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## NORTHERN SIERRA PARTNERSHIP

October 2014

Dear Friends,

Fall is here, in all of its cool, crisp beauty. Yellow splashes of aspen and cottonwood enliven the cobalt sky as bears forage for the last berries and acorns, and Clarks Nutcrackers cache seeds for winter. In Sierraville, the gorgeous bull elk pictured above stopped in for a visit wearing his spiffy new radio collar from the Department of Fish and Wildlife. To the surprise of many, large ungulates like this Rocky Mountain elk, as well as Great Basin pronghorn, seem to be recolonizing Sierra Valley in greater numbers.

Like all large landscapes, the Sierra Nevada is in a state of constant change. The headline grabbers (and heart wrenchers) are the enormous wildfires like the King Fire, which started its 97,000-acre dash up the west slope of the Sierra three weeks ago and is finally close to being fully contained. Our story below discusses that fire in the context of inadequate federal budgets for forest stewardship. Clearly this is a problem that affects us all.

But just as important are the frequently overlooked stories of ecosystem restoration and recovery. Liebe Patterson's guest article about our hike from Donner Summit to

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Independence Lake describes the extraordinary vistas, forests and wildflowers we encountered along the way, and the thankfulness we felt at being able to experience the untrammled wildness of Upper Independence Creek. At the mouth of the creek, we saw huge Lahontan cutthroat trout lolling about, the beneficiaries of one of the most exciting and successful fish recovery efforts in the Sierra Nevada.

We are also pleased to report on the many meadow restoration projects underway that are enhancing the ecological condition and resilience of these rich natural systems. Mountain meadows are one of the most altered, impacted, and at-risk landscapes in the Sierra but they play a critical role in providing clean water to downstream users in late summer. With thoughtful management, degraded meadows can be returned to their full vigor. A friend who visited Pierce Meadow earlier this summer wrote: "Pierce Meadow and what we refer to as the little Yosemite Meadow are doing great. The previous roadbed is filled with alders, small cedars and other vegetation. The meadows are doing amazingly well for the virtual third year of dry conditions... [We saw] some amazing bear scat and other evidence of wildlife definitely taking over the meadows and feasting on this lush area."

So as we head into late fall, let's not get discouraged by all of the bad news we hear. Instead let's recommit ourselves to the essential task of restoring the natural systems upon which all life depends. We humans are a destructive lot, but we are also incredibly creative when we want to be. The elk and the bear are counting on our success, and so is the newborn next door.

For the Sierra,



Lucy Blake

President

[Northern Sierra Partnership](#)

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## Into the Wild: A guest post by Liebe Patterson

*Liebe Patterson is a member of NSP's Governing Council*

This past summer, Lucy Blake invited me to backpack with her in the Northern Sierra to see, first hand, some of the beautiful country that the Northern Sierra Partnership is working so hard to preserve. In late July, Lucy, my daughter Ellie, son Graham, and I loaded up our backpacks and set out on a trip that would take us from the familiar and heavily traveled to the wild and incredibly remote. We set out on a beautiful morning from the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) trailhead at Boreal, passing under four lanes of Highway 80, and started our journey to Independence Lake.



The first day we hiked the PCT steadily up, past the Peter Grubb hut and into Paradise Lake. The PCT was well traveled and well marked with spectacular views of the Sierra Buttes and the Sacramento River Valley beyond. The trail passed through dazzling displays of wildflowers, clustered along damp drainages. The colors and combinations were stunning and, even in a dry year, the wildflowers had enough water to bloom profusely. That night, we camped on a flat rock slab next to Paradise Lake, which we all agreed was well named. Clear, cool water and rock slabs in the lake to swim to and jump off made for the best swim ever. The day concluded with a stunning sunset over the Sierra.

The next morning we left the well-worn PCT and set off toward Mt. Lola. We hiked around Paradise Lake to look down at Warren Lake and planned to pick up the Warren Lake Trail that, on our map, connected to the Mt. Lola Trail. We never did find it, but managed to make our way up and over a saddle and reached the point where our descent to the Independence Lake watershed would begin. The weather that morning was beautiful, but just as we were heading down a steep, wooded slope, rain and then hail began to fall. As we waited for the storm to pass, we ate our lunch under the protective branches of a large Red Fir. We were truly at the mountain crest – White Rock Lake and the Pacific to the West and Independence Lake and the Little Truckee River watershed to the East. When the rain stopped, we headed down toward Independence Lake, as the water would, into this wild, untouched wilderness. No trails, no other hikers and no sign of humans, just lots of bear scat in a magical, untouched forest.

Camping on a granite bench in the middle of this untouched wilderness was surreal. Hadn't we just passed under a highway streaming with traffic heading to the shores of Lake Tahoe? It was an honor to walk through ancient fir and aspen trees on untrammelled ground, spongy with layers of decaying wood and leaf litter. It was a privilege to be a visitor in this refuge for black

bear, mountain lion and the endangered Lahontan cutthroat trout. It is reassuring to know that these wild places exist and that we can protect them for future generations.

## Sierra Meadows: Glorious and Imperiled

How many times have you rounded the corner of a trail and found yourself gazing in wonder at a gorgeous Sierra meadow stretched out before you? Rein orchids, monkey flowers, larkspur, shooting star and leopard lilies. The names alone bespeak the kaleidoscope of life that awaits you.



