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Another piece of Verde River Headwaters State Park puzzle falls into place

By GILLIAN 'GUS' ANDREWS, The Daily Courier
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A climber ascends a rock face in Upper Sullivan Canyon. (Granite Mountain Guides/Courtesy)



Rock climbers notched a win this week as a coalition led by the Prescott Climbers Coalition and the Trust for Public Land announced that it had helped permanently protect 10.5 of the last privately-owned acres of Upper Sullivan Canyon in Chino Valley, an area that offers dramatic basalt columns and canyon views.

The coalition worked with the Town of Chino Valley and Yavapai County to transfer ownership of the parcel to Chino Valley. The land will join a number of other protected lands that are forming a growing park system in the area which is expected to become the Verde Headwaters State Park. The trust purchased a 148-acre parcel to the west of Upper Sullivan Canyon in March 2024, which is slated to become the Verde River Headwaters State Park. A wildlife area managed by Arizona Game and Fish also borders the parcel.

"Upper Sullivan Canyon is a rare place where outdoor recreation, cultural history, and vital watershed protection all come together," said Michael Patrick, senior project manager for Trust for Public Land, hailing the deal as "preserving the ecological and cultural significance" of the area.

Upper Sullivan Canyon was the only privately-owned land along the first 20 miles of the Verde River, considered by conservation organizations to be one of the most important waterways in Arizona. The Verde contributes to the Phoenix metropolitan area's water supply in addition to being connected to the Big Chino Aquifer that Prescott and Prescott Valley are eying as a future water source. The river is also home to a diverse range of wildlife species, including unexpected ones like fireflies and otters.

"This is yet another positive step towards protecting the upper Verde River," said consultant Joe Trudeau of The Wilderness Society, who had worked with the coalition on a fundraising campaign including pint nights and the Wild Rivers Film Tour. Additional funding for the acquisition came from Yavapai County, a state Land and Water Conservation Fund grant, and the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.

Climbers first made their way to the area in the 1970s, and value the crack-climbing opportunities offered by the basalt columns as well as the multiple faces' year-round climbing offerings and "easily approachable and accessible experience for anyone who is seeking to increase their confidence and advance their skillset," said Mac McCaleb, president of Prescott Climbers Coalition. Local fire departments have used the area to practice search-and-rescue skills for areas that are hard to access.

Climbing and the river are not the only outstanding features of Upper Sullivan Canyon that will be protected. Prehistoric cave shelters in the area contain the remains of a one-room structure and pot shards, and petroglyphs are visible on some rock walls. A historic railroad bridge also crosses the canyon at one point. Trails planned for the area would also connect to Upper Verde River trails and others in the regional trail system.

"Chino Valley is proud to take ownership of Upper Sullivan Canyon," said Tom Armstrong, mayor of Chino Valley. The town is working to grow its reputation as "Arizona's Outdoor Fun Place."

"It is a beautiful piece of our community, and we look forward to protecting it and keeping it available for everyone to enjoy," Armstrong said.



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