



## Circle Creek Project

The North Coast Land Conservancy has been working with a wide variety of partners interested in coastal natural resources to complete a 364-acre land acquisition with a willing seller. The property is located in Clatsop County along the lower reaches of the Necanicum River delta within the city of Seaside. This land is the lowland feature of the Tillamook Head ecosystem and would connect to over 3000 acres of upland forest and coastline of Ecola State Park. This acquisition of 364 acres would secure extensive winter habitat for two large herds of elk, and protect over three miles of salmon, steelhead and cutthroat trout habitat on the Necanicum and Circle Creek systems that are associated with the property. Protection would also include an old growth Sitka spruce forested wetland of over 100 acres.

The CIRCLE CREEK PROJECT has been two years in the making and we are nearing the finish line and working to get the last of the funding pulled together. We think this is a once in a life time opportunity to secure this critical land for its open space values to the community, important natural resource values, and the beautiful vista from Highway 101, an All American Road running the 1.4 mile length of this property.

The North Coast Land Conservancy has worked closely with its community and agency partners to use an ecological framework for the long range planning of this region. In 1992 the land trust helped the City of Seaside Planning Commission develop a wetland reserve plan that has options for private landowners to participate in protecting key natural resources by providing landowner options including acquisition, easements, and conservation agreements. Over the last ten years this approach has made natural resource protection a part of the community ethic and has been used to implement many of the goals set out in the community land use plan. The Circle Creek project is one of the last critical acquisition phases with this effort.

This project will connect to the community based natural history park approach; protecting ecological process over and above the historic geography based park approach (where only set lands were designated as parks in communities with generally little regard to the "ecological process" associated with the land or its larger system context). Not only will the Circle Creek project advance the natural resource lands under planning protection, it will also add greatly to the community assets associated with the coastal landscape.

# Circle Creek Natural Resources

## Habitat & Wildlife Overview

The Circle Creek property encompasses 300 acres of river delta and 64 acres of upland forest. This land includes 1.6 miles of Circle Creek, a highly productive low-gradient stream that provides high quality rearing habitat for juvenile salmon, and 1.4 miles of frontage along the Necanicum River, a major producer of salmon and steelhead.

Historically, most of this land was floodplain forest. The Necanicum River system's floodplain and estuarine wetlands have been lost as a result of human settlement and development. More than half of the Circle Creek property has been diked and cleared for pasture. These pastures have had only limited use for cattle grazing in spring and summer during the past few decades. However, the property was severely impacted 25 years ago by a failed development project that attempted to dike off both the Necanicum River and Circle Creek for development. The impact of that development is still being felt as a result of the alterations in hydrology and resulting habitat loss and degradation. Slowly the dikes are beginning to fail and the natural system is being stabilized.

The primary purpose of the proposed acquisition is to expand the existing block of protected habitats in the Necanicum system and Tillamook Head ecosystem to include key portions of the lower river floodplain, creating a linked network of conservation lands extending from the estuary to the upland forests of Tillamook Head. The project would protect remnant high quality wetland habitats and would insure restoration in the future of a naturally functioning floodplain system.

From a statewide and eco-regional perspective, the Circle Creek property is significant primarily for its wetland habitats, particularly its forested wetlands, and its value as habitat for a number of at-risk species. At the local level, it provides important habitat for a wide variety of migratory birds and terrestrial wildlife.

The Circle Creek property includes a 160-acre spruce swamp, one of the largest remaining blocks of a forested wetland type that has been largely eliminated from Oregon. This is a high quality example of an ecological community that is considered "vulnerable" at the global level and "critically imperiled" in Oregon, according to the Oregon Natural Heritage Program. The Oregon Natural Heritage Program in 1993 estimated historic losses of this habitat type at almost 90 percent statewide, with losses estimated at 97 percent outside the Lower Columbia River region. The property also includes about 60 acres of emergent wetlands and 70 acres of seasonally flooded pastures that provide important habitat for wintering waterfowl and other migratory birds and a variety of terrestrial wildlife despite significant degradation by past hydrologic alterations and agricultural use. Two herds of elk use the open fields and wetland forest almost daily during winter and spring.

