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Conserving and caring for vital lands, waters, and wildlife of the Columbia River region through sound science and strong relationships.

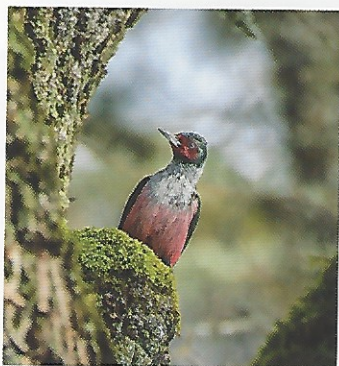
*Purple Lupine
abounds at Mill
Creek Ridge*



Saving the White Oaks of the East Cascades

Our Partnership Seeks to Conserve a Blend of Unique Habitats Before They Disappear

BY JAY KOSA



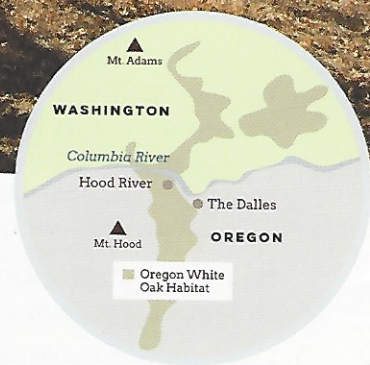
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For Lindsay Cornelius, the oak woodlands on the east slopes of Mount Hood and Mount Adams provide a place of deep connection—a multisensory experience: “Dry, crumbling soil underfoot; insects bumbling and fluttering; songbirds trilling and lizards skittering; raptors gliding overhead; balsamroot flowers smiling on the forest floor; the breeze carrying the sharp aroma of desert parsley and the vanilla scent of warm ponderosa pine—the experience is so complete, I can spend hours in idle observation.”

Cornelius, a land steward with Columbia Land Trust based in the White Salmon-Hood River area, describes a landscape that is tenacious and generous. Oak trees drop limbs, become completely hollow, and provide shelter for wildlife at the same time they unfurl a full canopy of leaves in the spring. In the fall, they produce an acorn crop that’s like a gold rush for wildlife. Oaks host

lichen and fungi, persist for centuries, and depending on slope, elevation, and moisture, they can be found in a range of ecosystems—near conifers, in shallow, rocky, windswept soils, and in meadows full of wildflowers, to name a few. Along with supporting more than 200 wildlife species, these valuable woodlands offer people important food resources, like deer and desert parsley, fuel for woodstoves, forage for livestock, and shade from the hot sun.

Despite their generosity, the Oregon white oaks of the East Cascades are at risk. As in many places across the Pacific Northwest, population growth in the East Cascades is steady, and a blend of human uses is fragmenting the landscape. In this transition area between the verdant forests of the West Cascades



and the shrub-steppe of the Columbia Plateau, commercially valuable conifer trees, orchards, and vineyards will grow if coaxed, and proximity to urban centers makes picturesque oak woodlands a desirable place to build a home.

In 2015, Columbia Land Trust convened a “think tank” of area stakeholders to evaluate the greatest conservation priorities in the East Cascades. The group expressed a hunger for an organized, collaborative effort to conserve critically important oak habitats. In response, the Land Trust worked with Pacific Birds to secure funding and establish a collective of partners, landowners, and residents dubbed the East Cascades Oak Partnership (ECOP).

“Our charge is to build a shared base of understanding about oak systems, and the people who work, live, and play here,” says Cornelius, who leads the partnership. “We spent months interviewing people whose lives are deeply integrated with the landscape—loggers, lumber companies, vintners, ranchers, planners, real estate agents, first responders, contractors, and others—to understand why people make the decisions they are making on the land.”

At convenings, ECOP has focused on sharing information about the ecological, historical, and cultural significance of oaks and oak landscapes, including indigenous perspectives.

“Oak habitats have provided home for valued foods, medicines, and other natural resources that tribal people have used for millennia, and they form an integral part of the mosaic of the homelands of tribal people today,” says Jeanette Burkhardt, a biologist with Yakama Nation Fisheries and a partnership participant. “I hope traditional ways of connecting to, knowing about, and managing those oak landscapes can be learned by our generation and incorporated into our thinking and land management.”

Currently, more than 150 people are actively engaged in ECOP, including

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Alan Busacca, an owner of Windhorse Vineyard

representatives from 15 different agencies, tribes, and organizations. Alan Busacca, an owner of Windhorse Vineyard near The Dalles, brings to ECOP his perspective as a resident, soil scientist, and viticulturist. “I fell in love with this landscape. As someone trying to grow grapes and hopefully make a bit of money while I’m at it, my job is to make decisions that treat the land as respectfully and responsibly as possible.”

In 2018, the partnership identified six primary interactions with oak systems: ranching and farming, fruit and grape growing, rural residential use, outdoor recreation, suppression of fire, and conversion to conifer tree species for timber. By the end of 2019, ECOP aims to draft a strategic plan to inform the efforts of the various stakeholders, including technical support for landowners who want to better manage their lands for oaks and maps of areas with the greatest ecological value for oak-associated wildlife. “A lot of people have had a strong interest in oaks but just never had a vehicle to help them work together,” says Bruce Taylor, conservation specialist with Pacific Birds. “It’s been pretty remarkable to see such a large and passionate group of people come together around this so quickly.”

The East Cascades Oak Partnership is indicative of Columbia Land Trust’s evolving approach to conservation. The Land Trust has conserved thousands of acres of East Cascades oak systems, and it continues to conserve and manage these landscapes. Yet to effect change at the scale necessary to save dwindling habitats and natural systems, this sort of broader collaboration is required. People in the East Cascades want to help nature thrive and we want to support them with tools and information to do so.

Looking forward, Cornelius envisions a broad diversity of stakeholders on the landscape who are actively engaged in conservation. This could mean altering land and business practices, raising funds critical to oak conservation, conducting outreach, offering technical resources to landowners, and informing municipal and county planning efforts.

By learning to appreciate oak woodlands, to steward them carefully, and to strategically protect what remains, we may yet guarantee the passage of these remarkable places into the future. 🌱

➤ Visit this story online for a full roster of East Cascades Oaks Partnership members and funders.

- a | Oregon white oak fall foliage. Photo by Doug Gorsline
- b | Lewis’s woodpecker checking its acorn cache. Photo by John Davis
- c | Oak bark texture. Photo by Brian Chambers Photography

