

Project APNs

006-100-011, 006-110-005, 006-110-006, 006-110-009, 006-110-019, 006-130-029, 006-140-002, 006-140-004, 006-140-014, 006-140-016.

Property Description

The property, known as The Wildlands Conservancy's Two Rivers Preserve, encompasses 2,483 acres and is designated under the Resource Management (RM) land use category. All proposed uses are subject to approval through a use permit. These uses align with the Mono County General Plan Land Use Element (2023), which allows for "recreation facilities, such as improved bike trails, cross-country ski trails, and pedestrian trails requiring modification of the natural landscape, if found by the Commission to be compatible with the natural habitat of the area."

Located at the base of the Sierra Nevada and Sweetwater Mountains at Sonora Junction, California, the preserve sits within an ancient volcanic caldera. The landscape features a stunning mix of glacial moraines, river-carved canyons, montane meadows, and alpine vistas, enriched by over nine miles of rivers and streams, including the Little Walker River and West Walker River, both known for their bountiful trout fishing.

Two Rivers Preserve protects a wide array of habitats, including sagebrush steppe, wetland meadows, riparian corridors, aspen groves, and mixed conifer forests. These diverse ecosystems support a rich variety of wildlife, such as the bi-state sage grouse, Rocky Mountain mule deer, black bear, bald eagle, red fox, mountain lion, and multiple trout species.

The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) established the preserve in 2015 with the acquisition of 150 acres at the confluence of the West Walker and Little Walker Rivers—just two miles north of Sonora Junction. This key acquisition prevented subdivision for vacation homes and ensured continued free public access to the river for recreational uses, particularly fishing.

In August 2023, the preserve expanded significantly with the acquisition of the adjacent 2,330-acre Bently Junction Ranch, funded by the California Wildlife Conservation Board. This addition supports TWC's mission to:

- Protect vital wildlife migration corridors
- Restore native habitats
- Support native species rewilding (e.g., Lahontan Cutthroat Trout)
- Improve grazing management
- Enhance public safety and access
- Expand outdoor recreation opportunities

For management purposes, the preserve is divided into three primary public access areas:

1. **Walker Canyon Area:** Located two miles north of Sonora Junction along Highway 395 at the confluence of the West Walker and Little Walker Rivers.
2. **Kirman Lake Trail Area:** Accessed via Kirman Lake Road from State Highway 108. This area includes Junction “Black” Reservoir and the Pines Picnic Area, located two miles from the highway. Kirman Lake, situated within the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, lies on the southwestern border of the preserve.
3. **Little Walker River Area:** Accessed via Little Walker Road (county-maintained), this area lies along the preserve’s southern boundary west of Highway 395.

Proposed Use

Permit the existing conditions and proposed improvements listed below for The Wildlands Conservancy’s Two Rivers Preserve. The preserve will be open daily to the public free of charge from dawn until dusk. A seasonal ranger will be hired to manage preserve stewardship and public access needs for the preserve during the main visitation season.

- **Allowed Uses:** hiking, dogs on leash, mountain biking, picnicking, bird watching, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, wildlife viewing, fishing (per CDFW fishing regulations).
- **Prohibitions:** No fires, hunting or shooting, alcohol or smoking, collecting, drones, overnight parking, off-highway vehicles, or camping will be allowed on the property.
- **Safety Alerts:** standard safety alerts for public visitors include the presence of mountain lion, black bear, rattlesnakes, and no potable water. Additional safety alerts will be posted as they arise.
- **Preserve Closures:** the preserve will be closed in the event of unsafe, hazardous conditions and emergency situations.

Existing Conditions

Overview

The Wildlands Conservancy honored nearly all pre-existing public access uses inherited from the previous owners. Existing recreation activities include hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, fishing, picnicking, and wildlife viewing. Minimal improvements were made after acquisition, where appropriate, to align with the stewardship goals of the preserve and ensure TWC complies with the California Civil Code § 846. This code provides liability protections to the organization as long as known risks to public safety are addressed.

