

CASCADES TO ROCKIES CAPITAL CAMPAIGN: Securing 8,750 acres to anchor one of Washington's most important wildlife corridors



Photo by Justin Haug, WDFW

"The Figlenski property is the linchpin piece in a public-private conservation effort to maintain landscape permeability across the Okanogan Valley for wide-ranging wildlife. The area is critical to the movements of a variety of carnivore and ungulate species including a portion of the state's largest migratory mule deer herd."

- Scott Fitkin, WDFW Okanogan District Biologist

Conservation Northwest seeks your contribution to an unprecedented and highly leveraged opportunity to gain permanent protection for 8,750 acres (14 square miles) of quality shrub-steppe habitat that is the linchpin of a wildlife corridor between the North Cascades and Rocky Mountains. We hold an option to purchase the ranch by this fall from the estate of Ernie Figlenski, who passed away in February 2021 and was the last member of the family that homesteaded it well over a century ago. In a story less believable than a pulp fiction western, Ernie died with peace of mind knowing he had secured, through the option he signed with us just days before his death, the future of this property for the wildlife he loved.

The price—set by an appraisal reported April 28, 2021—is \$500 an acre or \$4,373,000. Funds pledged to date total around \$2,500,000, including generous lead gifts of \$1 million from a private donor and at least \$500,000 from The Nature Conservancy, leaving a remaining fundraising goal of under \$2 million.

To sustain our wild Northwest landscape, we must protect habitat that links protected lands and wildlife populations of the Cascades and Rockies. Doing so will help sustain species like lynx while also generally helping nature adapt to climate change.

The importance of the Cascades to Rockies corridor was identified by an elite [consortium of biologists](#) and is shown (in yellow) in the graphic on the following page. A bottleneck—or fracture zone—exists where the corridor traverses private land in the Okanogan River Valley. Remedying that threat is the goal of the [Working for Wildlife Initiative](#), a coalition facilitated by Conservation Northwest with funding from the [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation](#). The coalition has secured investments in this corridor of over \$10 million for purchase of land or conservation easements, extensive habitat restoration on state, federal, and tribal land, and [far more yet to facilitate wildlife crossing of Highway 97](#), which bisects the bottleneck.

Figlenski Ranch, and the Tunk Valley of which it is the keystone property, is stunning in its vast sweep, natural condition, and glorious views. It sits at a critical junction of this important east-west corridor with a separate north-south corridor for sagelands wildlife, and securing it would be the crowning achievement of our body of work in the region. The property contains vital winter range for mule deer and several leks (breeding areas) for endangered Columbian sharp-tailed grouse—both of great cultural importance to

the area's Native American tribes. Ernie Figlenski sighted a wolverine on the ranch in 2018 and a lynx some decades ago. Wolves now roam the valley commonly.

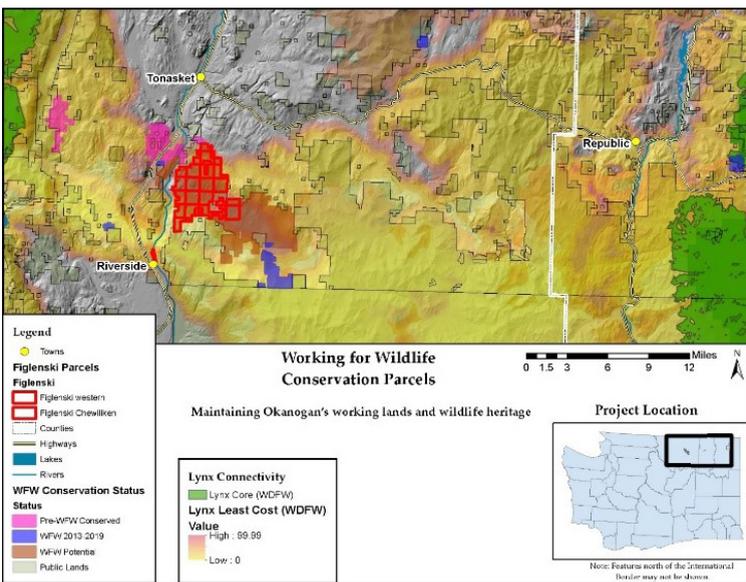
adopt through a resolution passed in February.

