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CRMS to preserve river corridor

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CARBONDALE - Colorado Rocky Mountain School has sealed a deal with Aspen Valley Land Trust to protect a stretch of riverfront property along the Crystal River that is home to two rare species of orchids and is considered an important area for wildlife.

The deal was part of a record-setting year for the land trust, which put 7,000 acres between Aspen and DeBeque into conservation easements in 2007. AVLTL has some 28,000 acres in conservation easements in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys.

Last year's easements included a 2,000-acre donation of ranchland along Garfield Creek, west of Glenwood Springs, the largest-single donation the land trust has ever received. That donation, from a Florida-based ranchland company, adjoins a state wildlife area and includes a broad range of habitat, from sagebrush meadows to evergreen forests.

The CRMS property stretches along 500 yards on the west side of the Crystal River. It's an undeveloped part of the school's 300-acre campus. School officials say they bought it in 1999 largely as a buffer from nearby development, and for river access for kayak races.

"Any time you can get a piece of the river, it's important habitat and open space to protect," said AVLTL Executive Director Martha Cochran.

Colorado State University lists the site as a conservation protection area, and ranks it as urgent because of nearby development pressure. Its status as a conservation protection area largely is due to the presence of two rare orchids - the canyon bog orchid and the yellow lady's slipper. The property is also home to a host of wildlife, including bald eagles, osprey, elk, mule deer, and bears.

"We bought it to forestall any development being there," said CRMS spokesman Jeremy Simon. "We've always intended to keep it in a natural state, but we've been doing it by holding this piece of land."

By turning it over to the land trust, the school will keep the property as open space forever. The school will be able to continue to use it for science classes and for kayak races. It also maintains the right to build a boat barn, to graze livestock, build trails and use the land for low-impact recreation.

"We were certainly not planning to develop it," Simon said. "Our board decided if we want to keep this land in perpetuity as natural habitat, let's do it now so a generation down the line, a different board, different people, don't change their minds."

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