Walker Canyon Area

Located at the confluence of the West Walker and Little Walker Rivers at the northern end of the preserve. APN: 006-100-011.

- **Parking:** multiple paved and unpaved, gravel pull-outs on north and south-bound sides of Highway 395. Parking areas are within the Highway corridor and are maintained by Cal Trans.
- **Trails:** 0.9 miles of pre-existing informal social trails from pull-outs on both sides of Highway 395. Trails run parallel to the West Walker River.
- **Recreational Activities:** Fishing, swimming, and nature viewing.
- **Existing Amenities/Infrastructure:** USFS Junction C&H Grazing Allotment barbed-wire fencing, four small preserve signs near social trail entrance points installed in 2016.

Kirman Lake Trail Area

Located between State Route 108 and Kirman Lake in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. APNs: 006-110-006, 006-140-004, 006-140-002.

- **Parking:**
 - Public roadside parking along Highway 108. Informal gravel or dirt shoulder pull-outs along the highway. Safety risks are present during egress with select vehicles backing up directly onto the Highway.

- Private interior parking adjacent to cattle corrals. This unpaved, dirt parking area is currently only accessible to authorized individuals, including TWC employees, cattle lessees, state/federal agencies, and organizational partners.
- **Restroom:** There are no restroom facilities on site, and none are proposed based on the observed existing and anticipated use. Existing users have historically utilized public restroom facilities at the USFS Sonora Bridge Meadow Picnic Site or Sonora Bridge Campground located one mile east of the Kirman Lake Trailhead on Highway 108.
- **Trail:** 2.75 mile pre-existing trail leading to Kirman Lake in Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. 97% of the trail utilizes the unpaved dirt road known as Kirman Lake Road. The remaining 3% of the trail is a converted social-trail that is also unpaved and allows the public visitors to bypass the existing barbed-wire fencing between the Highway and Kirman Lake Road.
- **Recreational Activities:** hiking, mountain biking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, picnicking, wildlife viewing.
- **Vehicle Access:** Kirman Lake Road is closed for public vehicle access but accessible to authorized vehicles, individuals, groups, agencies, Junction Livestock, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, and Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center.
- **Existing Amenities/Infrastructure:**
 - Cattle corrals and barbed-wire fencing for cattle management.
 - Historic Ranch House. The structure is deteriorated and vacant.
 - Junction “Black” Reservoir. Two earth dams south of Kirman Lake Road. Dams are under the jurisdiction of the California Division of Safety of Dams.
 - Trout Broodstock Fish Weir. Cement structure within the Junction Creek diversion channel just east of Junction Reservoir. Used for trout egg collection and fertilization by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.
 - Pines Picnic Area. North of Junction Reservoir. A flat, shaded Jeffrey Pine area north of Junction Creek that provides a space for visitors to rest on their hike.
 - Irrigation ditches for preserve grazing pastures.

Little Walker River Area

Located off Highway 395 via the county-maintained Little Walker River Road. APNs: 006-140-016, 006-130-029.

- **Parking:** informal, unpaved parking to the east of Little Walker River Road at the southeast corner of the property.}
- **Trails:** Small loop route, totalling 0.5 miles, providing access from the parking area to the east bank of the Little Walker River. Route is comprised of an old, unpaved ranch road and pre-existing informal social trail.
- **Recreational Activities:** hiking and fishing.
- **Existing Amenities/Infrastructure:**
 - Cattle corrals and barbed-wire fencing. Corrals include a small wood storage shed.
 - Irrigation ditches for preserve grazing pastures.

Proposed Improvements

Walker Canyon Area

APN: 006-100-011

- Minimal improvements for public access include periodically updating public guidance signs and maintaining existing social trails.

Kirman Lake Trail Area

APNs: 006-110-006, 006-140-004, 006-140-002

- **Trailhead Access Improvements (2024):** In 2024, TWC removed two hazardous metal stiles previously used by the public to climb over barbed-wire fencing at the trailhead.
 - Stiles were replaced with self-closing pedestrian gates to reduce the risk of visitor injury from falls, entanglements, or cuts from rusty barbed wire.

