

2025 Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project Snapshot Report



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Project Background

Since January 2025, Roaring Fork Conservancy (RFC) has partnered with Research Evaluation Consulting LLC (REC) to evaluate the impact of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project in Carbondale, Colorado. This project was designed to restore river and riparian health, improve public access, and enhance community engagement with Carbondale's natural resources. This evaluation examined how effectively the project achieved its mission, assessed its impact on partners and the Carbondale community, and identified both strengths and opportunities for improvement. All percentages in this report are rounded. Unless otherwise specified, results are based on participants who rated each item on a 1–5 scale, with 5 representing the most favorable response. Additional details can be found in the Impact Study Report (Shtivelband, Vaca, Sidman, & Rosa, 2025).

Crystal Riverfront Project Restoration Project funded by



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Conservation Board

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Before and After Overhead View of Weaver Ditch Diversion



Pre-Construction Summer, 2018



Post-Construction Summer, 2023

Before and After Accessible Park Entrance



Pre-Construction, Summer 2018



Post-Construction, Summer 2024

Stakeholder Perspectives

REC first gathered input from stakeholders directly involved in the design and implementation of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project.

What did Stakeholders Think About the Crystal River Front Park Restoration Project?

Twenty-five individuals representing 13 organizations¹ participated in telephone interviews with REC. Interviewees were asked to rate their agreement with statements about the project's progress toward each of the four intended goals and to explain their ratings. Overall, findings indicate strong stakeholder agreement and consistently high ratings across all project goals. Most interviewees described clear early successes such as improved vegetation, stabilized riverbanks, and expanded community access while some noted that it may still be too early to assess long-term outcomes. *Table A* below shows the goal, the percentage of stakeholders who agreed or strongly agreed that the goal was accomplished, the average rating, and their explanation.²

Table A. Stakeholder Interview Findings (n = 22 – 25)

Goal	Agreement	Rating	Explanation ³
Restoring the park's riparian zone while preserving bird and wildlife habitats through streambank stabilization, floodplain reconnections, and replacing invasive weeds and monocultures with diverse native plants.	92%	4.50	84% of stakeholders described goal-related project successes (e.g., positive vegetation impacts, stabilized riverbanks, improved floodplain connectivity) 40% felt it was too soon to tell 32% mentioned additional ideas, considerations, and differing views (e.g., ongoing weed management, habitat diversity and floodplain concerns, overuse by humans)
Enhancing river channel stability and improving fish habitats and spawning areas in this section of the Crystal River.	88%	4.36	96% of interviewees described goal-related project successes (e.g., enhanced river channel stability, improved fish habitats or fishing) 16% mentioned concerns (e.g., not sure the fish habitat had been improved, new habitat structures not working as intended, not entirely natural changes) 8% felt it was too soon to tell
Developing a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure to allow the Weaver Ditch to function within the river system while enhancing water delivery to the Town of Carbondale.	79%	4.43	80% of stakeholders described goal-related project successes (e.g., headgate and ditch diversion are working well) 12% felt it was too soon to tell 8% shared feedback not directly tied to this goal but related to the headgate component of the project (e.g., headgate automation technology needed improvements, Carbondale not adopting good water management strategies)
Enhance public experiences at Crystal Riverfront Park with installed or upgraded interpretive signs, trails, gathering spaces, and educational programs.	91%	4.59	84% of interviewees described goal-related project successes (e.g., community benefits from better and safer river access) 24% felt it was too soon to tell 12% shared ecological and management considerations (e.g., negative impacts from increased public access, overfishing, need for better communication and enforcement)

¹ Stakeholder interviewees represented the following organizations: American Rivers, Aspen Valley Land Trust, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, DHM Designs, Lotic Hydrological, Pitkin County Healthy Rivers, Proudline Guides, Redoubt Constructions, River Restoration, Roaring Fork Audubon, Roaring Fork Conservancy, Roaring Fork High School, and the Town of Carbondale.

² Not all interviewees provided ratings for every item; as a result, sample sizes vary slightly by question.

³ Percentages may not sum to 100% because stakeholders often reflected on each goal from multiple perspectives (e.g., successes, uncertainties, concerns).

