

Nature Conservancy buys last parcel of private Upper Verde land

By Joanna Dodder

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Dan Campbell and Heather Reading of the Nature Conservancy visit the group's new Upper Verde Springs Preserve along the Verde River about 20 miles north of Prescott.

Courtesy Photo/Matt Hinshaw

PAULDEN - The Nature Conservancy has bought the last major parcel of private land along the Upper Verde River, a rare strip of riparian habitat in a state that is rapidly losing such places to development.

The Nature Conservancy bought 312 acres from Betty and Billy Wells, who also donated two major conservation easements on the uplands portion of their ranch to The Nature Conservancy (160 acres) and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (2,440 acres). The easements prevent development.

"I didn't want to see the place develop," said Betty Wells, whose father Claud Aiken homesteaded in the Paulden area in 1930. "We didn't want houses all over it."

The Upper Verde River is one of the two best remaining native fisheries in Arizona, Nature Conservancy officials said. It is home to three endangered and threatened species. The river is one of the last places in Arizona where otter thrive, and it has one of the highest densities of breeding birds in the country.

The Upper Verde has been at the center of controversy in recent years as Prescott-area communities move forward with their plans to pump groundwater from the Big Chino Sub-basin south about 20 miles to their water-strapped region. Those plans prompted American Rivers to name the Verde one of the most endangered rivers in the country in 2006. Scientists generally agree that the Big Chino supplies 80 percent of the baseflow of the upper Verde River.

The new Nature Conservancy property encompasses the first mile of the river, where springs help keep the first 24 miles of the river flowing during the dry seasons.

"As the birthplace of the Verde River, it is a symbolic and strategic location, where the quality and quantity of water can be monitored as it flows from the Big Chino and Little Chino basins," said Dan Campbell, manager of the Conservancy's Verde Program.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department already bought 700 acres on three parcels along about three miles of the river that are interspersed with the new Nature Conservancy property. The [Prescott National Forest](#) and State Land Department are the other major landowners along the Upper Verde.

Nature Conservancy and state wildlife officials say the new purchase will foster efforts to protect and restore native fish threatened by at least eight non-native fish species.

Game and Fish Department officials had tried unsuccessfully to buy the Wells property, said Jeff Pebworth, wildlife program manager for this region. Nature Conservancy Field Representative Heather Reading, who grew up in the Chino Valley area, conducted the successful negotiations with the Wells family.

The new Verde River Springs Preserve is the only property The Nature Conservancy currently owns on the Verde, although it also owns the Hart Prairie Preserve along the edge of the Verde River Basin near Flagstaff.

Nature Conservancy officials and the Wells family declined to discuss their sale price at this time.

The Nature Conservancy is open to the idea of selling part of the Verde River Springs Preserve to the state, Campbell said. And the state Game and Fish Commission already has sanctioned the idea, Pebworth said.

The two already have collaborated elsewhere on the Verde. The Nature Conservancy has acted as a middleman for Game and Fish along the Middle Verde, buying land and then selling it to the state for the Verde River Greenway.

"We're looking for a balance in the Verde River between people and wildlife," Campbell said. "And we're willing to put our money where our mouth is in that equation."

Betty Wells said she's happy that this section of the Verde River will remain undeveloped for her descendants to enjoy.

"We hope people appreciate the fact that it's there," she said.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation hopes the Wells will inspire other landowners to protect their land, too. This is the first piece of property that an Arizona landowner ever has donated to the foundation.

"With subdivisions encroaching on wild and open land, prime habitat is scarce around Prescott," Elk Foundation Regional Director Ron Pittman said.

https://www.dcourier.com/features/nature-conservancy-buys-last-parcel-of-private-upper-verde-land/article_da890756-f601-534f-9dcc-64320cefa949.html

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