member of the board.



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH SODJA

With new capacity and a strong path forward, BRLC is better positioned than ever to be resilient and effective in the face of challenges, whatever may come. We're honored and grateful to be part of our community's journey into the future. ■

Community Outreach

One of our organizational priorities is to increase BRLC's recognition in Northern Utah. We want residents, city and county governments, businesses, and other organizations to think of the Bear River Land Conservancy when they think of preserving the benefits of land and water for present and future generations.

If you or your colleagues are interested in learning more about how conservation easements can contribute to long-term land use planning, please contact Scott Gibbons at 435-770-9731 or scott@bearriverlandconservancy.org.



Find Us Online!

Follow along with BRLC news and activities on social media! You'll find us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn @BearRiverLandConservancy ■

New Employees **SCOTT GIBBONS**

Development Director

In this critical role, Scott will lead the growth and strengthen the foundation of BRLC, working toward accomplishing the strategic objectives of the board and many stakeholders in our mission.

Scott is a fifth generation resident of Cache Valley. His family has been farming in Northern Utah for over 130 years. As a teenager, he had the opportunity to work with his uncles and grandfather on the family dairy farm in Lewiston, Utah.



Scott holds a Biology Degree from Utah State University, and Master's Degrees in Business Administration and Healthcare Administration from the University of Minnesota. Upon completion of his education, Scott took a position with Sutter Health in Sacramento, California managing medical groups with a specific focus of rebuilding distressed physician practices. Scott met his wife Toni there and they moved to Smithfield, Utah where Scott took a position with Western Medical to assist in the development of a new hospital and multispecialty physician network. In the summer of 2000, Cache Valley Hospital opened and Scott started a consulting company focused on providing management and development services to physicians and small businesses. In addition to his consulting work, Scott also owns and operates Batteryheads.com, an online business that sells specialty medical batteries and batteries for commercial, government, military, and education applications. ■

Conservation Coordinator for the Bear River Watershed

This position represents a watershed-wide commitment to preserve land from the headwaters of the Bear to its terminus in the Great Salt Lake. In this position, Matt will work with landowners, federal and state agencies, supporters, and others who wish to conserve more private land and meet the growing conservation needs of the watershed.



Matt grew up in northern Utah, within the Bear River Watershed, helping out on the family farm and cattle ranch. He earned a bachelor's degree in Business and Economics from the University of Idaho before moving to South America - where he spent three and a half years working with the Peace Corps to support local communities in sustainable agriculture, agribusiness, and natural resource projects. After leaving

Ecuador, he spent several years working with and managing small farms and community supported agriculture programs in New York's Hudson Valley. He later became involved with the Orange County Land Trust and Groundwork Hudson Valley, assisting with land stewardship and developing community-based conservation projects.

Matt returned to Utah in 2011 and attended graduate school at Utah State University where he studied landscape architecture and earned a master's degree in Bioregional Planning. His graduate work included a baseline study to support development of a comprehensive management plan for Utah's sovereign land resources along the Bear River. Matt leaves a job of seven years with the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands as the Bear River Area Sovereign Land Coordinator to take on this new position. ■

MATT COOMBS

SHORING UP THE BANK

BEAR RIVER BOTTOMS RESTORATION

Shaping the long-term health of a challenging riparian environment requires a lot of patience - and some luck

Lara Gale

PHOTO BY ELIZABETH SODJA

In a high arid desert, water catchment is critical to human development. One tradeoff is that downstream environments adapted to the natural ebb and flow of seasonal rain and snowmelt don't easily thrive in conditions created by intermittent release of large volumes of water, especially in a drought.

The Bear River Bottoms is such an environment, and the Bear River Land Conservancy employs several methods to manage the land with the objective of maintaining healthy riparian habitat and a sustainable, native ecosystem. Organic weed control is employed to keep highly competitive invasives from choking out native plants. Hundreds of invasive russian olive trees have been removed, allowing some regrowth of native tree species.

