



Connecting the Northwest

As our world becomes more crowded, humans and wildlife will increasingly share the same spaces. A recent study predicts that over half of Earth's land will see a growing overlap between human activities and animal habitats (University of Michigan). This will be especially true in agricultural and forested regions, where expanding populations are pushing into previously untouched areas.

Conservationists must rally local communities to get involved in protecting wildlife. Innovative solutions, like creating habitat corridors to link protected areas or establishing temporary safe zones during key times like breeding seasons, will be critical. With creative collaboration we can ensure both people and wildlife thrive in a shared landscape.

FALL 2024

Building Connections Across Washington

The Wild Ways Film Tour is focused on educating people across the state on wildlife crossings and their importance. Featuring two short films, Conservation Northwest's Wild Ways and ARC solution's (Re)connecting Wild, we're showing community members and decision makers how habitat connections can benefit wildlife and people alike.

Conservation Northwest's Community Partnerships Manager, Dan Wilson explained, "We chose six locations and almost immediately that started to grow; Eastern and Western Washington both have connectivity concerns and would benefit from us reaching into smaller communities. The goal is to spread this message and engage community decision makers and stakeholders wherever they are."

Each stop on the tour includes a panel discussion with regional conservationists and agency staff from the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to highlight local efforts and the broader needs within Washington to ensure sustainable wildlife populations and reduce wildlife vehicle collisions.

"Having local biologists from WDFW, local WSDOT employees, Conservation Northwest stakeholders who have engaged directly in connectivity work, as well as state leaders, all being able to sit together, find that common ground and that passion and momentum around connectivity has been really valuable."



The films don't shy away from showing the harsh realities of wildlife-vehicle collisions. "You recognize these places in Washington. You recognize the I-90 overpass and you see the people who are working there and the wildlife using it. But we also show what we all see along the side of the highway and have become a little too accustomed to. The ARC solutions film shows an animal getting hit and there are audible gasps from the audience when you see it. I think that's an important response because we shouldn't be comfortable with it."

Washington is the second most populated western state with the least amount of public land available for wildlife, meaning more human-wildlife interactions and challenges.

"Connectivity provides this foundational network of landscapes that our wildlife need to survive and thrive in the face of all the human challenges we put on the landscape. Taking ownership of connectivity means that, while we care about iconic wildlife and large landscapes, we can also do things that are beneficial to species that don't get as much attention but are vital for biodiversity. And connecting these landscapes means that we have a more functional ecosystem overall. It's right at the heart of protect, connect, and restore."

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How We're Connecting I-5

We're going to continue to raise the alarm: I5 is a multi-lane barrier disrupting wildlife movement between the Cascade and Olympic ranges. The pathways to address this issue are rapidly closing. Brian Stewart, Conservation Northwest Cascades to Olympic Program Manager, has been working on this problem since 2017.

Last year we commissioned a Southwest Washington I-5 Wildlife Crossings Alternative Analysis Report that identified 11 possible wildlife crossing sites. These are a mix of retrofits to existing sites like bridges, removal of fish passage barriers and replacing them with larger structures for both aquatic and terrestrial species, and new crossing structures over I-5.

We've protected critical pieces of undeveloped land that are part of the few remaining corridors. We helped purchase and transfer 140 acres to the Chehalis Tribe and are working on two additional land acquisitions totaling 140 acres.



Washington's Future in Connectivity

By this time next year, Washington will have a plan for where priority wildlife crossings should be built, and where land should be conserved around them. Conservation Northwest is deep in the process, not only working with WDFW and WSDOT on the plan but organizing the coalition that will see its vision into reality!

According to Jen Syrowitz, Conservation Northwest Conservation Programs Senior Manager, "We have more data than any other state when it comes to connectivity needs for species. Campaigns like Kettles Connect and Coast to Cascades have been leveraging this material. We've had major collaborative successes like the I-90 wildlife overpass. What we haven't had is an overarching plan or strategy – one that uses core habitats, corridors, and potential crossings to prioritize and sequence land protection and crossing infrastructure for decades to come."

Led by WDFW and WSDOT, we are helping to create a statewide Washington Habitat Connectivity Action Plan that will identify and prioritize wildlife crossing locations and habitat conservation opportunities throughout the state.

But a plan alone won't be enough. Our next challenge will be to support the creation of a permanent collaborative group – a Washington Connectivity Coalition – dedicated to legislative advocacy, securing funding, coordinating state and regional agency and stakeholder planners and practitioners, and educating the public and decision makers about the importance of connectivity.

"We might have all the data in the world, but if we don't have social and political capital, and the funding to help operationalize the plan, we won't be successful at implementation. For years we facilitated the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group. I see the Connectivity Coalition as a broadening of this group's work and an evolution of how we organize to get things done on the ground," Jen shared.

Humans are part of the landscape, but there are places we can and should have a smaller footprint. With the data we have, and a plan in place, we can be more strategic about our impacts, provide more security habitat for wildlife to move through, and improve the condition of that habitat so that wildlife can migrate, breed, feed, and have all the things they need in order to thrive.

