

Conserving a Natural Utah Treasure

by Elaine York

The Nature Conservancy recently announced its purchase of 55 acres (22 hectares) of habitat for rare species in the St. George area of southwestern Utah. This purchase is the first step in an ambitious plan to create a new 800-acre (325-ha) preserve as an oasis for plants, animals, and people.

Working with a diverse range of partners, including the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA), the Bureau of Land Management, the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the City of St. George, The Nature Conservancy has laid out plans for the creation of the “White Dome Nature Preserve.” White Dome is one of the few places where the gypsum-laced Moenkopi formation is exposed, and its sparsely vegetated soils are characterized by a rich biological soil crust. The preserve will protect habitat for several at-risk species, including the zebra-tailed lizard (*Callisaurus draconoides*), the loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), and rare native plants. It will also harbor some of last remaining populations of the threatened Siler pincushion cactus (*Pediocactus sileri*) and the endangered dwarf bear poppy (*Arctomecon humilis*), a plant found only in Washington County, Utah.

The recent purchase was funded through private donations from Conservancy supporters and a Recovery Land Acquisition grant from the Service. It marks the first phase of acquisition in a plan that began in 2005, when SITLA signed an agreement to make 800 acres available for sale to the Conservancy and UDOT to establish a nature preserve with public access.

Additional land acquisitions in the South Block by the Conservancy and UDOT will take place this year and next, with a goal of piecing together all 800 acres of the White Dome Nature Preserve within the next few years. The partners are also creating a long-term management plan, including fencing, maintenance, habitat restoration, and research on the rare plants and their pollinators, as well as the creation of hiking trails and signage that educates visitors about the unique natural features of the preserve. The Nature Conservancy will manage the preserve.

“We are facing major growth opportunities and challenges in our communities,” says Dennis Drake, a Washington County Commissioner. “The White Dome Nature Preserve is a great example of public and private groups working together to ensure we protect and celebrate our natural heritage as we grow.”

The next steps for the White Dome Nature Preserve include the Conservancy’s work, funded by a Private Stewardship Program grant from the Service, to restore the 55-acre parcel and the rare species that depend upon it. Scientists will study the dwarf bear poppy’s life cycle and pollination processes to ensure its long-term viability.

But this effort is bigger than just 800 acres or several rare species. It is about Utahns coming together to ensure that Washington County’s future will include places where people can value and enjoy the natural wonders in their own backyard.

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Dwarf bear poppy at The Nature Conservancy’s White Dome Nature Preserve.



John Milliken