RMEF’s quest to conserve elk habitat squares nicely with protecting the integrity of America’s National Historic Trails. And like Lewis and Clark, this alliance is proving to be a powerful duo.

In 2002, Tom Price and his family, owners of Price Cattle Company, decided the time was right to place a 640-acre voluntary conservation agreement (or VCA, also known as a conservation easement) on their ranch south of La Grande, Oregon.

“I donated the easement to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation because of the benefit of protecting habitat in perpetuity,” he says. “I believe in conservation easements, and I’m delighted the Elk Foundation does them.”

Their land is a mosaic of native forests dominated by ponderosa pine, shrublands of sagebrush and willowy creek bottoms that combine to provide forage and cover for the area’s bountiful wildlife. While the VCA does not include public access, it forever protects essential spring and summer range for elk and deer, including calving and fawning grounds, while also maintaining the land as a working ranch.

Yet the VCA came with another distinct benefit: historic preservation.

The Oregon National Historic Trail (NHT) commences from points in Missouri and Kansas, traveling more than 2,100 miles through Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. Starting in the 1840s, thousands of settlers embarked by wagon on the daunting journey west with the promise of cheap land and hopes for prosperity.
As the trail enters Oregon west of Boise, Idaho, it makes a sharp northward turn, generally following present-day Interstate 84. It’s along this stretch that the trail corridor passes through the Price’s 2,500-acre ranch.

“The Oregon Trail is a big deal here and that’s just great to be able to preserve that history,” Price says. “It just adds that much more importance to the easement.”

Farther north, the Oregon Trail corridor crosses the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Management Area in the Blue Mountains, which serves as both winter range for 100-200 elk and a migration stop for an array of birds and other wildlife. For travelers pulling wagons in the mid-1800s, though, it was infamous for its wagon wheel-sucking mud. In 2000, RMEF purchased 849 adjacent acres that expanded the WMA by more than 20%.

“I think it’s fantastic because you get a chance to preserve history and touch base with the events that shape our current habitat and even make it better,” says Bill Richardson, RMEF’s senior conservation program manager. “It’s not completely synchronous as far as mission overlap, but it’s a great thing when it happens and you’re able to double up to do more good.”

Upon passing the National Trails System Act of 1968, Congress established a network that now includes 11 scenic, 21 historic and almost 1,300 recreational paths.

Unlike most recreational or scenic trails, historic trails pay respect to events that shaped the history of the United States and, thus, are often not contiguous or may have multiple routes. In some cases, they share the same route—the Mormon-Pioneer, California and Pony Express national historic trails converge west of Lincoln, Nebraska, and follow the same path for hundreds of miles until reaching Salt Lake City, Utah.

Managed by the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, they mark routes used by explorers such as the 4,900-mile Lewis and Clark NHT; important commercial highways such as the 1,200-mile Santa Fe NHT connecting Missouri and New Mexico; and some of the darkest points in the nation’s history, including the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) NHT where 750 Nez Perce fled the U.S. military from Oregon nearly 1,200 miles, ending near the Montana-Canada border.

Carin Farley, national scenic and historic trails coordinator for the BLM, says that historic trails mark past migration routes, exploration, trade, struggle and military action while also traveling through ancestral homelands of hundreds of indigenous cultures. They offer the opportunity to learn from the often difficult stories of the past, she says.

“When historic trails are designated, they’re there to protect a period of significance, but I would argue it’s more than that. It’s this holistic landscape that paints a picture of the nation’s diversity. It’s the heritage of our country.”

They also go beyond just the lines on a map. Farley says she and other administrators develop baseline assessments to identify larger corridors and maintain their historic integrity. Because Native Americans made extensive use of many of these trails, she relies heavily on indigenous knowledge and tribal input to inform decisions on historic preservation. She spearheaded a project called Native Lands, National Trails to help in that effort, which overlays ancestral land maps with the national trail system.

Identifying, designing and protecting these corridors is also a natural extension of efforts to try to maintain each trail’s character so visitors can envision what it was like to travel them long ago. “Preserving that is supposed to preserve and conserve,” Farley says. “It’s that intrinsic value of ‘what would it have been like to walk this trail 200, 300 years ago?’ Preserving that is right in line with conservation.”

