



Lower Kennicott Ranch

Photo by Anne Layman ©2011

# BENCHMARK

NEWS FROM THE SAN ISABEL LAND PROTECTION TRUST

FALL/WINTER 2011

## Duckett Creek Ranch

# Fire and Wind: Building Resilience to Natural Disturbances

by Ben Lenth

The year 2011 has been rough in the San Isabel region. La Niña weather patterns brought nothing but wind all winter. The drought became extreme as the spring was also dry, bringing an early wildfire season throughout the southwestern United States. Summer never caught up, the water barely flowed and hay yields were sparse. Hurricane-force winds were to follow late this fall, completing a year of natural disasters for the region.

At least one ranch in the northern Wet Mountain Valley was prepared for the nightmare conditions that the year would bring. Duckett Creek Ranch, a 400-acre ranch protected by SILPT in 2007, was in the direct path of the worst of 2011's natural disasters, the Duckett Fire, but fared well thanks to decades of excellent stewardship by Cynthia and David Huber and their long-time ranch manager Jim Whitcomb.

On the morning of June 12, a half mile from Cynthia and David's home, an untended campfire on the adjacent San Isabel National Forest escaped and began to spread. As the winds picked up, the fire expanded aggressively. Within hours evacuations began as the wildfire spread like giant fingers towards the ranch. Cynthia, David & Jim were in action, evacuating equipment and dousing the areas around the houses with water from their ponds. The fires passed just behind the houses and structures, circling around both sides of the ranch headquarters. By the end of the day, over 700 acres had burned including dozens on the ranch. Within a week, over 4,400 acres burned, and the blaze was not declared fully extinguished for nearly two months.

*Continued on page 4*



Duckett Creek Ranch



National Forest

| Duckett Creek Ranch





## San Isabel Land Protection Trust

### Board of Directors

**President:** Terry Nimnicht

**Vice President:** Vic Barnes

**Secretary:** Mary Ellen Lesage

**Treasurer:** Lynn Karantz

**Member-at-Large:** Bill Donley

Mattie Burt

Jan Hildebrand

Keith Hood

Ann Robey

Claricy Rusk

Bob Steimle

Greg Watkins

**Director of Conservation:** Ben Lenth

**Special Projects Coordinator:** Annie Layman

**Administrative Assistant:** Holly Wray

**Office phone:** 719-783-3018

**E-mail:** [info@sanisabel.org](mailto:info@sanisabel.org)

**Web address:** [www.sanisabel.org](http://www.sanisabel.org)

**Newsletter design:** Jan Lee,  
ReThink Creative

*We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization*

### Our Mission

*The San Isabel Land Protection Trust protects ranch, farm and forest lands, wildlife habitat, scenic views for public enjoyment and historic resources.*



## From the President

First let me thank all of you for your continued support of the San Isabel Land Protection Trust. For us and land trusts across the country the unstable governmental financial situation has posed uncertainty. However, we are moving forward with conservation projects and are optimistic about the future.

The Board has looked strategically at what the landscape looks like in the next five years and we have decided to approach the future conservatively. Given this, Katherine Ripley-Williams has decided to retire as Executive Director of the San Isabel Land Protection Trust. On behalf of the Board and the staff, I want to thank Katherine who transformed the daily operations of the organization, bringing a sense of warmth and leadership to the office. We are grateful for the contributions she made. Katherine is a great asset to our community and will continue to support the work of the San Isabel Land Protection Trust. Ben Lenth will continue on with San Isabel and assume some of the duties that were previously Katherine's responsibility. To reflect that added responsibility, Ben will become Director of Conservation.

## Director of Conservation

Two thousand eleven has been a busy year for San Isabel Land Protection Trust, with an expansion of the land trust's involvement in land and water protection efforts. In particular, conservation easement stewardship has emerged as a primary activity. For the first time, the land trust actively participated in the defense of water rights in the Wet Mountain Valley. I provided technical assistance and served as an expert witness in a water court case that ultimately settled in a manner that protected the water rights on three conservation easements. San Isabel also assisted with an analysis of water demands in Custer County and supported educational forums on water use in the county.

