



# Event Recap: Habitat Connectivity Broadwalk

by Linda Starr



Author and Rio Grande Valley Broadband co-leader Linda Starr bundled up for the cold mornings!

**A**lmost fall, on a sunny mid-September afternoon, my spouse and Bro, Bob Cornish and I, pulled up in our old rattled pickup truck, plastered with bumper stickers, to the Habitat Connectivity Broadwalk.

Splendid golden colors, just beginning to sparkle amid the evergreens, beckoned us into the wilderness. For four lovely days, with only occasional spells of wind and drippy conditions, we joined with some of our own Broadband members among old and newfound friends. Our goal for this sojourn was to become acquainted with the vast importance of habitat connectivity and what these terms mean for plants, animals and, yes, we humans too.

A steep, rugged terrain, the South San Juan Mountain Wilderness rests southeast of Pagosa Springs, Colorado in the Rio Grande National Forest. Our camp lazed beside the swiftly rolling Conejos River, where a few brave souls cooled achy feet after intrepid hikes.

After dinner on Thursday, we gathered our camp chairs in a wide circle to introduce ourselves and name an animal we wished to be and why. Animals from rainbow trout and sea otter to lynx popped up. With our focus on habitat connectivity, the first animal that came to my mind was the wolf. In New Mexico, we Broads attended several U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) hearings on releasing the Mexican Wolf and pled for habitat connectivity. We're also hoping the gray wolf will be released into this part of southern Colorado.

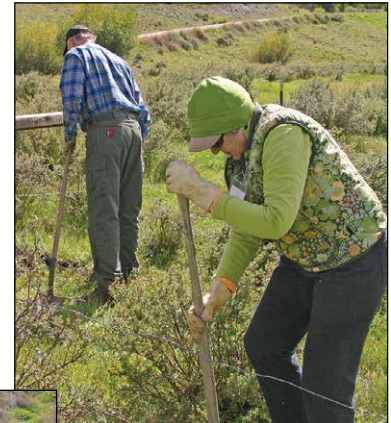
Between rainstorms, we listened to many knowledgeable, impassioned presentations, including Dr. Barry Noon, conservation and landscape ecologist at Colorado State University, who spoke on the effects of land management on imperiled species; and Dr. Paul Beier, wildlife biologist and conservation biologist at Northern Arizona University, who discussed habitat connectivity—why it's important, and how science and data are used to conserve it. We also heard from wolf expert, author, and former USFWS wolf recovery coordinator Carter Niemeyer. Cheney Gardner of Turner Endangered Species Fund and Hailey Hawkins of Endangered Species Coalition described our advocacy focus, the *Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act* (H.R. 6448).

On Sunday morning, Anna Lee Vargas, Director of Conejos Clean Water in nearby Antonito, presented on the organization's grassroots work to build public awareness and encourage advocacy and education on environmental, social, economic, and food justice issues. The group endeavors to expand Rio Grande del Norte National Monument (which President Trump may now be trying to reduce) into Colorado

to protect the history, culture, and beauty of the land. Anna is an empowering example of a truly great young broad and mother, and her fervent talk nearly had us in tears.

The last night, Greg Hill, Project Coordinator for Wood River Wolf Project in Idaho, spoke on finding common ground to encourage coexistence of wolves and livestock. Dr. Andy Gulliford, a professor of history, author, environmentalist and outdoorsman, offered moving examples from his literary pieces and from other notable land warriors. We were so lucky to have these incredible experts in our midst, thanks to Carrie King, Broads' Associate Director, who made all arrangements.

On Friday, we had our choice of eight stewardship activities. Bob and I joined the group heading up Bear Lake Trail, working about a mile into the wilderness sawing fallen trees and building channels to direct runoff.



Broads & Bros mending fences

Other groups repaired fencing in frog habitat, removed old fencing, cleaned up campgrounds, and installed trailhead signs. We were a bunch of busy bees.

Saturday was reserved for playtime in the woods. My group headed a mile up the initially steep Duck Lake Trail that then became



Hardy hikers dressed for occasional rain showers

a gentle two-mile hike in rolling terrain until we reached the lake. We were treated to spectacular scenic views into the Conejos River Valley. Two other groups were hard-core hikers, with one party ascending the Tobacco Lake Trail to 13,000-foot Conejos Peak. Bob's band of hard chargers followed Broads' Grassroots Leadership Director Lauren Berutich four miles (one way), gaining 2,650 feet in elevation to Ruybalid Lake. At least two valiant Broads took an ice-cold dip in the lake. During our numerous excursions, many of us were treated to views of wildlife like the herd of bighorn sheep frequently sighted on a particular road embankment.

It's always sad to say goodbye when these wondrous outings come to an end. After departing to journey home or to other adventures, we ponder these outstanding opportunities to learn about special areas like the South San Juan Wilderness and the possibilities for continued protection of such last-remaining expanses of paradise. Bending along the mountain roads, I reminisce on the many Broadwalks we've been fortunate to encounter. What an undeniable blessing!

