



Greater Roadrunner, Santa Cruz River, Arizona
Sonoran Institute/Julius Schlosburg

Finding Refuge in a Changing World

All living things need refuge. Protected lands and waters provide shelter to wildlife escaping development, habitat loss and the impacts of climate change. For communities, nature can be a kind of refuge—an escape from the bustle of modern life.

Often overshadowed by national parks, the United States National Wildlife Refuge System is a vital network of public lands that can play a key role in protecting 30% of lands and waters by 2030—a major goal in protecting biodiversity and staving off the worst impacts of a warming planet.

Together, our nation's 572 wildlife refuges are home to more than 700 species of birds and 800 species of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish—as well as over 170 threatened or endangered species. Refuges help build connectivity between other protected areas, facilitating safer wildlife migration. And because many refuges are located close to cities, they provide underserved communities access to nature.

For these reasons and more, The Wilderness Society is working to expand our country's refuge system, capitalizing on decades of ecological analysis, local relationship building and community momentum

to find opportunities that will serve both people and wildlife.

A keystone campaign built on years of local efforts is unfolding in the city of Tucson in southern Arizona to honor the revitalized Santa Cruz River and protect a portion of the waterway as an urban national wildlife refuge. Due to climate change, population growth and impacts on water quality, the Santa Cruz River was declared the fourth most endangered river in the U.S. by American Rivers in 2024. An urban refuge designation would buoy efforts to restore 20 miles of river habitat and adjacent lands that are at risk of development—strengthening the resiliency of surrounding communities and the wildlife that rely on this ribbon of nature.

The Santa Cruz watershed is home to the O'odham and the Yaqui people, whose relationships with the land and river have fostered thousands of years of

[continued on page 3](#)



Jamie Williams at the 2018 Climate Rally, Washington, DC
Melvin Cade

Dear Conservation Champion,

If there is one thing we have come to understand, it's that the only constant in life is change. This is true both in the world around us and here at The Wilderness Society. But then again, our work has always been about trying to create the change we want to see in this world—to shape a better future for ourselves and for the generations who will follow.

This fall, after serving as our president for more than 12 years, Jamie Williams stepped down to embrace a new personal chapter. That means The Wilderness Society is also turning to embrace change in the form of a new era of leadership—one that will build on our rock-solid foundation, which is firmly rooted in your deep commitment and fierce activism. We are confident, thanks to the continued support of members and supporters like you, that we will maintain our clear-eyed focus on protecting threatened places—such as the Santa Cruz River in Arizona and the Western Arctic in Alaska—while also looking ahead to what is possible. Because people and nature still depend on us, and we'll keep on fighting until the day that's no longer true.


Before his departure, Jamie left us with a few reflections on his tenure, which you can find on page seven. We echo his gratitude for your steadfast support and look forward to our enduring partnership!

Onward,
The Editors of *America's Wilderness*


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The Wilderness Society recognizes Native Americans and Indigenous peoples as the longest serving stewards of the land.

To learn more visit:

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Questions or comments?

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habitation and river stewardship. Barrios, rancherias and community farms dot the river, where multi-generational families still use the channel to work their horses, grow gardens and tend to cattle.

Working with this Traditional Knowledge and stewardship, a community-led coalition across Pima and Santa Cruz Counties is actively building the foundation for a new urban refuge. The Wilderness Society’s Arizona team serves on the leadership committee, supporting this incredible momentum by providing science and mapping resources, as well as policy and communications expertise.

The proposed refuge imagines an archipelago of protected properties along the Santa Cruz River from the U.S./Mexico border north through Pima County, where the fast-growing city of Tucson sits. Like a “string of pearls,” the designation would permanently protect habitat for wildlife and provide shade and river access for neighboring communities.

Hundreds of iconic species rely on intact habitat in southern Arizona, including endangered jaguars and endangered fish and birds like the Gila topminnow and southwestern willow flycatcher. And for the people of Tucson, the return of the flowing Santa Cruz River breathes new life into local communities with visitors seeking world-class birdwatching, cycling and exploration of national historic trails.

