

VEGETABLE RESCUE | REWRITING THE RULES | THE BODY BEAUTIFUL

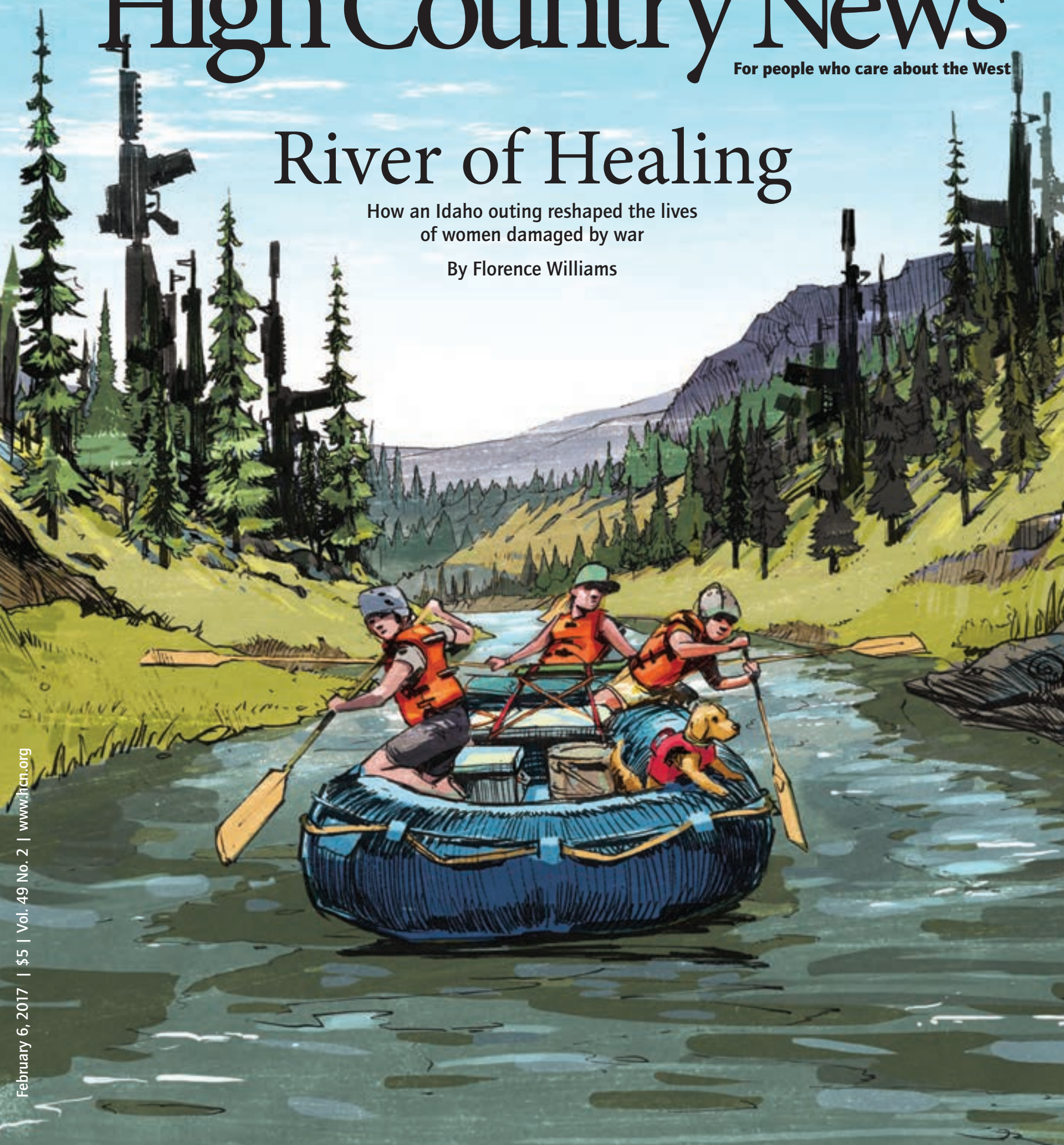
High Country News

For people who care about the West

River of Healing

How an Idaho outing reshaped the lives
of women damaged by war

By Florence Williams





GRAHAM SMITH

FEATURE

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Editor's note

A wild thought

It may be gone by the time you read this, but a compelling historic photograph was still posted on [Obamawhitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov) in mid-January: 11-year-old Barack Obama, his face turned from the camera, standing with his grandmother at a scenic overlook in Yellowstone National Park.



Below the picture, Obama writes: “I still remember traveling up to Yellowstone National Park, coming over a hill, and suddenly seeing just hundreds of deer and bison for the very first time. That new scenery gave me a sense of just how immense, how diverse, and how important the vast array of wildlife is to understanding and appreciating the world and our place in it.” Many of us, like our 44th president, vividly remember our earliest encounters with the natural world – maybe on a family trip to a national park or the ocean, or, as in my case, as a young boy in suburbia, slipping into a sliver of woods after school to experience an untamed landscape and meet the creatures that inhabit it.