In line with Conservation Northwest's past wins preserving wildlands of the Loomis Forest, Blanchard Mountain, linkages across the I-90 corridor, and many more, securing the Figlenski Ranch would mark a great advance in keeping the Northwest wild.

Please help us bring about this great success. Through access to bridge capital, we are able to accept pledges payable through 2022.

Ecological Case

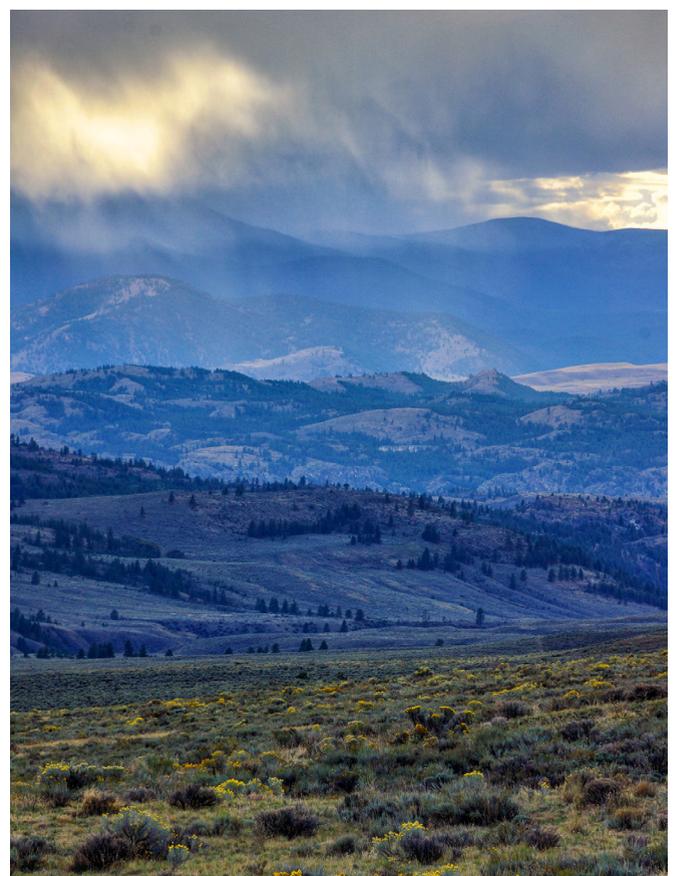
The best way to sustain sensitive wildlife is to protect areas that are large enough and wild enough to support sizable populations of free-roaming species, and to link these areas together with functional habitat corridors. When connected, even small patches of habitat function more like large patches, supporting more abundant, diverse, and resilient wildlife populations. The changing climate adds urgency to this approach, both because functional ecosystems are more resilient against change and because an intact and connected landscape allows species to shift their ranges in response to a warming world. This general approach is often called *landscape conservation*.



Yellow depicts habitat connecting core areas for lynx (shown in green) in the North Cascades and Kettle Mountains. The bottleneck is where it crosses the Okanogan River and Highway 97. While red shows the critical Figlenski Ranch, properties shown in magenta and blue are already protected and brown are in process.

There is great risk to this wild place. The ranch has been actively on the market since 2015, when the Tunk Block Fire burned Mr. Figlenski's home and those of his recently deceased brother and parents. Ernie recently sold the eastern 3,000 acres to a neighboring ranch (that is putting it under easement) and over 500 acres in its northeast corner to a California developer, who is subdividing it for housing. 8,750 acres is still available to conserve. **Conservation Northwest seeks to fund the direct transfer of these 8,750 acres to the Colville Confederated Tribes**, whose reservation sits just a few miles south.