Community Member Perspectives

RFC also collected survey data from community members in Carbondale and surrounding areas who had visited the park.

What did Community Members Think About the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project?

Forty-nine park visitors completed the community survey, reflecting on their experiences before and after the park’s restoration.

Visitor Demographics

All visitors lived in Carbondale or the surrounding areas either full-time (90%) or part-time (10%).

- **46%** of visitors had lived in Carbondale or the surrounding areas for greater than 10 years, followed by 27% for 5 – 10 years, 23% for 2 – 5 years, and 5% for less than 2 years.
- **38%** of visitors were between 56 – 75 years old, 27% were between 36 – 55 years old, 16% were between 18 – 35 years old, and 11% were greater than 75 years old.

Park Satisfaction and Improvements

Forty-one visitors (84%) provided feedback about what they liked most about the park and what could be improved.

- 63% provided positive feedback about what they liked most such as improved River Access (34%), Positive Impressions of the Park (29%), and Boulder and Rock Work (10%).
- 56% suggested ideas for improvement, such as to Improve Weed and Pest Management (15%), Address Issues Regarding Park Design and Accessibility (15%), and Provide Additional Gathering Areas (12%).

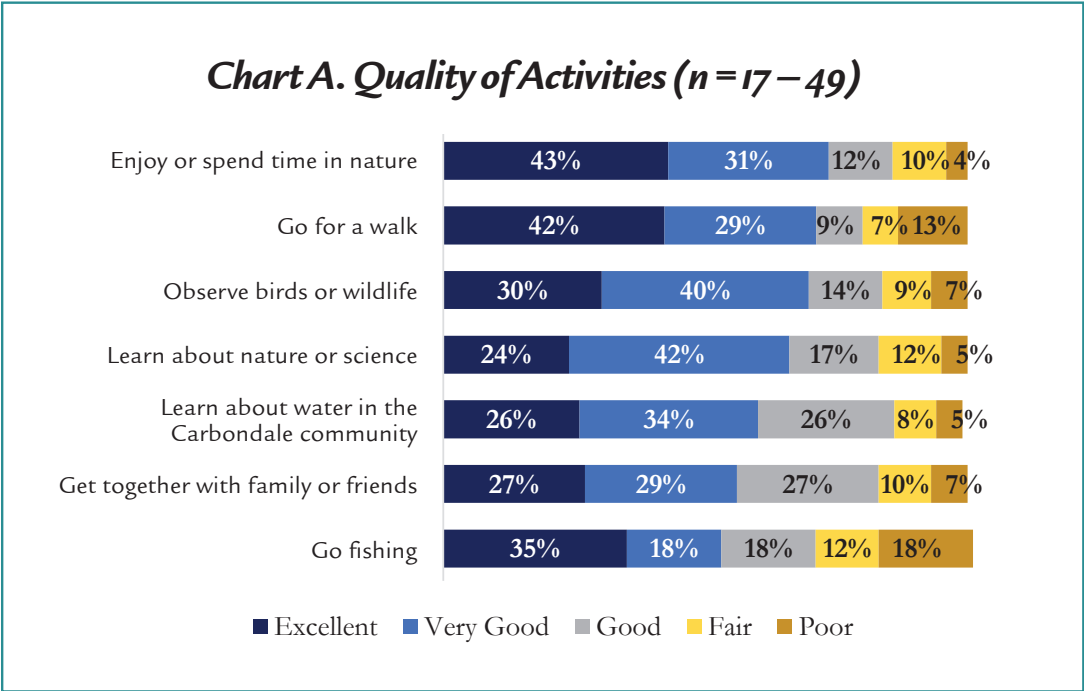
Quality of Park Experiences

All visitors rated their experiences with Crystal Riverfront Park.

- **Over 59%** of visitors rated their experience as Very Good or Excellent.

Quality of Activities

Between 35% and 100% of community members rated the quality of activities available at Crystal Riverfront Park.⁴ The activities that visitors most often rated as Excellent or Good were Enjoy or Spent Time in Nature (74%), Go for a Walk (71%), and Observe Birds or Wildlife (70%). Chart A highlights the proportion of visitors who rated the quality of each activity.



⁴ Visitors could select “Not Applicable” or “N/A” if they had not engaged in the activity.

Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project Impressions

Thirty-two visitors (94%) compared their personal experiences with the park before and after the restoration project.

- **69%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed Crystal Riverfront Park is a more appealing place to visit due to the improvements made during the restoration project.
- **66%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed that the current Crystal Riverfront Park is a valuable part of living in, or visiting Carbondale.



Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project Park Impacts

Eighteen visitors (53%) reflected on what positive or negative impacts they had observed or experienced from the restoration project. Many visitors shared both positive and negative impacts.⁵

- Among the 18 responses, 13 participants (72%) identified negative impacts, including Increased Use Impacts (22%),⁶ Did Not Support the Restoration Project (17%), Parking Concerns (17%), Fencing Concerns (11%), and Dislike of Signage (6%).
- Nine participants (50%) reported positive impacts such as Increased Use and Access (28%) both for themselves and others, Improved Visual Appeal (11%), Improved Signage (11%), and Improved Vegetation (6%).

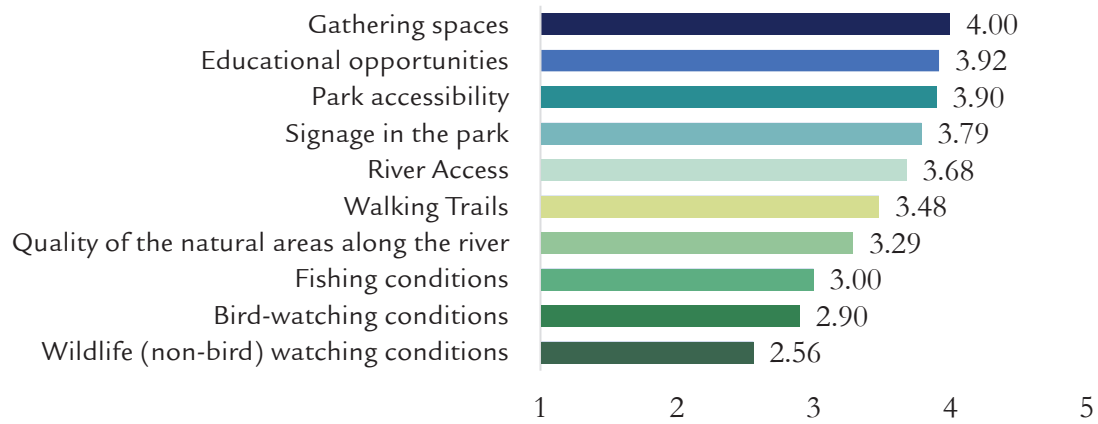
Feature Improvements

Between 88% to 91% of visitors rated how much they thought specific features of the Crystal Riverfront Park had improved. The features that visitors most often rated as most improved were Gathering Spaces (M = 4.00), Educational Opportunities (M = 3.92) and Park accessibility (M = 3.90). See Chart B for visitors' average ratings.

⁵ Please note that percentages exceed 100% because participants could identify multiple themes.

⁶ These visitors noted increased trash, unfamiliar people, and graffiti.

Chart B. Feature Improvements (n = 30 – 31)



Summary of Findings

Together, these findings indicate that the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project has made a positive impact on both the Carbondale community and the surrounding environment. The project helped and will likely continue to help restore vegetation and improve the riparian zone. River channel stability and fish habitats also showed signs of success, with stakeholders confident in the long-term outcomes, though some community members were still uncertain about visible improvements. Stakeholders viewed the new self-sustaining headgate and diversion system as a success in balancing water delivery and ecosystem health. In general, public experiences in the park improved with new trails, signage, and educational features, with some community members requesting more gathering areas and additional educational features. Both stakeholders and community members reported increased park use, which led to positive and negative impacts. Respondents noted appreciation for the park and its recreational features, alongside concerns about parking, safety, and environmental strain. Overall, the project was seen as a strong collaborative effort that enhanced Carbondale's access to natural spaces, with future success relying on ongoing monitoring and partnerships between RFC, the Town of Carbondale, and the public.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted in this evaluation. First, not all stakeholders participated in the stakeholder interview, and only 49 visitors completed a community survey. As a result, the findings reflect the perspectives of a subset of visitors rather than the entire community. The survey respondents may not fully represent the demographic diversity or the full range of park uses (e.g., age, income, cultural background), which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the data collection occurred at a single point in time, which may not capture seasonal variations in park use, visitor experiences, or wildlife presence. The small sample raises the possibility of self-selection bias,⁷ as visitors with particularly strong positive or negative views may have been more motivated to respond. In addition, because the evaluation relied solely on self-reported data and asked visitors to recall from more than 2 years ago, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias,⁸ recall errors, or individual differences in how participants interpreted the questions and rating scales.