Such seemingly small encounters have a large impact on our brains and our well-being, as Florence Williams lays out persuasively in her new book, *The Nature Fix*. They are a welcome antidote to what she calls the “mass generational amnesia enabled by urbanization and digital creep” that humanity is now experiencing across the globe.

Too many of us have become isolated from the natural world, either by circumstance or choice, but as Williams’ cover story shows, it’s not too late to reconnect. Describing a trip down Idaho’s tempestuous Salmon River by female U.S. veterans suffering from post-war trauma, she writes, “These trips can rearrange our very core, catalyzing our hopes and dreams, filling us with awe and human connection and offering a reassurance of our place in the universe.”

I can’t help but think that our 45th president, Donald J. Trump, could use a strong dose of the wild in his life. His habitat seems to be the concrete jungle of the city. In his quest for popularity and business success, he’s likely never taken time to dunk his head in a cold mountain stream, or stretch out in the grass and look up at the stars in wonder.

Maybe, as president, he’ll finally get the chance. Obama was reportedly deeply moved by seeing Alaska, the Grand Canyon and Yosemite; they gave him perspective, and galvanized his impressive conservation policies in the West and beyond. While the new administration’s first days show only a total disregard for the environment, I still hold out the slim hope that Trump will at some point get out of the city and experience some of his country’s wild places. Go hunting with your sons in Montana, President Trump, float down the Colorado River with your new secretary of Interior. We need you healthy and balanced, and quickly.

—Paul Larmer, executive director/publisher

On the cover
Original illustration
by Graham Smith.



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Making sense of Trump’s energy plan

President Donald Trump’s energy plan is short on details and full of contradictions and outdated assertions. Nonetheless, on the chopping block are an array of Obama initiatives, such as accelerating siting of renewable energy on public lands; controlling methane leaks; shrinking the federal government’s greenhouse gas footprint; and the Waters of the U.S. regulation. The biggest contradiction is Trump’s vow to revive the coal industry while also boosting natural gas production. The rise of natural gas is the biggest factor in coal’s sharp decline — and more gas production should only lower prices more, further reducing the demand for coal. ELIZABETH SHOGEN

MORE: hcne.ws/low-energy

◀ The West Elk Coal Mine near Paonia, Colorado, is the only mine out of three in the area that is still operating. BROOKE WARREN

Trending

Predator control

Mule deer have been on the decline in states all over the West, including Utah, Idaho and Wyoming, where efforts to boost populations have been ongoing. In Colorado, two controversial studies will kill cougars and black bears to increase the ungulates in the Piceance Basin and the Upper Arkansas River. The studies, which start this spring, have drawn criticism from scientists and conservationists who say the primary cause of deer decline is not predation, but massive habitat loss to energy and housing development. ANNA V. SMITH

You say

CHARLES FOX: “Why not spend that \$4.5 million on something that would actually work: acquiring habitat for mule deer. Without safe, undisturbed places for them to live they don’t stand a chance.”

SHELLEY STALLINGS: “We have absolutely no right to kill (predators) just because they might be competing with us for venison.”

SCOTT A. MCINNIS: “Bears mostly scavenge the dead and are primarily omnivores. Predators like lions keep populations healthy by killing sick, old and slow deer. Habitat loss is the key to declining ungulates.”

MORE: hcne.ws/colorado-predators and [Facebook.com/highcountrynews](https://www.facebook.com/highcountrynews)

96.5 percent

Amount of national monument acreage Obama designated that is under water

200 nautical miles ... or less

Proximity to U.S. coast of proposed marine national monuments that would trigger requirements for approval from Congress and from any state within 100 nautical miles

Nearing the end of his term, former President Barack Obama enacted a flurry of national monument designations, including more than tripling one protected area on California’s coast and controversial proclamations like Bears Ears and Gold Butte. But a vocal group of congressional Republicans has long protested Obama’s monument designations, framing the issue as one of local versus federal land control. The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee is considering a bill that would undo the 111-year-old Antiquities Act, taking the power to create national monuments away from the president and keeping federal lands and waters open to oil and gas exploration. MAYA L. KAPOOR