This valley is part of a much larger area that the Colville Tribes have an exceptional connection to. It was within traditional territory of the Okanogan Tribe, one of 12 in the Colville Confederation. But it was also within the original reservation established for the Colville tribes in 1872. In 1892, after gold was discovered, the "North Half" of the reservation was nominally purchased back by the government for the purpose of white settlement and mining. The Tribes desire the property for its historical, cultural, and ecological values. These values will be protected by a covenant on the deed that the Colville Business Council committed to



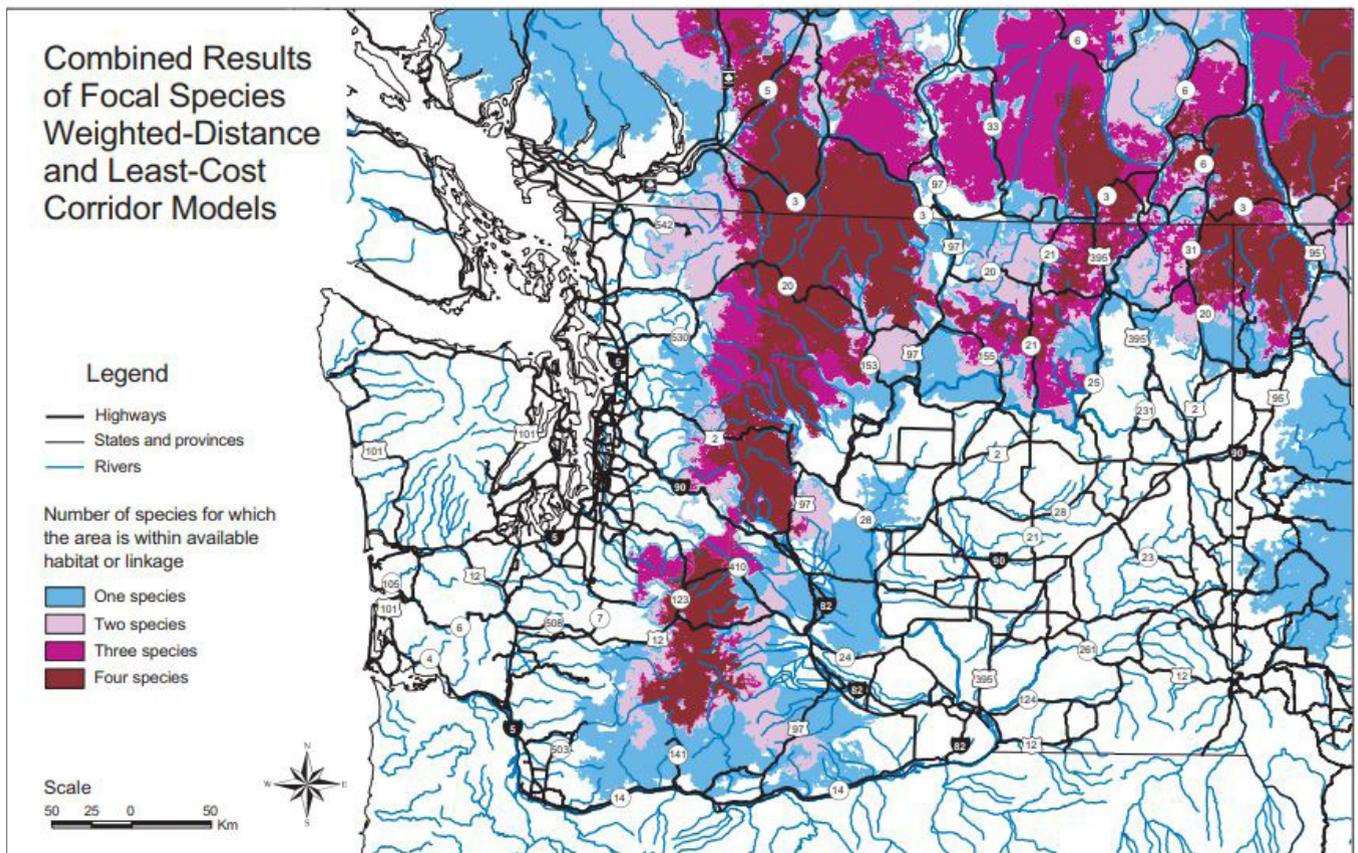
The Tunk Valley looking west. Photo by Justin Haug, WDFW

We're fortunate in the Northwest to have a landscape with substantial acreage to work with, thanks to our mountain ranges, the federal public lands within them, and decades of conservation effort to protect their ecological function. This [research publication from 2002](#), which used scientific modeling to evaluate the condition of the landscape in terms of linkage opportunities, has long guided much of Conservation Northwest's connectivity efforts. A potential disruption in a habitat corridor is called a *fracture zone*. The Cascades to Rockies corridor has a fracture zone in the Okanogan River Valley, where wildlife movements are constrained to a bottleneck by development on surrounding properties and traffic on Highway 97. Since about 2007, Conservation Northwest and partners have undertaken a vast body of work (detailed below in "Conservation Context") to protect the function of this wildlife corridor, and the Figlenski Ranch is the linchpin of that work.