“The Santa Cruz River is the first story that has given me any hope in our future. I feel my brain and my heart expand every time that I’m engaged with the river. It’s the source, the thread, the reason we are here. How beautiful it is that it will return and that it is returning.”

— Maxie Adler, member of the Tucson Birthplace Open Space Coalition

It also reflects a story of hope within the stressed Colorado River Basin. Since 2014, restored surface flows in Tucson have ignited local leaders and volunteers to re-create almost 20 miles of vibrant habitat for wildlife that desperately need to reach the surrounding Sky Islands mountain ranges. The proposed refuge builds on those efforts, offering a permanent tool to protect the city’s history and ensure a healthy future.

As our ever-changing world necessitates spaces of refuge like the Santa Cruz River, your support ensures that the voices and perspectives of local communities are heard loud and clear.

Refuge System by the Numbers

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

572
refuges

800
million acres
of lands
and waters

53
million
annual
visitors

\$3.2
billion
in local
economies

41k
jobs

Expanding Protections in the Western Arctic Reserve



Teshekpuk Caribou Herd grazing
Bob Wick/BLM

In the Western Arctic lies the United States' single largest stretch of contiguous public land, an area that holds immense cultural significance and provides habitat to countless wildlife. But you wouldn't know this judging by its official name, the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.

Now known as the Western Arctic Reserve, this complex landscape is trying to shake a label that suggests a single purpose—providing oil and gas. Located between the Brooks Range and the Arctic Ocean and directly west of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, this terrain harbors caribou, polar bears, walrus, bowhead whales, broad whitefish, salmon and millions of migratory birds. It is also the cultural homeland and subsistence area for more than

40 Alaska Native communities, who have stewarded and relied upon these lands since time immemorial. Spanning more than 23 million acres (bigger than 10 Yellowstone National Parks), this vast expanse is not just a remote frontier for resource extraction—and it doesn't deserve to be thought of that way.

Yet sure enough, the Reserve is under constant threat from companies eager to industrialize the landscape with oil rigs, drill pads, pipelines and infrastructure aimed at extracting, refining and distributing fossil fuels that contribute to the climate crisis. The rapid pace of warming in the Arctic (as much as four times faster than the rest of the world, according to a 2022 study in the journal *Communications Earth & Environment*) amplifies the urgency of protecting

The Gems of the Western Arctic Reserve

Nearly half of the Western Arctic Reserve's lands—more than 13 million acres—enjoy enhanced protections in five designated "Special Areas." Each of these areas possesses unique characteristics and wildlife.

- Teshekpuk Lake Special Area
- Colville River Special Area
- Utukok River Uplands Special Area
- Peard Bay Special Area
- Kasegaluk Lagoon Special Area



Map contains modified Copernicus Sentinel data 2023
Nick Underwood

this delicate landscape. Melting sea ice, habitat degradation and the disruption of migratory patterns are just some of the consequences this region faces.

The 2023 approval of ConocoPhillips' massive Willow Oil Project in the Reserve's northeastern corner prompted the Biden administration to review and update regulations governing the management and protection of the entire Reserve—a task the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had not undertaken in 40 years.

The Western Arctic Rule

This spurred a breakthrough development this past spring when the BLM released the Western Arctic Rule, a final management policy aimed at ensuring maximum protection from the impacts of oil and gas development on more than 13 million acres of existing “Special Areas,” as well as sustainable management across all 23 million acres.

By offering important tools for protecting the area's globally significant wildlife, birds, fish and other values, this new framework supports the Indigenous communities that rely on these resources and provides greater resilience against climate change. The Rule is a substantial victory that required decades of persistent efforts by The Wilderness Society and our partners in Alaska—which your support made possible.