The project will benefit five species that are either currently listed or recently de-listed under the federal Endangered Species Act: Coho Salmon, Steelhead, Northern Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, and Marbled Murrelet. In addition, the project will benefit three other species – Chum Salmon, Coastal Cutthroat Trout, and Red-legged Frogs – listed as "sensitive" under the Oregon Endangered Species Rules. Each of these species is discussed below:

Coho Salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch ssp.*) (*Threatened*). Acquisition will protect existing high quality habitat for Necanicum River Coho Salmon populations and allow additional habitat restoration and enhancement in the future. Both Circle Creek and the Necanicum River support spawning Coho populations; habitats on the target property provide migration and rearing habitat, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Surveys in 2003-04 recorded over 40 adults spawning in Square Creek, one of the first tributaries of Circle Creek.

Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss ssp.*) (*Candidate*). Acquisition will protect existing high quality habitat for Necanicum River steelhead populations and allow additional habitat restoration and enhancement in the future. Sampling on the property has documented presence of juvenile Steelhead in Circle Creek. The property also provides migration and rearing habitat for Necanicum River steelhead.

Coastal Cutthroat Trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki clarki*) (*recently de-listed as federal candidate taxon; listed as "sensitive" by State of Oregon*). Acquisition will protect existing high quality habitat for Necanicum River Cutthroat Trout populations and allow additional habitat restoration and enhancement in the future. Monitoring has documented juvenile and adult cutthroat trout on the property in Circle Creek and the Necanicum River. Cutthroat Trout use these habitats for rearing and migration.

Chum Salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*) (*listed as a "sensitive – critical" species under Oregon's endangered Species Rules*). Acquisition will protect existing high quality habitat for Necanicum River Chum Salmon populations and allow additional habitat restoration and enhancement in the future. Both Circle Creek and the Necanicum River support spawning Chum populations; habitats on the target property provide migration and rearing habitat, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Elk Two large herds of elk use this area for winter habitat during the winter months. The general habitat of these populations are the upland forest and timber lands of Tillamook Head. The opportunity to view the elk grazing in the wetland areas and open meadows of Circle Creek have a long history and residents and visitors value this visual access to wildlife viewing in this context.

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) (*Threatened*). Acquisition will protect existing high quality habitat for Bald Eagles. There are two nest sites on adjoining state park properties. The Circle Creek property provides roosting and foraging habitat for two pairs of bald eagles.

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) (*recently de-listed*). Acquisition will protect existing high quality habitat for Peregrine Falcons. Peregrine Falcons are regularly observed on the site during the nesting season but nesting has not been confirmed.

Marble Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) (*Threatened*). Acquisition will protect high quality habitat for Marbled Murrelet. Marbled Murrelets have been detected on the site in

recent surveys by Oregon State University researchers. The large old growth trees in the spruce swamp have the capacity to serve as nest sites, but nesting has not been confirmed. Only one other Murrelet nesting site has been identified in coastal Clatsop County.

Red-legged Frog (*Rana aurora aurora*) (listed as “sensitive” under Oregon Endangered Species Rules). Acquisition will protect existing high quality habitat for Red-legged Frogs, which have been documented on the property. Red-legged Frogs use the habitats found on the property for all phases of their life history.

In addition to the four salmonids noted above, the project will also benefit Chinook Salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*). The property provides migration and rearing habitat for Chinook Salmon in the Necanicum River. Acquisition of the Circle Creek property will allow future restoration and enhancement of habitat for all five of these salmonid species. Riparian (streamside) habitats along the Necanicum River on the property have been severely degraded by past livestock grazing, as have riparian and in-stream habitats along the portion of Circle Creek above the spruce swamp. We believe that restoration efforts could mitigate these impacts in a short period of time.

The project will also protect existing high quality habitat for a variety of coastal-dependent and migratory birds. Intensive monitoring of a similar 34-acre study site less than a half-mile from the Circle Creek property has documented use by 157 bird species. Banding and recapture data demonstrates long-term migratory and nesting use by a variety of neo-tropical migrants, including Yellow Warbler, McGillivray’s Warbler, and Rufous hummingbirds. The seasonally flooded pasturelands provide excellent habitat for migratory shorebirds such as Curlew, Whimbrel, Spotted Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, and Killdeer. Wetlands on the property receive extensive winter use by Ring-necked Duck, Scaup, Bufflehead, and Northern Pintail, as well as American Widgeon and Mallard.