In the research publication noted above, the graphics on pages 80 through 95 (with page 95, below, being perhaps most compelling) highlight the linchpin value of the Figlenski Ranch for linking the Cascades to the Kettle Range (and beyond to the Rockies) for species like lynx, wolverine, wolves, and even grizzly bear.

The science and modeling tools have continued to evolve, and ensuing work has tended to confirm earlier models. Washington is well served with connectivity modelling by the [Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group](#), an ad hoc coalition of biologists from state and federal agencies, academia and NGOs. Their statewide modelling results are assembled [here](#). Their [model for lynx connectivity](#) between the Cascades and Kettles runs right through the Tunk Valley and its keystone property, the Figlenski Ranch.

The Connectivity Working Group has also modelled the needs of species that rely on sage steppe habitat, such as Columbian sharp-tailed grouse. For these species, the trick is to keep habitats and subpopulations linked along the Okanogan River corridor between the Columbia Basin and the grasslands of British Columbia's South Okanogan-Similkameen region, which is the objective of a different effort of ours: the [Sagelands Heritage Program](#). In [this model for sharp-tailed grouse](#), particularly graphic number 4, you see the prominence of the Tunk Valley (labelled Habitat Concentration Area #3) and its Figlenski Ranch.



Combined results of the landscape linkage models for the focal species.

There is one place where the mapped corridors converge for the east-west linking of large mammal populations between the Cascades and Rockies and the north-south linking of sage steppe species: the Tunk Valley and Figlenski Ranch.

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Scott Fitkin, WDFW Okanogan District Biologist, holding a cougar cub.

includes the most strategic habitat for sharp-tailed grouse conservation in the Okanogan Watershed, and as such, is critical to the recovery of this endangered species in Washington. In addition, given that the parcels lie at the heart of one of the largest remaining blocks of undeveloped shrub-steppe habitat in North-Central Washington, it’s also important to the survival of host of other shrub-steppe obligates from badgers to burrowing owls.”

-Scott Fitkin, WDFW Okanogan District Biologist

History and Description

Tunk Creek flows east to west, draining from the western slopes of the Okanogan Highlands within the Colville National Forest down through arid grassland and into the Okanogan River in McLoughlin Canyon. The creek parallels the northern border of the Colville Indian Reservation, which runs along the forested southern slopes of the valley. The Figlenski property runs almost all the way west to the Okanogan River, with the lower (western) half being rugged with remote canyons and the eastern being half more gentle. All of it is arid grassland with trees few and far apart.



Pair of displaying sharp-tailed grouse. Photo: HStiver

Ernie Figlenski died in February while tending his cattle in the frigid cold. With his passing closed a classic western story that began in 1904 when his great grandfather moved his family of five sons from Wisconsin to homestead the lower Tunk Valley. Over four generations, the family expanded the ranch up to almost 15,000 acres. Large ranch operations are what kept much of the Okanogan in open space and suitable for wildlife for over a century. But land use patterns change with the economy, and this was one of only 14 full-time ranches still in operation in Okanogan County in 2008. Of county ranches over 400 acres, about half changed ownership between 1993 and 2008. Of the land that changed hands, about half went out of ranch use to developers, investors, and amenity buyers.

A decade ago, the ranch remained in full operation by Ernie Figlenski, his brother, and their parents. Ernie lost his mom in 2011, his brother in 2014, and his father in 2019. In 2015, the Tunk Block Wildfire burned down their homes, barns, hay, and many fences, leaving Ernie to make the difficult decision to sell the property. The ranch has spent the ensuing time on the market, which has been flat since the fires. In 2019, the neighboring 20Bar3 Ranch bought the easternmost 3,000 acres, which will soon be placed under conservation easement with funds from the present session of the Legislature. Then the Covid pandemic stirred up the housing market and another 640 acres was sold, most of it to a developer who intends to subdivide for cottages. But the heart of the ranch, the part essential for our conservation objectives, remains intact and is covered by our purchase option.