For groups like RMEF, it also sets the table for potent partnerships. Through voluntary conservation agreements and land purchases, RMEF staff often find a beautiful melding of conservation and history that only works to make projects that much better.

Mike Mueller, RMEF senior lands program manager, recently visited Fort Fizzle southwest of Missoula, Montana, where portions of the Lewis and Clark and Nez Perce trails follow the same path over Lolo Pass along the Montana-Idaho border. The Nez Perce trail notably departs for a time to avoid Fort Fizzle where, in July of 1877, 15 members of the 7th Infantry posted in anticipation of a confrontation with the Nez Perce. Tribal scouts witnessed the construction of fortified terraces, and the fleeing party headed north through the steep mountains away from the soldiers.

Mueller looked down at the map sitting on the tailgate of his truck before pointing up at the steep grassy hillsides that climb up to the 2021 Bear Creek Lolo Trails acquisition. RMEF worked with RY Timber to purchase 1,040 acres of industrial timber lands, then transferred ownership to the Lolo National Forest. This acquisition, and work by other organizations to convey additional parcels to the Forest Service, protected public access and wildlife habitat first and foremost, but also the character of a place so rich in history.

Protecting the “viewsheds” along these routes makes it all the easier to relate to their history because the land “is as it was,” he says. Most hunters, anglers and other recreationalists seek that as well.

“When you have a cultural or historical aspect of the project, everybody is interested in that,” says Mueller. “The more that hunters can be seen through their efforts as conserving not just places to hunt but
places that have American cultural value, Native American historical value; [the more it can help] tell the story of our country and show values that everybody can appreciate.

Sandra Broncheau-McFarland administers the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) NHT for the Forest Service. She is also an enrolled member of the Nez Perce Tribe, and works with 28 tribes as well as landowners and land managers to preserve the trail’s historic integrity. It’s considered sacred in its entirety, she says.

It follows a route once marked with blood. In the summer of 1877, the Nez Perce faced a forced relocation from their homelands in the Wallowa Valley in Oregon to a reservation in the Idaho Territory. That led to skirmishes between some tribal members and settlers before the battle of White Bird Canyon erupted and sparked months of battles across what is now Montana and Idaho as the Nez Perce attempted to flee to safety in Canada. Eventually, at the Battle of Bear Paw in October, Chief Joseph, in assessing the massive losses and land managers to preserve the trail’s historic integrity. It’s considered sacred in its entirety, she says.

“From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.”

“From my perspective, as a tribal member and a descendant...”

“...I think it’s important to remember that.”

Broncheau-McFarland says it’s also important to recognize that many soldiers died during the month-long pursuit.

“It’s always sad too when you look at the military history because those boys, many of them were really young and came from all these different foreign countries to serve here in America,” she says. “Their lives were taken, or they were badly injured in the raids that took place, and their lives count just as much as anyone’s.”

While the trail is most associated with the 1877 flight, its designation also recognizes its use for thousands of years by multiple tribes for trade, travel and hunting grounds and meetings between tribes that often led to intermarriages. “Even the acquisition of the horse, they were traveling the trail using pack dogs to move trade goods back and forth and down into California and to the Pacific Ocean, as if you were traveling that trail on foot,” she says.

HURRICANE ALLEY: Just west of Oregon’s Wallowa Lake where the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail begins, RMEF worked with private landowners in 2017 to purchase a 67-acre inhaling at the edge of the Eagle Cap Wilderness covering two miles of Hurricane Creek, a major corridor for hunters, hikers and horsepackers as well as winter range and migration path for elk. It’s now managed by the U.S. Forest Service and opened to all.

“‘Our culture is woven with really an intimate relationship between humanity and nature. We were taught to live in a state of balance and harmony with our surroundings and we considered animals our kin,’ she says. ‘I see these corridors benefiting not just the preservation of historic sites and segments and the history sharing the culture, but also just as important is the preservation and survival of our species that inhabit these corridors.’