Land conservation tax incentives continue to enjoy strong bipartisan support both in Colorado and nationally. However, budget restraints on all levels place considerable pressure on these funds. If you believe in these programs, please share your stories and words of support with your representatives.

# George Beardsley Remembered

by Annie Layman

Long-time friend of San Isabel, George Bostwick Beardsley, died in August of this year. Although George and his family resided in Denver, where he was a highly respected land developer and citizen, his family's roots are in the Wet Mountain Valley and he always maintained a deep interest in the area.

The Beardsley history in the Wet Mountain Valley began in 1890 when George's grandfather, also George B. Beardsley, arrived in Westcliffe, and with H.H. Tompkins established the H.H. Tompkins Bank. In October of 1898, he was married to Pauline Swanson of Rosita who died in April of 1905. George never remarried. In 1920, George acquired the Tompkins stock and incorporated the Westcliffe State Bank in the building which currently houses Wild West Properties on Main Street. The Beardsley home was what is currently the Main Street Inn B & B. From 1901 - 1916, George also served as the mayor of Westcliffe. When he died in 1924, *The Wet Mountain Tribune* of December 19, 1924, stated, "The death of Mr. Beardsley came as the greatest shock this community and the whole county for that matter, ever had, for he had been with us so long and it seemed that each year won him greater esteem in the hearts of our people." George B. was buried in Rosita along with Pauline.

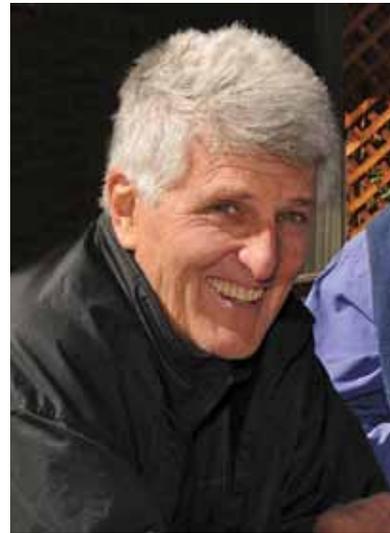
George and Pauline's children, George L (1899- father to George Bostwick) and Pauline (1901-who never married) also lived and worked here in many capacities and the Beardsley family could still be found in Westcliffe at the time of the 1930 census.

George L. "Woody" - fourth in the line of George Beardsleys- served for a time on the Board of Directors of SILPT. In quotes from several Denver newspapers at the time of his father's death, Woody spoke of the high regard in which those who

worked with him held George. "The reason he was so successful is because he cared about the people he worked with and he cared that things be done well." "He was very much interested in both land development and land conservation. He thought the two should be considered hand-in-hand."

George is best known for developing the Inverness Business Park in Denver. He also worked on the Copper Mountain Ski Resort and the Town of Vail. His Board experience is vast, including serving with the Colorado Conservation Trust, the Gates Foundation and the Nature Conservancy of Colorado. In 2004, Mayor John Hickenlooper appointed him to the Denver Water Board. George's friend Joe Blake, Chancellor of Colorado State University, said of his mark on the Water Board, "Some people were skeptical that a developer would do the right thing, but he became a leader on such things as water conservation." Beardsley was also a founding Trustee of Great Outdoors Colorado, whose lottery dollars have benefited the efforts of SILPT on many conservation easement projects over the years.

Following his death, Pam, George's wife of 51 years, graciously asked that memorial contributions be made in his name to benefit SILPT, and we have been amazed and grateful for the extremely generous response as a result of this request.





*Duckett Creek from the National Forest*



*New growth*

## Duckett Creek *continued*

Amazingly, at the boundaries of the ranch the aggressive crown fires coming from national forest land halted, leaving only appendages of ground fires creeping onto the property. The fires on the ranch never grew as intense as those on the neighboring national forest, and no structures were lost.

