



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**



# Headwaters Forest Reserve

California

The Headwaters Forest Reserve protects 7,472 acres of coastal redwood forest containing some of the last undisturbed old-growth redwood stands in the world.

Following a decadelong grassroots effort, the Reserve was acquired through federal and State of California funding and established through an Act of Congress on March 1, 1999. Located in Humboldt County, six miles south of Eureka along California's North Coast, the Reserve is home to several threatened species including the marbled murrelet, northern spotted owl, coho and Chinook salmon, as well as steelhead and cutthroat trout.

The Bureau of Land Management Arcata Field Office manages the Reserve in consultation with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to protect old-growth redwood groves, other forest stands, creeks, and wildlife. The Reserve is the only forest reserve within the BLM's system of National Conservation Lands.

## Tribal Partnerships

The Reserve is within the homeland of the Wiyot people, who have lived, traveled, and traded along waterways of the Humboldt Bay region since time immemorial and continues to remain significant today. Tribal partners as co-stewards, work with the BLM to restore natural and cultural landscapes of the Reserve. Tribes also gather materials from within the Reserve for traditional cultural uses, including basketry and building.

The BLM supports traditional native cultural practitioners in gathering culturally utilized plants including hazel, willow, ferns, and fallen redwoods, for personal, community, or other non-commercial traditional use.

## Forest Protection and Restoration

The Reserve protects a mixed-species conifer forest including approximately 3,000 acres of thriving old-growth redwood and over 4,000 acres of second-growth and remnant old-growth redwood forest. Other conifers include Douglas-fir and western hemlock. Many second-growth redwood stands inside the Reserve require extensive management to accelerate the return of old-growth or mature forest conditions and reduce increasing fire risk.



The BLM conducts forest health restoration projects to protect existing old-growth stands, restore the natural forest structure, improve habitat for threatened species, improve carbon storage, and increase resilience to climate change.

The BLM and partners have made substantial progress towards achieving restoration goals, including thinning over 1,600 acres of formerly logged second-growth forest, reclaiming more than 36 miles of old logging roads and planting them with vegetation, and removing non-native invasive plants. Work to stabilize hillsides has reduced the risk of more than one million cubic yards of sediment from entering the South Fork Elk River and Salmon Creek, protecting downstream aquatic habitats.

## Wildlife

The Reserve is home to several wildlife species that depend on various high-quality habitats, from the redwood canopy to the nutrient-rich forest floor. The old-growth conifer forest provides essential nesting habitat for the threatened marbled murrelet and northern spotted owl.

A wide variety of plants including huckleberry, western tanoak, ferns, and several kinds of conifers grow in the shelter of redwood trees. A community of fungi, lichens, and mosses helps to regenerate soils and provide nutrients essential to wildlife. Blacktail deer, mountain beavers, mountain lions, bobcats, black bears, brush rabbits, gray foxes, Douglas squirrels, Pacific fishers, winter wrens, and many other species depend on the forest for cover and food.



During the school year, hundreds of students visit on field trips to study redwood ecology, local history, and watershed health. The seasonal South Side Trail provides a more primitive hiking experience along a short, moderately steep loop. The trail is closed to dogs and bicycles to minimize disturbance to water quality, fish, and wildlife.

The seasonal, reservation-only Salmon Pass Trail provides access to spectacular old-growth and second-growth redwood forest on the south side of the Reserve. Visitors participate in docent-led guided hikes along the trail from May through November.

## Visitation

Over the past 25 years, visitation to Headwaters has increased from 5,000 to 40,000 visitors per year, with a 25 percent spike in visitation to the Elk River Trail. While many locals use the Reserve year-round, visitation increases in the warm summer months with more out-of-town visitors.

## Partnerships

The BLM Arcata Field Office works with partners including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Friends of Headwaters, AmeriCorps Watershed Stewards Program, California Conservation Corps, Save the Redwoods League, Cal Poly Humboldt, and local schools in projects to conserve the Reserve and share information about its importance.

## Fish

The South Fork Elk River and Salmon Creek flow through the Reserve, providing crucial spawning habitat for threatened coho salmon, Chinook salmon, and steelhead and cutthroat trout. Monitoring the South Fork Elk River is vital to the recovery of these imperiled fish, and informs instream restoration projects.

The BLM conducts annual salmon and steelhead spawner and juvenile snorkel surveys using California Department of Fish and Wildlife standards. In 2021, the BLM began the "Wood is Good" restoration project in the South Fork Elk River by placing trees removed from forest thinning operations into key areas of the stream to promote complex habitat. Approximately 300 trees were added to the stream, improving spawning and rearing habitat in a 1.5-mile river corridor.

## Recreational and Visitor Services

The Elk River, South Side, and Salmon Pass Recreation Trails provide public access and opportunities to learn about the natural and cultural history of the Reserve. The Elk River Trail is a popular year-round destination for hiking, bicycling, dog walking, and wildlife viewing.

Interpretive signs along an accessible portion of the trail commemorate the historic value of a once-busy mill town named Falk (listed on the National Register of Historic Places), grassroots efforts leading to Reserve designation, and the unique redwood ecosystem. The Headwaters Education Center along the Elk River Trail is open to the public from noon to 3 p.m. on Sundays from June through September.

From May through November, the BLM and partner, Friends of Headwaters, provide interpretation, education, guided hikes, workshops, and special organized events along the Elk River Trail and in the Education Center.