The Rule also requires the BLM to gather input from Tribes, local governments and the public regarding areas of the Reserve that deserve increased or new



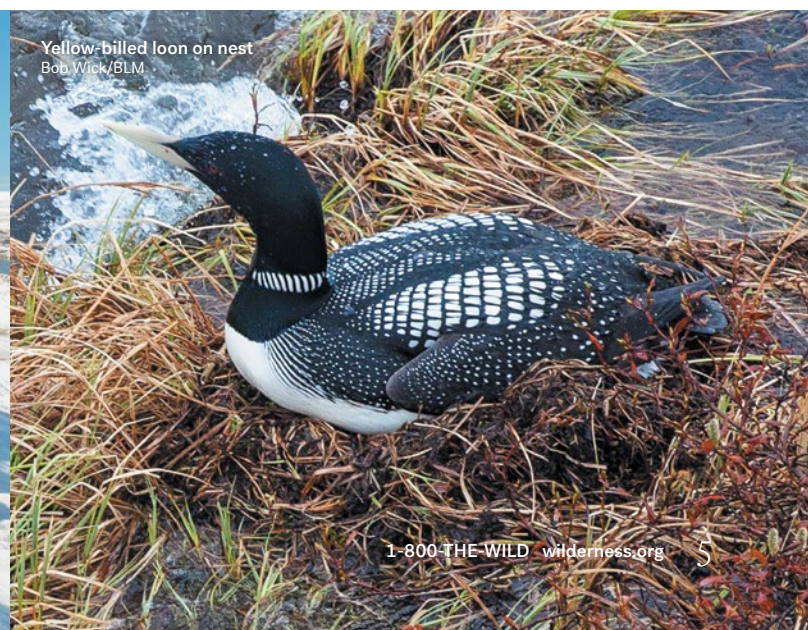
Arctic Fox in the snow
Wayne Svejnoha/BLM

protections. Following the BLM's request for this information this fall, The Wilderness Society used this opportunity to submit a proposal—supported by research—to expand the Special Areas and impose strong measures to better protect wildlife populations and Indigenous ways of life in the Western Arctic.

In the coming months, we will continue the critical work of tracking the agency's implementation of the Rule. Simultaneously, we are preparing to defend it from any attacks in Congress or in the courts. Whatever obstacles we face, your partnership means that we're closer than ever to redefining the value of this special place. The Western Arctic Reserve should not—and will not—be defined by its dirty energy label, but celebrated for its exceptional ecological and cultural significance.



Eroding bluff along the Beaufort Sea
Craig McCaa/BLM



Yellow-billed loon on nest
Bob Wick/BLM



Making Nature's Benefits Accessible to All

By fighting alongside local communities, The Wilderness Society is deeply committed to addressing historical injustices so that nature is equitably accessible to everyone. On two key fronts, we are making progress.

EXPLORE Act

With our partners, we are supporting the passage of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act, which is moving through Congress this fall. This wide-reaching legislation aims to improve access to outdoor spaces, especially for youth, families, people with disabilities, veterans and those living in nature-deprived neighborhoods by:

- Extending the popular free park pass program for 4th grade students and their families.
- Expanding opportunities for outfitters and guides to take people out on public lands and waters.
- Making permanent and expanding access to a federal grant program to create parks and green space in communities that have no or limited access to outdoor recreation.

Outdoor Equity Funds Change Lives

Outdoor Equity Funds (OEFs) are state-level funding programs that invest in community-based organizations that are focused on providing outdoor experiences to historically under-resourced communities. This tool can help transform the movement to protect public lands and ensure their benefits reach all.

The Wilderness Society has been using its resources and reach over the last several years to help communities create and increase funding for OEFs in several states with great success. For example, OEF grants have enabled Latinos Adventureros in North Carolina to help families of color discover easy ways to get outside and share those experiences in their community. Likewise, the organization Unleash the Brilliance is tapping Washington's OEF funds to enable low-income and youth of color in the greater Seattle area to connect with the outdoors—many for the first time.

Discover more stories about the impact of outdoor equity funds. Nature awaits everyone!



Time for a New Chapter

Serving as President of The Wilderness Society has been the greatest privilege of my conservation journey, one I could never have dreamed of as a kid enthralled with the wild. After 12 great years, I leave knowing that we have accomplished so much together, that the organization is stronger than ever before, and that the mission to protect America's wild places remains critical to who we are—and who we can become—as a country.

Beyond the chance to work alongside a collaborative, creative and exceptionally competent staff, what brought me to The Wilderness Society was its generous spirit and humble approach in making an extraordinary impact. This organization has always served as a backbone for the conservation movement, leading the way on the protection of our nation's wild public lands. What truly sets us apart is our big tent approach to achieving conservation success. This was true in 1955 when our forebearers won the fight to save Echo Park from a 500-foot dam on the Green and Yampa Rivers. It is also true today, as demonstrated by our pivotal work to support the largest, most diverse national conservation coalition in the country—the America the Beautiful for All Coalition.