### **Decades of dedicated forest management**

The reason Duckett Creek Ranch didn't immediately become overwhelmed by wildfire and lose everything, despite its location in the heart of the wildfire, was due to decades of proactive forest management on the property and the prompt and valient efforts of firefighters who worked tirelessly to protect the Ranch . When the Hubers purchased the ranch in 1991, huge numbers of down trees made the forests difficult to travel through. The property had been logged in the early 1980s following a pine beetle infestation, leaving much down wood. Cynthia & Jim got to work immediately, thinning the forest to restore it to healthier conditions – conditions that would naturally result from frequent, low-intensity wildfire, as has been typical through the history of forests along the east side of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Throughout the 20th century, wildfires were suppressed, allowing the forests to grow thick with small, stunted trees and a large accumulation of down wood. Such overgrown forests have a higher risk of catastrophic wildfires. This was as true on the forests surrounding Duckett Creek Ranch as it is anywhere, and if it weren't for their dedicated forestry work, the entire ranch almost certainly would have burned.

Through these decades, Duckett Creek Ranch has faced infestations of Spruce Budworm and mistletoe, heavy fuel loads, and impenetrable thickets of Gambel

Oak. Each challenge was met with an appropriate remedy. Against infestations, large trees were logged to protect the younger ones and encourage regeneration. Other infestations called for aerial spraying. Oak thickets were roller-chopped to open pasture, improve wildlife habitat, and reduce fuel loads. Other ground fuels – branches and slash – were chipped, and larger trees were limbed to 6' above ground to reduce 'ladder fuels' which carry ground fires into the trees. The Hubers received grant money to assist with these efforts, in particular via the Habitat Protection Program of the US Forest Service, which encourages the creation of thick patches and open areas to improve wildlife forage and resting places. Similar monies are available from the NRCS.

The results of this work were evident in the Duckett Fire – the ground fuel reduction and limbing efforts had focused on the west side of the property, most of which was spared by the fire; less work was done on the south side of the ranch, which suffered more severe burning in 2011.

Following the fire, Cynthia, Jim & David plan to continue rotationally thinning and roller-chopping the property, treating perhaps 20 acres per year of Gambel oak and other species as needed to keep ground fuels in check.

### **Ecological changes, economic opportunities**

The Duckett Fire precipitated ecological changes on the forests in the area. Areas that were previously Gambel Oak and conifers are being recolonized by aspens, which are an early successional species that thrives on disturbance. That is their niche. When aspen stands become mature in about 100 years, they will typically be replaced by slower-growing and more stable conifers. The cycle continues – the fire only resets it.

*Continued on next page*

If the fire wasn't enough, along came the evening of November 13. That evening, Jim was sitting in his living room watching television, when all of a sudden a tree branch came through the roof not far from where he was sitting. The powerful windstorm took down trees relentlessly and unpredictably. Certainly 10,000 trees must have fallen that night, including many of the seemingly healthiest specimens, while sparing many standing dead – the ones you might expect to fall. Duckett Creek Ranch lost dozens of large, healthy trees – those same trees they had worked so hard to protect from wildfire.

The work done on Duckett Creek Ranch is expensive; the same treatment could not be prescribed for smaller holdings, and in

not all cases would the harvested resources be sufficient to pay for the work. Following fires and blowdowns, an incredible amount of wood needs cleaning up, and cumulatively these materials are very valuable. Hopefully many houses and barns will be re-built with these trees. Severe drought conditions continue to plague the San Isabel region. The heavy fuel loads of our forests will some day burn – that much is certain. The question for forest landowners is *how* their forests will burn. The goal must be to allow the return of fire to our local ecosystems in a way that does not endanger our homes and livelihoods. Forest landowners would be wise to follow the Hubers lead in maintaining defensive space around structures, and working to restore forest conditions to more diverse, thinner stand structures to both enhance and protect our forests.

## Recently Protected Properties

by Ben Lenth

The land trust also continues with a number of new conservation easement projects, three of which have closed since spring 2011 protecting 710 acres. All closed projects lie within Fremont County, where SILPT now holds 24 conservation easements covering over 5,500 acres. Other projects in Custer, Pueblo and Huerfano counties are in the works.