Connecting habitat is a globally recognized best-strategy to protect and restore landscapes and improve biodiversity and ecological function. As such, millions of federal dollars are being allocated to wildlife crossing projects and adjacent habitat restoration. Washington has the data. What we need is a plan and collaborative strategy to execute that plan.

This work is at the core of our work. "When people think of Conservation Northwest, they think of connectivity, it's analogous to who we are. It is ingrained in how we think about landscapes and built into our practice. I can't think of another organization that prioritizes and executes this work the way we do."

Types of Wildlife Crossings



Overpasses

Wildlife overpasses, or bridges (you've likely seen one over I-90 on Snoqualmie Pass), are designed to help large mammals and other wildlife cross busy highways safely. These structures often blend into the landscape using vegetation and natural materials, reducing noise and visual disturbance for animals. You can expect to see species such as elk, deer, black bears, and cougars using overpasses, but they are not limited to a specific set of species. These crossings are essential for helping animals move safely across highways, reducing roadkill incidents and promoting genetic diversity in isolated populations.



By doing this, we’re basically handing WSDOT a pre-approved engineering report so that they can take to the next step and get funding. Conservation Northwest is filling a void in the state’s capacity trying to make sure this gets done.

BRIAN STEWART
Cascades to Olympic Program Senior Manager

“When we first started looking at parcel development it looked bad. It was happening way faster than we anticipated, so we started looking at how we could secure land around the remaining habitat linkages, so that when the feasibility study shows us where the wildlife crossings need to go there’s a place to put them,” Brian explained.

Wildlife crossings are crucial because without them, animals have almost no chance of surviving a crossing. “I-5 runs right through the Chehalis basin which is home to 85% of the biodiversity in the state. When populations of wildlife are cut off from each other and

don’t have access to other landscapes, they have a 50-75% higher likelihood of local extinction, Brian emphasized the importance of this zone.

Our next steps are continuing to collect data by installing wildlife monitoring cameras at proposed crossing sites; coordinate four working groups with state agencies, Tribes, and nonprofit partners; and narrow down the options for crossings with studies on human impacts to wildlife, fish passages, and wildlife genetics. All of this is leading to a “shovel-ready” wildlife crossing project that we aim to have in place by 2030.

90% Success on Highway 97

We’re addressing a critical connectivity need in Okanogan County along Highway 97 over a stretch of 12 miles where multiple wildlife collisions were happening daily before Conservation Northwest stepped in.

“We studied this area for many years, and it’s shown to be a major connectivity zone from the Kettle to Cascade Mountains,” Sagelands Heritage Associate Director Jay Kehne shared “The maps show it, the data shows it, and the dead deer on the highway show it. There’s a lot of animals that want to move east to west across highway 97. We’re just answering the call to protect connectivity.”

The goal of the Safe Passage 97 project is to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and restore vital habitat connections for species such as mule deer, black bears, and moose. The effort began with the Janis Bridge Project, where an existing bridge was improved and paired with fencing to guide animals safely underneath the highway. This initiative has proven highly successful, reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions by over 90% in that area. Once a location where up to 35 deer were killed annually, it now reports just one or two incidents a year. The success of this project has energized local communities, demonstrating that these measures can work, save lives, and maintain healthy wildlife populations.

However, Safe Passage 97 is far from complete. The project spans a 12-mile stretch but only one mile has been addressed so far, more wildlife underpasses and fencing are needed. Conservation Northwest



Fencing along highway 97 helps protect and guide animals.

is actively working alongside WSDOT to secure additional funding, supporting through securing match funding and supporting grant proposals.

The project not only benefits local wildlife but also carries significant social, economic, and safety implications. Reducing these incidents is an investment in both wildlife conservation and public safety. In addition to limiting wildlife collisions, this work directly protects a Colville Confederated Tribe first food, mule deer. Connectivity work impacts far beyond the bridges that we see while driving along the highway.

With support from local communities, tribal leaders, and government representatives, Safe Passage 97 has maintained momentum. As the work progresses, Conservation Northwest is ensuring that the area remains a critical wildlife corridor, allowing species to move freely while reducing the risk of collisions for generations to come.



Arrows show possible crossing locations.

Underpasses

Wildlife underpasses can be more ideal for smaller animals that may prefer more sheltered environments. These crossings are less visible to humans and reduce light and noise disturbances, making them suitable for species that are shy or nocturnal such as beavers, rabbits, raccoons, and foxes. Additionally, amphibians and reptiles benefit from these crossings. Near the city of Cle Elum, on the same I-90 corridor, a series of wildlife underpasses have been constructed to complement the overpasses. Building underpasses and overpasses together along with fencing to support funneling the wildlife towards them helps to ensure these structures are more successful.



Fish Passage Structures

Fish passage structures are a specialized type of wildlife crossing designed to allow aquatic species to move upstream and downstream, especially in areas where roads, dams, or other human-made barriers block natural waterways. These structures are essential for maintaining fish populations, particularly for species that migrate between freshwater and the ocean. Species like salmon, trout, and other native fish rely on these passageways to reach spawning grounds. The restoration of fish passage helps sustain local ecosystems, benefiting not only fish but also predators like bald eagles, otters, and bears that depend on healthy fish populations.