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act this year and the 90th anniversary of our founding in 2025, it's important to remember that The Wilderness Society has always been a champion of wilderness for people. But our aim over the last decade has been to be more intentional about making it for ALL people, especially those historically excluded by the conservation movement. To this end, I truly believe we have changed more in the last eight years than perhaps during any other time in our history.

It hasn't all been easy, but this organization doesn't set out to do easy things. Again and again, we roll up our sleeves to fight the uphill battles. We innovate relentlessly, combining community-based solutions with national policy and strong coalitions to achieve a unique impact for conservation. While the political



Jamie Williams with his son and daughter.
Linville Gorge Wilderness Area, North Carolina

winds may shift from time to time, we take the long view, leading with a deep sense of purpose and confidence in the art of the possible. And we do all of this because we know how important our work is to the health of our communities, to wildlife and to solving the climate crisis.

This can-do attitude has produced epic results, enabling us to secure a new model for Indigenous conservation and co-management in Bears Ears National Monument, a strong conservation framework for the Bureau of Land Management in the Public Lands Rule, permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and so many community-driven national monuments and wildland designations that were years, and sometimes decades, in the making.

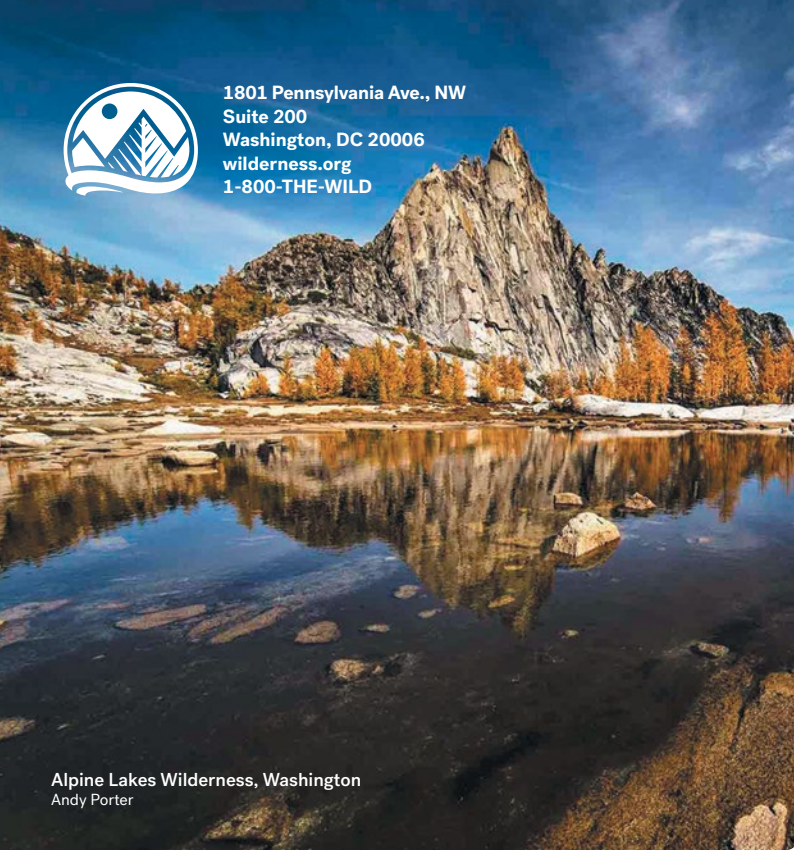
Behind this success is an incredible community of Wilderness Society members, partners, staff, and board leadership. Your remarkable generosity and commitment to our mission have made all the difference, and I really believe we are on the right path to building a more powerful movement for the future—the kind we need for the challenges we face.

For this rewarding journey, I am filled with gratitude. It's because of all of you that I feel so confident in making this change and welcoming a new leader who will take The Wilderness Society to new heights.

Jamie Williams



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Moose, Rio Grande National Forest, Colorado
Matt Payne