⁷ *Self-selection bias.* A sampling bias that arises when individuals who choose to participate differ systematically from those who do not, which can skew results and limit how well findings generalize.

⁸ *Social desirability bias.* A type of response bias that occurs when participants answer questions in a way they believe will be viewed favorably by others, rather than providing completely accurate or honest responses (e.g., overstating positive behaviors or underreporting negative ones).





Actionable Recommendations

Based on the findings of this Impact Study, REC offers the following six recommendations to support RFC, the Town of Carbondale, and their environmental, governmental, and community partners in shaping future restoration and engagement efforts.

1 Celebrate the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Projects' Successes

There is much to celebrate for RFC, the Town of Carbondale, Pitkin County Healthy Rivers, and the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project. This evaluation demonstrates that the majority of stakeholders, along with many community members, view the project as a success and acknowledge meaningful improvements to both the Crystal River and Riverfront Park. These achievements, reflected in the positive feedback and outcomes, deserve to be highlighted and shared with RFC staff, partners, and the Town of Carbondale. RFC can showcase these successes through a variety of channels, including community town halls, the Town of Carbondale newsletter, social media (RFC's Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as the Town's Facebook), and local press outlets such as the Sopris Sun, the Aspen Times and Aspen Public Radio.

2 Continue Monitoring Project Progress

Stakeholders noted that it is too early to determine whether all project goals have been achieved,

particularly regarding fish habitats, vegetation growth, and headgate performance. REC recommends that RFC and the Town of Carbondale continue to implement ongoing monitoring and periodic evaluations to assess long-term outcomes. They could also report findings to stakeholders and community members to maintain transparency and demonstrate progress.

3 Address Capacity and Maintenance Needs

Community members noted that park upgrades brought more visitors, which led to increased trash, graffiti, and parking overflow. REC recommends that future projects plan for the additional demands that come with higher visitation. RFC, in partnership with the Town of Carbondale, can enhance the use of the park by offering additional gathering space and collaborating with the Town to ensure adequate trash receptacles, consistent weed management, and routine park cleanup.

4 Increase Community Education

Community members did not mention the goal of creating a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure, even though information about it is

included on current park signage. This suggests that the community may not be fully aware of this component of the project or its significance. Several community members also expressed interest in enhanced signage and additional educational opportunities about the park and its wildlife. RFC could expand education efforts by adding temporary QR codes to signs that link to short videos, sharing project updates through the Town of Carbondale's monthly newsletters, and partnering with Roaring Forks High School's Riverwatch team to create short informative videos.

5 Continue to Gather Community Feedback

While feedback from 49 community members provided meaningful insight, continued engagement would help capture a broader range of perspectives. As the long-term project goals evolve, community views may also shift. REC recommends that RFC establish ongoing feedback collection including short 1-2-minute pulse surveys and simple tools such as a comment box or digital suggestion forms to gather real-time input. These surveys could also be

available in Spanish. REC recommends new data be collected in three years to allow key project outcomes (e.g., vegetation growth, fish habitat development) to fully develop. To reach a wider audience, RFC could expand outreach through online surveys, social media campaigns, and in-person feedback stations at the park or at local events.

6 Maintain Collaboration Among Stakeholders and Community Members

Stakeholders widely agreed that collaboration throughout the eight years leading up to the restoration was strong. Now that the project is complete, maintaining this momentum will be important to support long-term stewardship, address emerging needs, and keep community members engaged. REC recommends that RFC in partnership with the Town of Carbondale continue nurturing collaboration by periodically hosting town halls or community forums, maintaining a communication plan with clear points of contact and expectations, and considering a small community advisory group to provide ongoing input.