The river itself poses a challenge to the land, as intermittent high volume water releases cause bank erosion. In 2018, a Utah State University study showed that the bank of the Bear River in the Bear River Bottoms had migrated 3-5 feet in just a few years; on a path to seriously degrade the local ecosystem. Working with Gabe Murray, Bear River Watershed Coordinator for the Utah State Department of Agriculture and Food, Casey Snider and the BRLC Board came up with a plan to reshape and replant the most affected parts of the bank to help slow the pace of erosion.

Over the last 4 years, Casey, Gabe and volunteers spent more than 120 hours doing earthwork and laying out planting mats and planting willows. In such a challenging system, the project was something of an experiment, but the work has been showing signs of stabilization. This year, drought conditions led to electric fence failure and the cows used for weed control unfortunately couldn't be stopped before trampling the plantings. The earthwork has mostly stayed in place, however.

Gabe said he's hopeful that what remains will continue to hold long enough for vegetation to regrow. The bank restoration project will require on-going monitoring and effort, but that is the point of land conservation. We're grateful for the opportunity to partner with landowners to preserve the value of critical lands for generations, whatever it takes. ■

Field Notes

MENDON MEADOWS

A disappointing year for orchids at Mendon Meadows

Mark Brunson

The annual count of flowering Ute Ladies'-tresses at BRLC's Mendon Meadow Preserve came up very short this year. The volunteers who weekly monitor and map the *Spiranthes diluvialis* orchids during the late summer found only 26 flowering specimens in 2021 - by far the lowest in the nine years since systematic counting began.

Biologists are still trying to understand the life history of Ute Ladies'-tresses, a ground-growing orchid that prefers areas that stay moist but are not inundated with water. It's likely that this year's low count - less than 5% of the 608 flowering plants we counted in 2020 - was affected by the extreme drought that Utah experienced this past spring and summer. Normally the pasture is irrigated twice a week, but in 2021 the canal was too low to make that happen.

Mendon Meadow is a 30-acre farmland parcel on the west side of Cache Valley, and includes 11 acres of irrigated pasture that supports a healthy population of Ute Ladies'-tresses, listed as a Threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Each year the tall grasses, sedges, and rushes that grow in the pasture are mown in late June for hay. Botanists believe periodic disturbance is important for Ladies'-tresses to keep them from being shaded out by competitive grasses. The orchids bloom between Pioneer Day and Labor Day, and once the flower stalks have dried out and the seeds fall to the ground, our farmer partner grazes cattle there for a few weeks in October and November, again trimming the grass and adding nutrients to the soil.

Although the 2021 flower count was disappointing, there's little cause for concern just yet. Ute Ladies'-tresses have an unusual growth strategy in that they have a dormant stage, lurking at or beneath the soil surface as little more than a root system and waiting until conditions are best for flowering. The Mendon Meadow population has always had good years and bad years, fluctuating from as few as 129 to as many as 1,979 flowering plants between 2013 and 2020. And here's some more good news for Cache Valley rare plant enthusiasts: A new and robust population was discovered elsewhere in the valley this year at a wetter site - evidence that this delicate and beautiful orchid can continue to survive and thrive in northern Utah. ■



PHOTO BY DIRK BAKER



Bear River
LAND CONSERVANCY

Become a Friend of the Land, today!



Dear Northern Utah Neighbor,

As the population continues to grow in Box Elder, Rich and Cache counties, our mission to “preserve the benefits of land and water in Northern Utah and the Bear River Watershed for present and future generations...by partnering with communities and landowners to permanently sustain the heritage of working lands and protect natural areas” is more critical than ever.

If you feel the work BRLC is doing is important, please consider becoming an annual “Friend of the Land” member today with your tax-deductable donation of \$100 or more. Thank you, and happy trails!

- The BRLC Team

Donation & Membership Sign-up Form

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Please send your donation to:

PO Box 4565
Logan, UT 84323-4565

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