### **Smith Ranch – 320 acres, Fremont County**

The Smith Ranch is the first conservation easement in Garden Park, a priority conservation area north of Cañon City. This property is comprised of rolling piñon-juniper woodlands and native prairies, rising to steep hills and canyons to the east. The property is visible from the Gold Belt Scenic Byway off Shelf Road, and is certain to be followed by additional protected properties in the area.

### **Oxford Ranch 2 – 160 acres, Fremont County**

The Oxford Ranch is an incredibly beautiful property within the Cherry Creek Valley near Howard. This second phase easement protects a mix of open meadows and mixed-conifer forests, with several creeks. This property provides a buffer to BLM lands and is within ½ mile of the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness Area.

### **Brockett – Anderson, 230 acres, Fremont County**

The Brockett – Anderson Property lies along Bear Gulch, an important wildlife migration corridor in south-central Fremont County. The property provides a buffer for the adjacent Grape Creek Wilderness Study Area, managed by the BLM. The property's rolling foothills, dry washes, and piñon-juniper and ponderosa pine forests provide excellent wildlife habitat in a very fragile landscape.



*Oxford Ranch II*



*Brockett – Anderson*



## Seasons of the Sangres on Display at Rancher's Roost

If you've had a meal at Rancher's Roost in the last few months, you have undoubtedly been amazed at the seasons passing across the Sangres on the north wall of the dining area. This highly visible and beautifully constructed photographic mural was created by local artist Mike Arterburn. Each mountain peak is clearly labeled and credit for protecting this view is given to San Isabel Land Protection Trust. There is a spot in front of the mural where

we plan to put a table displaying our newsletters, brochures and items whose sale benefits SILPT. The man behind this whole effort is of course, Dick Stermer, whose generosity to San Isabel is something we can never thank him enough for. If you haven't seen it, go have a meal at Rancher's Roost and enjoy watching the seasons pass from the comfort of the dining room.

## New Brochure Emphasizes Four County Area

In November, with the help of a 2011 Land Trust Leadership Post-training Assistance Program Grant from the Land Trust Alliance, SILPT has a new brochure. Designed and produced by Jan Lee of local design firm, ReThink Creative, the brochure emphasizes the fact that the conservation

easement work of the Land Trust includes the four counties of Custer, Fremont, Huerfano and Pueblo. Although all of those counties have been within the scope of San Isabel's work, the previous brochure placed its main emphasis on the Wet Mountain Valley. While a majority of our easements

still lie within Custer County (70 easements comprising of 25,588 acres) Fremont, Huerfano and Pueblo contain a total of 47 properties totaling at 10,781 protected acres. The specific purpose of the LTA Grant was to "launch a campaign to expand our operations in Fremont County to make SILPT more visible and accessible...to increase awareness of our work in that county, and ultimately increase our donor base and the number of easements held in Fremont County." The new brochure is a specific tool aimed at this outreach campaign.

**FREMONT**  
Fremont County, a major historical crossroads in Colorado's history is today the state's undeveloped recreational paradise. Here the Arkansas River tumbles through the Royal Gorge, entering Colorado's famous belt, the narrow area in the state and home to generational ranches and farms. Rugged foothills and abundant access to the Arkansas provide recreational riches for rafters, fishermen, climbers and hikers. San Isabel's desire is to help preserve the scenic beauty and working landscape of Fremont County's varied landscape for future generations while supporting responsible development.



**HUERFANO**  
The northeastern extent of former Spanish territory, the Upper Huerfano River Valley is a unique landscape of sun-baked cliffs, green fields and large ranches in the shadows of volcanoes and mountain peaks. The area remains an undeveloped refuge for wildlife, agriculture and families whose ancestors settled the area generations ago. San Isabel is actively working to assist landowners in preserving the lands and water of this remote valley but is fully aware of the growing desire for energy development within South Central Colorado and the need to be flexible in customizing conservation easements.



**CUSTER**  
The heart of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains towers over the scenic Wet Mountain Valley, home to the San Isabel Land Protection Trust. Overall, over 20,000 acres of Custer County's bucolic landscape is now protected by conservation easements, representing over 2% of the private land in the county with much of it showcasing the agricultural heritage of the area.