- The new pedestrian gates will prevent fence tampering, which had previously allowed cattle to stray onto Highway 108, creating serious safety hazards.
- **Parking Improvements:** Once improved, the existing internal parking area will be formally opened for public use during the primary visitation season (May–October). The improved parking area will be closed to vehicles during the off-season but visitors may continue to use existing roadside pull-outs along Highway 108. If it occurs, overflow parking will also be allowed at the same location during times of heavy visitation in the summer season. Accommodations for approximately 20 vehicles are anticipated after the following improvements are made:
 - Clear and grade 2,397 square feet of additional space on the periphery of the existing parking area footprint.
 - Place a 4-inch layer of a natural gravel base on the existing and proposed parking footprint to reduce runoff and dust and allow for easier maintenance.
 - Erect approximately 316' of <5' tall steel railing on South, West, and North sides of the proposed/improved parking footprint to clearly define the parking boundary and protect surrounding vegetation.
- **Access Road & Trail Improvements:** The access road connecting Highway 108 to the new parking area will be minimally changed with the following improvements:
 - Clear and grade 1,236 square feet on the northwestern corner of the existing access road/driveway to accommodate a turnout for passing vehicles during ingress/egress.
 - Place a 4-inch layer of natural gravel base on the existing entry road/driveway to reduce runoff and dust and allow for easier maintenance.
 - Install signage for vehicle-access guidance.
 - Improve existing 'agricultural gates' at driveway entrance with a more robust steel gate and support braces later in time to match parking lot railing - no anticipated timeframe.
 - Improve an existing cow-trail on the Southside of Junction Reservoir to create a ½-mile, single-wide (24") hiking trail in order to connect to the existing trail that wraps around the West, North, and East of the reservoir to create a new 'loop' opportunity. This will be a minimally improved surface and utilize native material as the trail tread. Improvements involve removal of brush within the 24" tread and minimal leveling of the trail surface where needed.

- **Signage and Visitor Information:** Several guidance and informational signs are proposed to accommodate the other improvements to better manage public access:
 - Steel-framed informational kiosk at proposed parking area near the interior trailhead. This larger sign is not yet designed but will be based on similar signs incorporated at other Preserves and may include the following features - plywood backing, 44"x60" printed media which would show pertinent information regarding the Preserve and surrounding region.
 - Organizational preserve network map showing the entire preserve system across three states will also be housed in a similar steel-frame to the information kiosk and located adjacent.
 - Hiker guidance markers - 4x4 posts with chamfered tops and 3x3 metal emblems along the hiking route, typically around 5' maximum in height.
 - Speed limit signs keeping authorized vehicles below 10 mph will be mounted to pressure treated 4x4 posts along the hiking/driving route, 7' height maximum.
 - Two-way directional signs near Junction Reservoir and Pines Picnic area indicating the remaining distances and directions to notable features from that location.
 - Second steel-framed informational kiosk exactly mimicking the trailhead version, but placed at the boundary near Kirman Lake to inform incoming visitors from adjacent lands into the interior of the Preserve.

- **Restrooms:** Preserve maps will show the location of nearby public restroom facilities. In the event the Preserve experiences issues of human waste due to increased use and visitation, TWC will implement a seasonal portable toilet during times of need.

- **Trash:** The Preserve operates based on the Leave No Trace Principles. Visitors will be asked to pack out any trash they pack in during their visit, similar to other wilderness trailheads in the region. Staff will be present on the property during the main visitation season. One of their responsibilities will be to keep the preserve clean, including picking up any trash left at the preserve. They will dispose of that trash at one of the County's transfer stations nearby.

Little Walker River Area

APNs: 006-140-016, 006-130-029

- **Recreational Access:** The Wildlands Conservancy plans to maintain existing public recreational access to the river by using one of two dirt roads present.
 - TWC will slightly modify the current use by closing the second, deteriorated access road to vehicles.
 - A simple T-post barrier will be installed to block vehicle traffic access while still allowing hike-in access on the same route.