“In 1868 as the Lewis and Clark expedition returned east from the Pacific Ocean, the party divided at what is now Traveler’s Rest State Park south of Missoula. Meriwether Lewis’ party embarked...”

RMEF’s Joseph Plains project near the Oregon-Idaho border protects more than 1,500 acres overlooking the Salmon River Canyon and the White Bird Battlefield, the first battle on the Nez Perce Flight of 1877.

“...he said, ‘We have these stories from our oral tradition that she speaks for herself but not officially for the us, 1877 wasn’t that long ago,’ she says, emphasizing the raids that took place, and their lives count just as much as anyone’s.”

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up the Blackfoot River toward what is now called Lewis and Clark Pass, having learned of it from the Nez Perce as a conduit from the mountains to the plains. Lewis wrote little about the low pass the Salish called Smítu Sx’cu’ji in his journal entries, mostly describing deer and beavers killed by the party for food.

But on July 7, Patrick Gas, a sergeant on the expedition, wrote “we proceeded on four miles up the branch, when we came to the dividing ridge between the waters of the Missouri and Columbia; passed over the ridge and came to a fine spring the waters of which run into the Missouri.”

Perched on the Continental Divide, that’s now a spot two national trails converge, and a place that’s remained near and dear to Mike Mueller’s heart since he shepherded the Green Mountain acquisition there in 2019. Purchased from a conservation-minded, multi-generation ranching family, it grew the Helena-Diamond and Pope ranches in southwest Wyoming.

“TRIPLE CROWN: RMEF’s 620-acre Green Mountain Front helped protect both habitat and history at the junction of three famous paths: the Continental Divide Trail, Lewis and Clark Trail and the Road to the Buffalo.

Charles M. Russell, 1918.

The benefits the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation brings to these public lands go well beyond just hunting resources and recreational opportunities,” Wiley says. “The more natural these lands are directly relevant to the time period of the expedition. It’s that context that lets the American people appreciate what these landscapes were like prior to European contact. As they ascended the Blackfoot River toward Green Mountain, the expedition followed a well-worn path passing through traditional Salish-Pend d’Oreille territory that the Nez Perce called Qoq’aalx ‘lskit, Road to the Buffalo, which took hunting parties to the plains where the vast herds roamed. Using travois—a cart made from two poles dragged behind a horse—they traversed the pass, leaving deep ruts and an easy path for Lewis to follow.

Upon his return to St. Louis, Lewis recounted stories of abundant wildlife including deer, pronghorns, bears and elk.

RMEF worked with private landowners near Trinidad, Colorado, near the New Mexico border to conserve a half dozen properties through voluntary conservation agreements. That also happens to fall within the Santa Fe National Historic Trail while respecting the rights of private landowners,” he says. “The opportunity to find additional methods to utilize the land and showcase the trails while protecting the natural integrity of the trails is welcomed by all of our trail partners.”

Whether consolidating checkerboarded landscapes or working with conservation-minded landowners, those charged with protection of historic trails believe the conservation work of RMEF and others will continue to foster a great partnership between habitat and history.

“The goal is to protect, preserve and promote the Santa Fe National Historic Trail and these historic and cultural values before they’re all broken up,” Mueller says.

While the Santa Fe Trail Association President Larry Short prides land conservation as an additional historic preservation tool to help build relationships between his group, private landowners and NPS which manages the trail.

“The vision in the future is to create a National Scenic Trail that will overlap in places to help preserve history and conserve the wildlife that inhabit them. Between 1996 and 2000, RMEF purchased the Diamond and Pope ranches in southwest Wyoming. Now under BLM ownership, the ranches combine with adjoining public parcels to create a 14,000-acre block of winter range for the West Green River elk herd. And if so happens that a significant section of the Oregon Trail passes directly through the Pope Ranch here in the windswept hills of Wyoming.

The namesake of RMEF’s first acquisition, Robb Creek in southwest Montana, feeds the Ruby River and then the Missouri where the Lewis and Clark expedition put more than a year exploring in 1806. Upon his return to St. Louis, Lewis recounted stories of abundant wildlife including deer, pronghorns, bears and elk.

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