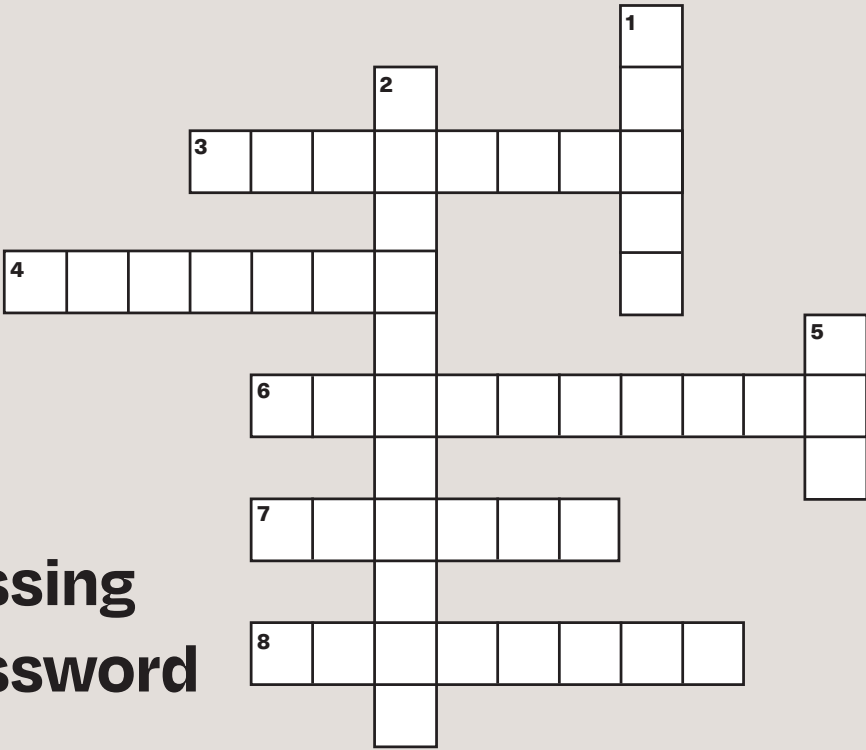
Thank You Connell Family



Conservation Northwest is incredibly fortunate to have many consistent and generous donors, with the Connell family playing a major role in recent years. Daryl and Michelle Connell, along with their children Danielle and Jake, have made our organization a central part of their family's philanthropy.

Their contributions have been pivotal, from funding much of the feasibility study for future I-5 wildlife crossings to supporting key property acquisitions like Figlenski Ranch and Green Point on Palmer Lake. When there are major wildlife crossings on I5, the Connells will deserve much credit. Connells' support also helps enhance habitat connectivity around Snoqualmie Pass and contributes to restoring grizzly bears in the North Cascades. Their generosity is making a lasting impact on the future of Northwest wildlife.

Crossing Crossword



Across

- 3. The county Safe Passage 97 focuses on.
- 4. What is missing? Connect, Protect,
- 6. The second most populated western state with the least amount of public land available for wildlife.
- 7. This small mammal, known for chewing wood, can benefit from wildlife underpasses.
- 8. A type of wildlife crossing that goes over a roadway.

Down

- 1. The bridge on Highway 97 with 90% less wildlife collisions thanks in part to CNW.
- 2. A barrier disrupting free wildlife movement between the Cascades and Olympic mountain ranges.
- 5. A conservation nonprofit that's leading connectivity in Washington state.

Answers: 1. Janis 2. Interstates 3. Okanagon 4. Restore 5. CNW 6. Washington 7. Beaver 8. Overpass

Stories Shape Us, Conservation Connects Us

I first fell in love with animals through story, specifically, Charlotte's Web, Stuart Little, and The Trumpet of the Swan by E.B. White. Then, between undergraduate and graduate school, I worked at a vet clinic. One day someone brought in a box of seemingly abandoned ducklings. I held one in the palm of my hands, and someone took a picture. I still carry this picture in my wallet because that was the moment I knew I was going to work either with or on behalf of wildlife for my career. All through my university studies, I learned from Native elders and spiritual practitioners – often through story – about how conservation work could and should be done in a holistic way – one that includes language, culture, and biotic systems. What an immense privilege it is to be at Conservation Northwest and thoroughly nourished, in all ways, through my work.

Our mission to protect, connect, and restore habitat for wildlife drives my efforts every day. Our ever-evolving methodology to use multiple ways of knowing fuels my passion to achieve conservation results through reconciliation between people and the land. Eco-culturally connected lands and people can restore our souls and our landscape so that wildlife will always find everything they need to thrive across our incomparably beautiful state. Thank you for your ongoing support. It means we can continue to learn and grow both professionally and organizationally, building durable bridges - literally and figuratively - for wildlife and people.

JEN SYROWITZ
Conservation Programs Sr. Manager



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- Save post-tax money for personal use

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Stock donations are easy through Freewill, and not only increases your impact but also maximizes your tax savings.

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