The closing of the Figlenski family era is harrowing. Ernie was a quiet and gentle man of 65, the last of his immediate family. He and Mitch Friedman, Conservation Northwest’s Executive Director, had

largely agreed to terms on a purchase option. The last remaining issue was that Ernie wanted assurance that the ranch would remain in its present condition, as the open space and wildlife habitat that was his family's heritage. The challenge was that we intended to donate the property to the Colville Tribes, and we knew that the Colville Tribal Business Council would object to accepting property encumbered with a conservation easement. This position is common among governments, including the US federal government, as easements are seen as an impingement on the sovereignty of the nation. This is especially so given that the Tribes had previously owned the vast area including the Figlenski Ranch until a federal edict in 1892 shrank their reservation. With abundant legal guidance, Mitch worked with Colville tribal leadership on language committing the Tribes to encumber the property through a restrictive covenant on the deed. That language reads in part, *In accepting title to the Property, the Colville Tribal Business Council also approves the placement of a covenant on the Property to manage and maintain the Property in accordance with the following restrictions on the use of the Property to protect in perpetuity the Conservation Values of the Property...* Ernie approved this language as satisfying his family's legacy.



Ernie Figlenski. Photo by Nancy Soriano

Two days later, at the very hour that Mitch was in nearby Nespelem speaking with the Colville Business Council as they passed the resolution committing to the covenant, Ernie passed away among his small cattle herd. The purchase option is binding on his estate, so we are working now to secure his final dream and wish.

Cultural Context

The Tunk Valley is within the traditional territory of the Okanogan Tribe, one of the twelve tribes forced in 1872 to move onto the Colville Indian Reservation, named for Fort Colville and its namesake, a Scottish Governor of the Hudson Bay Company. The reservation was originally established from the Columbia River to the Canada border, but in 1892, the federal government removed the northern 1.5 million acres to the current boundaries. The

government eventually paid the tribes \$1 per acre, allotted 80 acres to each tribal member who chose to remain in the North Half, and recognizes "usual and accustomed" tribal hunting and fishing rights to the land. Most of the allotments were sold to settlers over time, and none are known in the Tunk Valley.

The geography and ecology of the Tunk Valley are suitable to various plants and animals highly valued by the Colville Tribes. These include mule deer, a vital focus of subsistence hunting; Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, the mating behavior of which is the inspiration for the Prairie Chicken Dance, an ancient tradition still common today; and food and medicinal plants like bitterroot.

"The Colville Tribe is excited by the prospect of having 8,750 acres of the homelands of the Okanogan people returned to the Tribe's ownership. Our tribal members have close ties to their homelands through familial experience, knowledge of the history, fishing and gathering areas, and stories learned from their Elders. Having access, our members of the Colville Tribes will create new shared experiences and a growing sense of the land while creating memories. Under our ownership the Tribe can ensure future management supports the conservation goals and objectives consistent with tribal values."



Rodney Cawston, Chairman of the Colville Business Council

-Rodney Cawston, Chairman of the Colville Business Council

Conservation Context

Gifts towards the acquisition of the Figlenski Ranch are highly leveraged, as they are the culmination of over a decade of conservation work in this landscape. Protecting this habitat corridor became one of our top priorities around 2005. We catalyzed an effort involving Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, The Trust for Public Land and Okanogan Land Trust that brought federal Endangered Species Act funding in 2007 to acquire two key properties where the corridor crosses Highway 97, one of which was being actively marketed for development. This

is now managed by WDFW as the 2,200 acre [Carter Mountain Wildlife Area](#). From 2011 to 2014, with help from [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation \(NFWF\)](#) and many Conservation Northwest capital donors, we purchased easements to over 600 acres of the Gotham Ranch east of Republic, a key location at the eastern end of the corridor.

