

## **Valuable and Spectacular Virgin River Parcel Protected**

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and its partners are excited to announce the purchase of a critical piece of property called Sheep Bridge along two miles of the Virgin River near Zion National Park and the town of Virgin, 22 miles east of St. George. This landmark project protects valuable riverine and streamside habitat in one of Utah's most scenic watersheds.

The two mile-long river corridor through Sheep Bridge has been identified by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources as one of the most pristine in the American Southwest. Here, the Virgin River has eroded a deep, steep-sided canyon through colorful sandstone formations that bound its floodplain and created a lush riparian zone. This stretch of the river provides aquatic habitat for four of the Virgin River's six at-risk native fish, including the Virgin spinedace, flannelmouth sucker, desert sucker, and speckled dace. The riparian zone is vital for nesting, wintering, and migrating neo-tropical birds, such as the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher, Wilson's warbler, and many more. It is also an oasis in the surrounding arid landscape for amphibians, reptiles, and numerous species of native wildlife.

"It's a crucial acquisition that was possible due to close partnering with TNC, the State, and the Virgin River Recovery Program," explains Laura Romin, acting Utah Field Supervisor with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). "This stretch of the Virgin River has important habitat values for native fish species, the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher, and migratory birds, and maintains connectivity of important and rare riparian habitat which is so vital in the arid lands of Utah's red rock country."

The Nature Conservancy has been working in this region for many years and considers the completion of this acquisition a major step forward in the protection of the Virgin River corridor leading up to Zion National Park.

"Washington County has one of the fastest growing populations in the country. As development pressures mount, this is a rare opportunity to safeguard healthy river habitat," says Elaine York, TNC-Utah's West Desert Regional Director. "The Virgin River includes healthy habitat for wildlife and is in the middle of some of the most scenic landscape in the United States. Sustaining the health of the Virgin River is urgent and important for people and nature."

The purchase was made possible thanks to generous private donations and major funding provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through its endangered species programs. The property will continue to be private and will remain on the county tax roles. It will be owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy in cooperation with the Utah State Department of Natural Resources. The JEM Trail, important for outdoor recreation, will remain open to the public. The Utah State Division of Wildlife Resources will aid in managing the significant flora and fauna of the property and work to support the region's native fishes.

"This is an example of a great conservation partnership," adds Brian Steed, Director, Utah State Department of Natural Resources. "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Utah and private funders have come together to conserve this very special section on the Virgin River in the scenic corridor leading to Zion National Park. We are pleased to have been of assistance, and extend our congratulations and thanks to everyone involved."

"As millions of visitors approach Zion National Park," said Lori Rose, Executive Director of the Virgin River Land Preservation Association, "they drive along the Virgin River. Its beautiful cottonwoods form a "ribbon of green" in the red rock. Sheep Bridge is a vital link in this corridor. Our organization has been thrilled to be a part of this effort which will protect this property for all time."

In addition to the USFWS' major commitment, The Nature Conservancy would like to thank the Dr. Ezekiel R. Dumke and Edna Wattis Dumke Foundation, the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation, My Good Fund, The Crandall Family, Dan Sulzbach, The Virgin River Land Preservation Association, Congressman Chris Stewart, Governor Gary Herbert, The Washington County Water Conservancy District, Zion Forever, many other generous private contributors and the landowners from whom the land was purchased for helping to make this project possible.

#### **About the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service is both a leader and a trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation. It is known for its scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. USFWS administers The Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (section 6 of the ESA) which provides grants to states and territories to participate in a wide array of voluntary conservation projects for candidate, proposed, and listed species. For more information visit [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov).

#### **About The Nature Conservancy**

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is an international conservation organization which works collaboratively to protect ecologically significant lands and waters for people and nature. Guided by science, TNC seeks on the ground solutions to achieve lasting conservation results. The organization has over one million members and programs in all 50 states and 40 foreign countries and has conserved more than 119,000,000 acres of land and thousands of river miles worldwide. In Utah, working with partners, the Conservancy has helped protect over one million acres of public and private land while earning the support of 6,000 members, an active board of 25 civic leaders, and over 800 volunteers. For more information contact: Tracey Stone, [tstone@tnc.org](mailto:tstone@tnc.org), (602) 738-1586

#### **About the Utah Department of Natural Resources**

The Utah Department of Natural Resources (DNR) helps ensure Utah's quality of life by managing and protecting the state's abundant natural resources. The department includes seven divisions: State Parks and Recreation; Oil, Gas and Mining; Forestry, Fire and State Lands; Water Resources; Water Rights; Wildlife Resources and the Utah Geological Survey. DNR protects Utah's natural resources through engaging state, county and local officials; collaborating with community members, organizations and groups and coordinating with our federal partners. Active management of resources like watersheds, wildlife, oil and gas, minerals and water, allows the state to forecast challenges, solve complex opportunities and anticipate and meet future needs. For more information go to: <https://naturalresources.utah.gov/about>

#### **About The Virgin River Land Preservation Association**

The Virgin River Land Preservation Association is a local non-profit organization working with communities and landowners to preserve southwestern Utah's heritage of scenic beauty, open lands, and quality of life. Its efforts focus on productive farmland, scenic viewsheds, recreation access, adjacency to significant public land, riparian corridors, wildlife habitat, and historical values. Key projects over 27 years have included Confluence Nature Park (LaVerkin-Hurricane), Grafton Ghost Town (Rockville), Webb Hill (St George), East Zion Buffalo Meadow (East Entrance Zion National Park), Pine Valley Meadows (Pine Valley), and significant portions of Smith Mesa (west boundary of Zion National Park), For more information go to: [www.virginriverland.org](http://www.virginriverland.org)