

UTAH Conservation SHOWCASE



Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Benefits from Riparian Restoration Work

Jim Hook, owner of the Recapture Lodge and volunteer fire chief in Bluff, has been working for years to manage and restore the riparian habitat on his property along the San Juan River in southeast Utah. His hard work over the years has begun to yield results as the invasive plants have begun to die and native plants are taking their place. An endangered bird species, the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (SWFL), is one of the species that will benefit from his restoration work. At the confluence of Cottonwood Creek and the San Juan River, and small patch of potentially suitable SWFL nesting habitat is becoming established.

Over the years, Hook has welcomed projects from researchers, students, agencies biologists, and artists on his land and allows hiking access to individuals with authorization. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Monticello Field Office has been in contact with Hook for a number of years and when the Working Lands For Wildlife SWFL Initiative began, he was an obvious candidate. In 2012, Hook entered into a Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program contract with NRCS.

The conservation plan entails controlling invasive Russian olive, removing dead tamarisk, and planting additional acres with native species to supplement the existing habitat. After completing most of the work himself, Jim was able to see the results of his efforts—growing willow, cottonwood, privet, and sumac.

Alas, a flash flood in Cottonwood Creek washed out some of his early restoration efforts. Some plants were swept away, others benefited from the extra irrigation, and new volunteer willows began naturally recruiting. In no time, he was back hard at work replacing the lost plants.

Hook is continuing his work to eliminate the beetle-killed tamarisk on his property, control invasive plants, and is working with the Utah Conservation Corps to build fuel breaks and plant more willows. Even with minor setbacks like the flash flood, there is no doubt he will continue to restore habitat and manage the property to benefit SWFL and other wildlife. Hook and NRCS will continue to monitor the restoration of the SWFL habitat, and hope to see a nesting pair in the upcoming years.



Landowner Jim Hook (left) surveys beetle-killed tamarisk with NRCS Soil Conservationist Amber Johnson along the San Juan River near Bluff.

About the Flycatcher

The southwestern willow flycatcher is a small Neotropical migratory bird that breeds in dense riparian vegetation in the arid southwestern United States. It has been federally listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The flycatcher's current range is similar to its historic range; however, the amount of suitable habitat within the range is greatly reduced from historic levels.

