

Wildlife and Riparian Corridors in the Upper Rio Grande

Executive Summary

Wildlife and riparian corridors are pathways and waterways that provide food, water, and habitat; they are vital to the survival of the plants, animals, and local communities that thrive along their undisturbed channels. The Upper Rio Grande Corridor is one of these channels which stretches from Colorado to Arizona, and is in need of protection from man-made obstructions and barriers that fragment corridors such as major highways and construction projects. We have an opportunity to support communities that depend on these natural lands for their way of life, and we have an obligation to save the vulnerable plants and animals in the U.S. Southwest that depend on these corridors.

These plants and animals account for some of the greatest at-risk wildlife of the one-third of U.S. species that are already classified as at risk or endangered. By supporting the bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act, we can allocate \$1.4 billion dollars in annual funding to restore habitat, recover wildlife populations, and rebuild the infrastructure for both our natural systems and outdoor recreation opportunities associated with corridors like the Upper Rio Grande. By supporting locally led and voluntary, nationwide efforts to connect, and restore lands, waters, and wildlife, we can secure these corridors. By supporting the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act, we can also facilitate the creation of a National Wildlife Corridor System and provide for the designation and management of such corridors on federal land and water. It is necessary to safeguard our climate, our wildlife, and the communities that are connected to these areas from peril that we act now.

Challenge

More than four million miles of roads connect almost 330 million people in the United States. Humans rely on these corridors to facilitate migration and enable the commerce that allows our species to thrive. Likewise, wildlife requires corridors. Wildlife corridors are pathways or routes that connect habitat and are key for wildlife survival. These areas foster seasonal movement, between summer and winter range. They are critical for wildlife to find mates to ensure genetic diversity. Migration routes increasingly are also used for wildlife seeking new habitat because of natural disasters or climate change. Wildlife corridors also include aquatic linkages, which allow fish and other species to move freely through watersheds.

The Upper Rio Grande Valley includes the Taos Plateau and extends from north-central New Mexico into the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado. The Upper Rio Grande Valley is home to the Santa Fe National Forest, Carson National Forest, Rio Grande National Forest, and Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. It also includes vast tracts of tribal, state and private land.

Many local communities depend on the land, water, and wildlife in the Upper Rio Grande Valley for their way of life. These communities understand the importance of preserving wildlife so that future generations can enjoy hiking, fishing, hunting, camping, bird watching and many other recreational activities in the region which make up their way of life. Additionally, Native American tribes play an important role in protecting wildlife connectivity and corridors in the Upper Rio Grande. Some key habitat for fostering wildlife connectivity is under tribal management. Many tribal natural resource officers are collaring animals and collecting data that is critical to understanding species movement.

A specific segment of the corridor which can be examined further to express this interconnectedness is the Caja del Rio, a complex series of ecosystems created by the Rio Grande rift and small single-eruption volcanoes two to five million years ago that have left more than 60 cinder cones and basalt outflows across the landscape east of Santa Fe, including Tetilla Peak and Cienega volcano. Piñon-juniper, grasslands, Great Basin sage scrub, chamisa, and sagebrush dot the entire area and give coverage to a variety of wildlife species, including elk, deer, black bear, cougar and many endangered and sensitive species of mammals, reptiles and birds.



\$1.4 B

Money from Recovering America's Wildlife Act meant for habitat restoration, and other wildlife recovery efforts

670 MILES

Length of the Upper Rio Grande Corridor



Since time immemorial to the present day, Indigenous communities have thrived in the Caja, building dozens of village sites and irrigation structures and leaving behind remarkable petroglyphs in the basalt canyon walls. Today, surrounding Pueblo people continue to regard the landscape of the Caja as sacred, home to ancestors and spirits, and critically important for future generations to maintain cultural connection to traditional lifeways. As the original stewards of this landscape, these Pueblo communities continue to fight for the protection of the Caja alongside many other dedicated allies from diverse backgrounds.

The current legal and regulatory status of riparian corridors is a shallow patchwork of laws and regulations which does not make easy work of preserving these lands and waters. In some cases, the only explicit policies supporting riparian corridor protection and restoration in the Upper Rio Grande are found within impermanent federal and state resource management plans, which guide and place sideboards on resource management decisions but seldom mandate action or offer long-term or permanent protections. Much of the Upper Rio Grande includes national forests managed by the U.S. Forest Service, while other public lands (generally at lower elevations) are managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). On private lands, riparian habitat policy is embedded in public and private incentives such as federal agricultural conservation programs and conservation easements. Wildlife doesn't recognize state lines, forest service boundaries or tribal borders. For any wildlife corridor policy to be effective, it must transcend jurisdictional boundaries and involve active engagement from key stakeholders including federal and state agencies, tribes, private landowners, local communities, and non-governmental groups.

Riparian corridors provide essential habitat elements—food, water, shelter, nesting and breeding areas, to name a few. In New Mexico, 80 percent of all vertebrates use riparian areas for at least half their life cycles; more than half of these are totally dependent on riparian areas. In turn, terrestrial and riparian habitat corridors are interdependent: diverse species of wildlife rely upon the food, shelter, and water obtained in riparian zones, and the rivers and streams require riparian zones for filtering out pollutants and creating habitat for fish and other aquatic species.

Solution

There are several solutions to pursue in order to help protect the Upper Rio Grande's riparian and wildlife corridors. Science and best land management practices must be shared with all partners and used to guide corridor decisions for the Upper Rio Grande's iconic wildlife to thrive and flourish for generations to come. The construction of wildlife overpasses and underpasses can prevent vehicle collisions, developers and energy companies can be incentivized to create outside of migration corridors, and ranchers can be encouraged to install wildlife-friendly fences. Wildlife and waterways hold intrinsic and economic value, they feed and sustain millions of Americans each year, drives tourism in many places, and reminds us that wild places still exist. At a moral and legal level, identifying and conserving wildlife and riparian corridors is necessary. Conserving thirty percent of our lands and waters by 2030 is a necessary step in protecting the Upper Rio Grande Corridor, as is investing \$1.4 billion annually in wildlife recovery efforts and recreation, and creating a National Wildlife Corridor System to designate and manage corridors on federal lands and waters.

Policy Recommendations

- Recovering America's Wildlife Act - Allocates \$1.4 billion in annual funding for the management of fish and wildlife species of greatest conservation need as determined by State fish and wildlife agencies across states, tribes, and U.S. territories
- Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act - Provides for the conservation and restoration of habitats that facilitate the movement of certain native or noninvasive species (e.g., fish, wildlife, or plant species) that may be at risk due to habitat loss or fragmentation.