**PUEBLO**  
From the foothills of Greenhorn Mountain to the productive floodplains of the Arkansas River, western Pueblo County includes vast expanses of mixed exotic forests, rugged canyons and fertile valleys with abundant wildlife, scenic views and recreational opportunities.



I would like to join with the San Isabel Land Protection Trust in their efforts to protect more of what is important to me as a resident of          by the very special part of Colorado.

Contributions are tax deductible. Please send checks to San Isabel Land Protection Trust, P.O. Box 124, Wray, CO 81252.

Name:

Email address:

Address:

City/State/Zip:

Phone:

\$50       \$100  
 \$250     \$500  
 \$1000     Other

We accept Visa and MasterCard

Name on card:

Credit card #:

Expiration Date:

3 digit code from back of card:

Thank you for believing in our mission!



# The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same

We made a few changes to Art for the Sangres this year, but one thing that didn't change was the loyal support of attendees and buyers. Our revenue was up somewhat from 2010 and as always we were extremely grateful for that support. Each year we look at

## Save the Date

Art for the Sangres 2012 will be Saturday, September 29 at the Historic Pines Ranch.

This is the 5th Saturday of the month. We hope to see you there.

how we can make our arrangement at the Pines work better for both artists and patrons.

This year we rearranged the main room by having a series

of three two-sided panels connected down the center of the east end of the room. This provided more hanging space for each artist and made the viewing of all art much easier.



Because of this, we moved our silent auction of art painted that week-end out into the entry area. Pieces could easily be viewed as people came and went from the food tent and both changes seemed to be very popular with everyone in attendance. Marion's Gourmet Catering took charge of the food and was appreciated by all.

Another change this year was the addition of an on-line catalog. Produced by Jan Lee of ReThink Creative, this page-turning catalog allowed patrons to view the art several weeks before Art for the Sangres and bids could be placed ahead of time for the fixed price lottery sale. Sales from the catalog added several thousand dollars to our totals.

This year we had to ask for even more volunteer help than usual and as always, volunteers enthusiastically came forward as docents, art hangers, cashiers, venue set-up and take-down crew, shuttle drivers, food preparers and greeters. That is something that will never change and we're so grateful.

## SILPT Summer Activities



*Our Field Day at Music Meadows Ranch in June.*



*Beer and Brats Party for our supporters in August.*

# Support SILPT with Your Holiday Gift Giving

If you are thinking about Holiday gifts, look no farther than our website [www.sanisabel.org](http://www.sanisabel.org) *A Passion for Ranching*, Bill Gillette's wonderful book of photographs of the Wet Mountain Valley and many of its ranching families is also available for purchase at our office or at Cliff Lanes. The sale of every book (\$32.02 with tax) benefits SILPT and it's definitely something that many of the people on your gift list would enjoy.

Photo from *A Passion for Ranching* by Bill Gillette



One of 12 wildlife portraits from *Seasons of the Sangres* by Sarah Woods.

There are also a few remaining copies of the limited edition portfolio of 12 wildlife portraits by nationally renowned artist, Sarah Woods, entitled *Seasons of the Sangres*. Each 8" x 8" canvas is signed and numbered and the set comes with a folding custom frame which can display two prints at a time or one print and a calendar insert which accompanies it. The price is \$750, of which \$400 is a tax deductible contribution to San Isabel.

## SUPPORT OUR WORK!

Once again this year, the Wet Mountain Valley Community Foundation is making it possible to increase your year-end donation through their matching funds for area non-profits. Up to \$1000 will be eligible to be matched. More than ever, your financial support is crucial to help sustain the effectiveness of our organization. Please give generously on our behalf and show that you support what we do.

Checks should be made to the Wet Mountain Valley Community Foundation and designated for SILPT.

The mailing address is:

PO BOX 718, Westcliffe, CO 81252.



**San Isabel Land Protection Trust**  
PO Box 124 • Westcliffe, CO 81252

**Address Service Requested**

US POSTAGE PAID  
NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
PERMIT #23  
WESTCLIFFE, CO  
81252