



TRUCKEE ▲ DONNER
LAND TRUST

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Waddle Ranch in the Sierra near Truckee is Being Preserved

Truckee, Nevada County - Three months ago, Perry Norris took his 7-year-old son to the **Waddle Ranch** in the northern Sierra Nevada and pointed out the sweeping panorama of pine forests, pristine meadows, birds and wildlife that make up the Martis Valley.

The executive director of the Truckee Donner Land Trust told his son how he had been working for some eight years trying to save the biologically rich area from developers who wanted to build a hotel, golf course and some 600 units of housing right where they were standing. His son looked around and said, "Dad, grown-ups shouldn't build houses in places like this."

And now they won't. Norris' group and the Trust for Public Land announced Thursday that they had purchased the 1,462-acre **Waddle Ranch** for \$23.5 million, ending years of legal fighting, negotiations, cajoling and plain hard work by a coalition of conservationists, land owners, developers and local airport officials.

The purchase saves one of the most biologically diverse stretches of High Sierra wilderness and essentially bars construction in the northern half of the Martis Valley. Conservationists hope the deal will prompt more land preservation and, eventually, a continuous band of wilderness throughout the

northern Sierra all the way to Mount Lassen and the Cascade Range.

"It's one of the largest conservation deals ever done in the Sierra," said David Sutton, the Northern California director of the Trust for Public Land. "This started out as a pitched battle and has turned into a cooperative effort where everybody is involved. When people started talking eight years ago about what would happen in the Martis Valley, almost nobody thought this was possible," he said.

The **Waddle Ranch**, just north of Highway 267 between Truckee and Kings Beach, has been privately owned for more than 150 years. Bought by the **Waddle** family in the 1880s, it was used throughout most of its history for grazing livestock. Old-timers tell of cattle drives through Truckee and into the Martis Valley. The **Waddle** family slaughtered their own cattle and sold beef at a meat market they owned in Auburn (Placer County).

The **ranch** originally covered 6,000 acres, though the local airport and Army Corps of Engineers acquired some of the land over the years. The most valuable land, however, remained in the family until 1971, when the **ranch** was purchased by the Pritzker family, which owns the Hyatt Hotel chain. The ranchland is in the middle of a wildlife corridor stretching to Mount Rose. It teems with wildlife. Bear, cougar, bobcats and coyotes have recently been seen in the ancient pine forests and sagebrush-covered valleys. Golden and bald eagles, ducks and geese fly overhead and sometimes lounge in Dry Lake.

Trouble in the area started when Placer County in 2003 completed the Martis Valley Community Plan, which authorized up to 6,000 new homes, resort hotels, shopping malls and golf courses. The Pritzkers had the right to build up to 1,000 homes on the **Waddle Ranch**. Plans were drawn for 600 housing units and a golf course in the pine forest.

Residents and environmentalists were outraged, arguing that so much development would devastate the valley's delicate ecology. They took the county and developers to court, and a judge overturned the plan in 2005,

forcing negotiations.

The two sides eventually agreed to allow construction south of Highway 267 - where Northstar-at-Tahoe Resort and several upscale subdivisions are situated - and to sharply curtail growth north of the highway.

The accord created a county open-space fee on developments in the valley to purchase sensitive habitat. About \$10 million in fee revenue as well as \$2 million from the Truckee Tahoe Airport District and money from donors, grants and foundations were used to purchase the **Waddle Ranch**.

A "No Trespassing" sign that had blocked the entrance to the **ranch** for at least 50 years was taken down Thursday and replaced with a sign that said "Welcome to the **Waddle Ranch**." Conservationists, donors and other celebrants later sipped sparkling wine by Dry Lake, a name that trust officials would like to change to Ella Lake, after Ella **Waddle**, the matriarch of the family that owned the **ranch** for so many years.

Perry said the wildlife and history of the property has not yet been thoroughly studied. He nevertheless pointed out a vernal pool where he found an old rock apparently used by American Indians to grind nuts, indicating that the land may have been used for thousands of years.

A trail system already exists through the meadows and forest to Dry Lake. The Truckee Donner Land Trust will spend about two years building trails and making other improvements, linking the ranchland with the 45,000-acre valley of sagebrush, ponderosa pine and riverine meadow that makes up the Martis Valley.

It will all be turned over to the airport district in two or three years, which will formally own the land and make it available to the public through a conservation easement held by the trust.

But the battle is not over, Perry said. Close to 3,000 units of housing were built recently or are under construction in three communities around Northstar. A huge chunk of wilderness owned by logging company Sierra Pacific Industries sits between the Martis Valley and Mount Rose. If the

trust could obtain that land, he said, it would create a crucial wildlife corridor that includes the Martis Creek Lake National Recreation Area and the Tahoe National Forest.

"We're looking at preserving in the neighborhood of 40,000 acres of continuous habitat and recreational land," Perry said.

Sutton, who worked closely with Perry on the **Waddle Ranch** deal, said management of the wilderness will be especially important in the future as development pressure, increasing fire danger and a shrinking snowpack caused by global warming change the region's ecosystem and habitat.

"The northern Sierra is where there is a gap, with fractured ownership and inconsistent management," he said. "If we lose control over the land base, then we won't have the opportunity to solve the problems that are coming about as a result of climate change and population increases in the Sierra."

Online Resources

Truckee Donner Land Trust:

www.tdlandtrust.org

Trust for Public Land:

www.tpl.org

How to get there

- From the Bay Area, travel east on Interstate 80 for about three hours.
- Exit onto Highway 267, exit 188B.
- Take the new bypass route for about 5 miles. The new site is on the north side of the highway less than a mile before the Northstar-at-Tahoe ski resort and across from the Northstar golf course.
 - A small sign and gate identify the spot as **Waddle Ranch**.