Conclusion

The evaluation findings indicate that the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project has strengthened both the ecological health of the river corridor and the community's connection to the watershed. While early results are highly positive, ongoing monitoring and collaboration will be essential to support continued vegetation growth, habitat stability, and public engagement. By implementing the recommended strategies, RFC and the Town of Carbondale can build on the project's success and continue advancing watershed stewardship and community education.



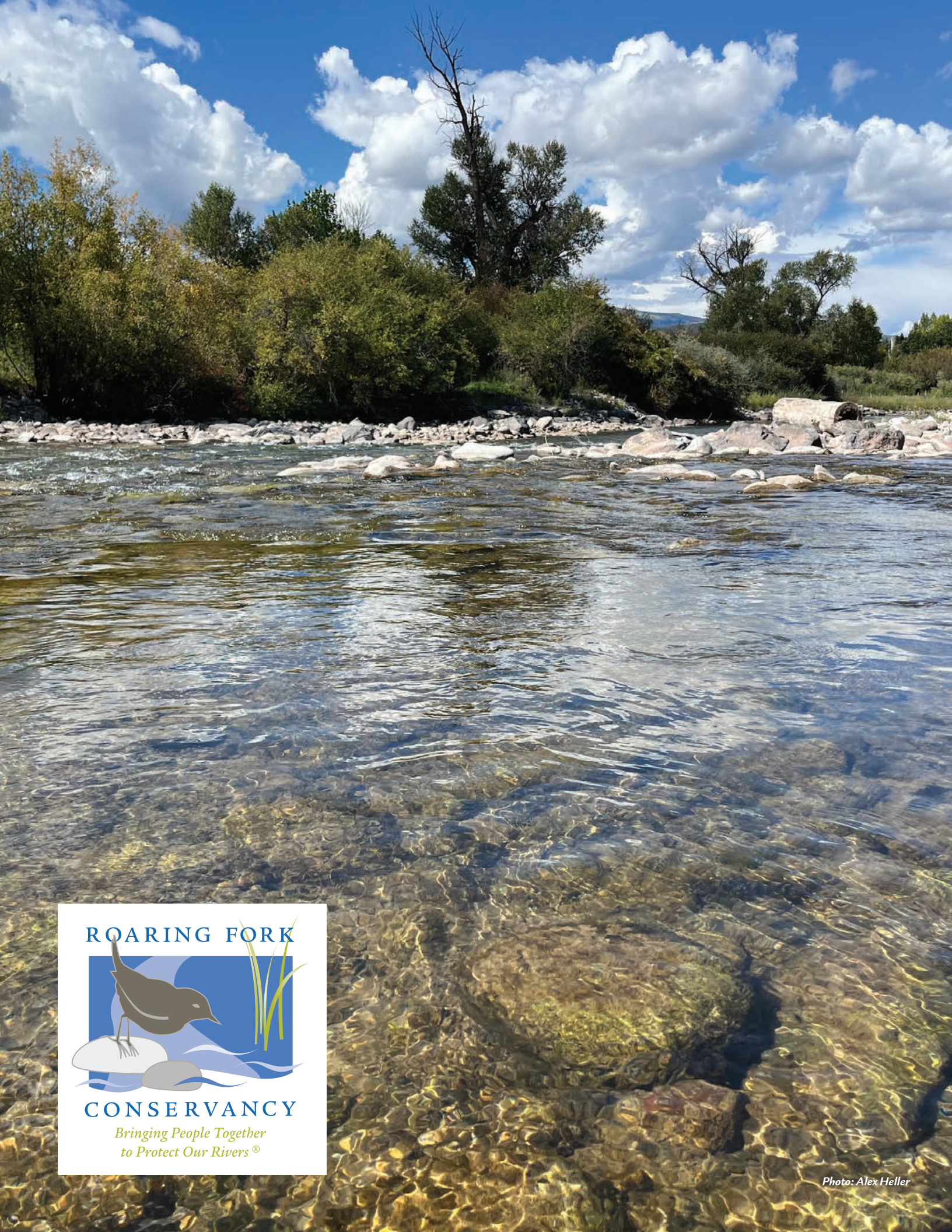


Photo: Alex Heller