But mountain meadows are more than delights to behold. They are among the richest habitats for wildlife and provide an array of ecosystem services for humankind. And while they represent only a small fraction of the total Sierra Nevada landscape, their importance is disproportionate. Mountain meadows store spring floodwaters and release flows in late summer, filter out sediment and pollutants, sequester carbon, and provide critical wildlife habitat. Almost two-thirds of California's birds and amphibians depend upon meadows and the habitats they create.

Unfortunately, mountain meadows are also one of the most altered, impacted, and at-risk landscapes in the Sierra. Intensive livestock grazing, railroad grades, water diversions and ditching, and reservoir construction have all played a role in diminishing meadow habitat Sierra-wide. To reverse that trend, scientists and land managers are undertaking projects to restore meadow systems throughout the range.

NSP partners are committed to restoring these fragile ecosystems when and where we can. Recent projects in the northern Sierra include [Perazzo Meadows](#), Pierce Meadow, Van Norden Meadow and Elizabethtown Meadow.



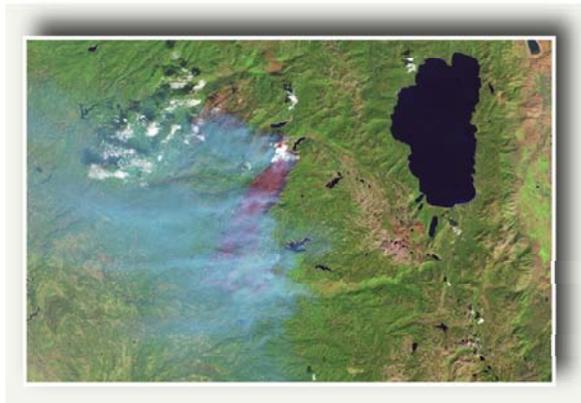
Pierce Meadow, just north of Eagle Lakes/Cisco Grove, was acquired by the Trust for Public Land and the Truckee Donner Land Trust in 2009 with funding from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and then transferred to the U.S. Forest Service. The meadow holds and then releases water into the South Yuba River. The acquisition protected the property from rural residential development and made possible the meadow's gradual restoration. A popular jeep route passed through the property and jeeps illegally veering off route had degraded the meadow. The Land Trust worked with Integrated Environmental

Restoration Services to block the road into Pierce Meadow and eradicate other tracks through the meadow. The meadow system is now recovering well as shown in the attached photo taken this summer.

Even closer to Donner Summit, another restoration project is in the works. The Truckee Donner Land Trust, which purchased Van Norden Meadow as part of the acquisition of Royal Gorge, recently got confirmation that the dam on Lake Van Norden has been illegally storing water. In order to bring lake levels into compliance with state law, the Land Trust will be lowering the dam and embarking on a multi-year partnership with the Forest Service to restore Van Norden Meadow, one of the most important sub-alpine meadows in the Sierra. If you'd like to learn more about the decision to lower the reservoir, read the Land Trust's white paper [here](#).

And closer to Truckee, Elizabethtown Meadow marks the site of an 19th century mining town that existed for only two years. The 155-acre property contains a network of mountain meadows have been degraded over the years by timber harvesting and infrastructure for a once planned resort subdivision (named Martis Creek Estates.) The Truckee Donner Land Trust, working with the Truckee River Watershed Council, is restoring the natural hydrological regime to increase the meadow's water table. A new trail connecting Northstar to Waddle Ranch, protected by NSP partners in 2007, is also in the works.

## The King Fire: A glimpse of what's to come?



If you have turned on the news the past couple of weeks, you have surely heard about the devastation caused by the King Fire. The blaze started September 13th near the foothill town of Pollock Pines and grew at an alarming rate, surpassing all predictions. In all it burnt over 97,000 acres (see overlay of fire zone on San Francisco Peninsula below).

A report released by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy in September makes clear that the risk of high intensity forest fires is only going to increase unless we take action to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration.

Fires are a natural part of the forest lifecycle but the frequency and destructiveness of wildfires in the past decade is not normal. A longer fire season from the drought and warming climates combined with denser forests from decades of fire suppression are causing wildfires to burn faster and hotter.

These wildfires are going to have huge ecological and economical costs. It was estimated that the Rim



Fire last year released greenhouse gas emissions equal to the annual emissions of 2.3 million vehicles and involved fire suppression costs over \$100 million.

So what can be done to prevent these high-intensity fires? The first and most important step we must take is to increase the pace of our forest restoration efforts. The U.S. Forest Service manages 6.3 million acres in the Sierra Nevada and does not have the funding or resources to keep up with the amount of restoration that needs to be done.

Some members of Congress are trying to alleviate this problem with the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2014. One major reason for the underfunding of ongoing management activities has been the siphoning off of money to fight wildfires. The bill would develop a wildfire emergency funding process for the USFS that would be similar to those used for other natural disaster emergencies. This would leave the discretionary budget of the USFS intact to continue ongoing restoration efforts. The bill was introduced in February and is currently being reviewed by various committees.

To learn more about the effects of forest fires and the steps needed to help restore our forest health, read the full Sierra Nevada Conservancy report [here](#).