By 2014, we had expanded our coalition—adding Colville Confederated Tribes, Okanogan Conservation District, Okanogan Trails Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation, US Forest Service, and others—to launch the [Working for Wildlife](#) initiative through NFWF. Through our [seven-year business plan](#), which (somewhat extended) comes to a close by the end of 2022, we have accomplished an extraordinary amount. NFWF alone has contributed over \$1.5 million, and partners have more than matched this amount with funding and in-kind effort. Highlights include:

- Restoration of lynx habitat in the uplands at either end of the corridor through Forest Service projects that have thinned thousands of overly dense forested acres and removed more than 30 miles of logging roads;
- Removal of about 6 miles of roads in lynx habitat on the Colville Indian Reservation;
- Removal of over a dozen miles of obsolete barbed wire fence;
- Installation of fence markers on 7 miles of barbed wire fence to prevent sharp-tailed grouse from becoming entangled.
- Development of conservation plans and provision of technical assistance to over 30 local landowners who manage thousands of acres;
- Translocation of 71 sharp-tailed grouse to the Tunk Valley and Scotch Creek Wildlife Area;
- Acquisition of conservation easements on 2,776 acres of private property, both upland rangeland and key acres adjacent to Highway 97;
- Development of [a functional wildlife crossing under Highway 97](#), supported by the construction of about a mile of fencing; and
- In 2019, Conservation Northwest purchased the 1,500 acre Chapman property, just south of the Figlenski Ranch, put it under easement, and sell the encumbered land to a conservation buyer.

All of this work culminates over the coming months:

- We are lobbying the state legislature to include \$18 million in the Transportation Budget to complete additional wildlife underpasses and

fencing on Highway 97;

- Okanogan Land Trust has proposals to purchase conservation easements on three properties totaling 4,480 acres in the Tunk Valley. These have all been ranked high enough by the state's Recreation and Conservation Office that the Legislature is almost certain to fund them;
- Partners will complete more road removals and fence upgrades on the Colville Indian Reservation; and
- With your help, we will secure the linchpin by purchasing the Figlenski Ranch!

Logistics

An appraisal was completed in April. Per our purchase option, the appraiser established the property's fair market value for agricultural and open space uses. The option provides us until at least late September to close. At closing, the deed will transfer directly to the Colville Tribes, with the protective covenant placed on the deed as worked in a resolution adopted by the Colville Business Council on February 18. Conservation Northwest will wire funds into escrow to enable the transfer.

Gifts made to the Cascades to Rockies Capital Campaign will be restricted to this purpose. Any funds in excess of the purchase price may be used to offset the costs of the campaign or to purchase conservation easements to additional acres on adjoining high conservation value properties in the Tunk Valley.

We hope that you will join with us in this rare opportunity to permanently protect the most important remaining piece in our efforts to connect the Cascades to the Rockies and thereby help keep the Northwest wild!

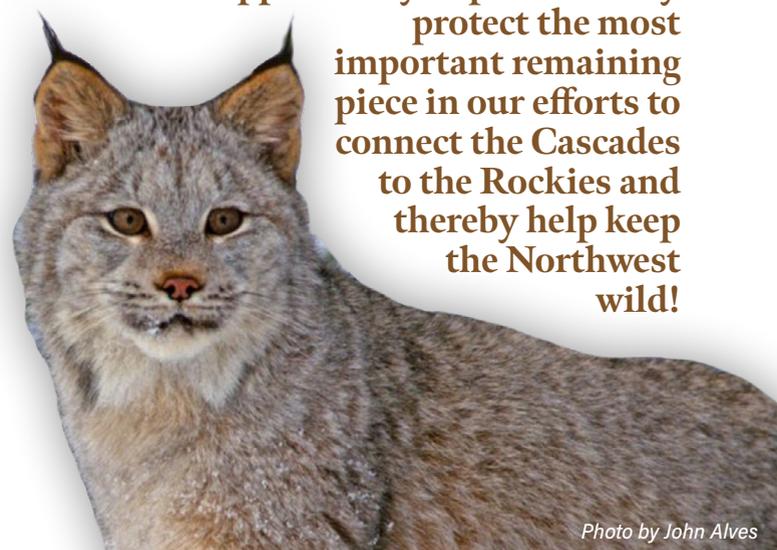


Photo by John Alves