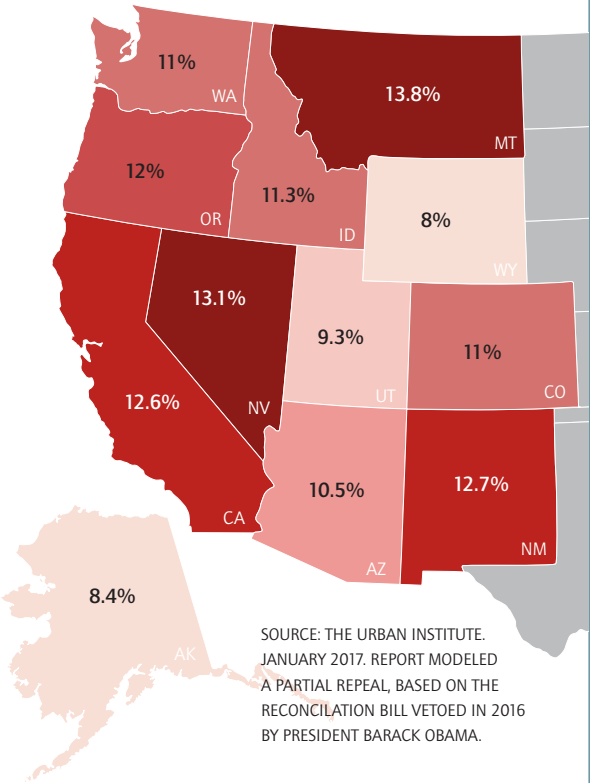
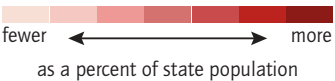
MORE: hcne.ws/monument-blitz

How many Westerners could lose coverage if Obamacare were repealed?

Under Obamacare, approximately 20 million Americans gained health insurance. According to the White House, the latest figures put the nationwide uninsured rate below 9 percent. But in the first hours after the new Congress convened, a resolution passed the House that is a first step towards repealing Obamacare (formally known as the Affordable Care Act). If they’re successful, nearly 9 million people in the West could lose coverage. States that didn’t opt into the expansion — Idaho, Utah and Wyoming — would stand to lose the least if Obamacare were repealed; Montana would lose the most.

PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER

MORE: hcne.ws/obamacare-numbers



v. guerilla archiving

[guh-ril-uh] [ahr-kahyv-ing]

The act of finding, collecting and saving data on a new server in case the government decides to delete it, or manipulate it.

This is what a Canadian team started doing before President Donald Trump was in office in order to protect climate change data.

SARAH TORY

MORE: hcne.ws/trump-proof



BEN NELMS

Photo Essay

A dammed legacy

In 1962, the Site C dam burst near Moberly Lake, British Columbia, and the Williston Reservoir engulfed over 1,100 square miles of land, lake and river, flooding enormous sections of nearby river systems. The true scale and extent of the destruction in these drainages can only be guessed at, as adequate records weren’t kept before the great flood. Now, Peace River residents are still living with the dam’s legacy.

CHRISTOPHER POLLON

MORE: hcne.ws/peace-river

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ANOTHER WRONG BIRD

Please relay my appreciation to author Michael Baughman for his essay on turkey vulture for Thanksgiving dinner ("Right holiday, wrong bird," *HCN*, 12/26/16). I'm still laughing. When my boyfriend and I were duck hunting in the mid-'70s, I asked him if he'd ever tasted a mud duck. He hadn't, so, being a curious type of gal, I shot one, cleaned it, cooked it and took a bite. Tasted just like mud. Spit it out just like Mr. Baughman did. Way high on the yuck factor!

Sally Sherman
Boise, Idaho

CODE OF SILENCE

I worked as a park ranger, one of the first women hired into a state park system. I felt lucky and privileged that this career was even possible. Part of the package was fitting in with "the guys" ("How the Park Service is Failing Women," *HCN*, 12/12/16).

Countless times I bit my tongue with a tight smile when inappropriate sexually tinged comments were bantered about. I was often the only woman in the room, and it was almost like they were testing me, to see if I would quit or complain. I kept quiet and put up with it. I survived partly because of the vast majority of good guys that welcomed and supported me and gave us women a chance. Sometimes I wondered what they were thinking about the suggestive comments aimed at me. But the code of silence prevailed with all of us.

Now, I am long retired. Could it possibly still be like this for women in the workplace, 40 years later? The answer — yes.

Donald Trump's sexual boasting has exposed a cultural truth that we didn't want to talk about, and put it front and center. Think about all those women coming forward with their stories years later. They all remember exactly what happened, when and where, and the pain they have carried ever since. Men are on the receiving end, too — I recently saw a young bartender mercilessly harassed by a drunk woman customer about how "hot" he was and ordering him to kiss her.

It is time to break the code of silence, to join together and call out sexual harassment when we see it. It is time to evolve into mutually respectful beings in all our common spaces.

Janet Carle
Lee Vining, California



HIDDEN COSTS

Your article on the Dakota Access Pipeline was good as far as it went ("The twisted economics of the Dakota Access Pipeline," *HCN*, 12/12/16). You omitted a very important issue that makes your assumptions incorrect. You are probably right in that there will be profit by someone from the pipeline installation. What you left out of your analysis was the fact that the oil is going to be shipped (moved) no matter what. You did not take into consideration the huge cost to the environment that will result from transporting this amount of oil by truck or train. You can start with emissions from the diesel engines that power the trucks and trains. You should include the high cost of maintaining the roads and rail that will handle this amount of tonnage transportation. Yes, this will create a lot of jobs for a lot of people: truck drivers, truck manufacturers, tire manufacturers, repair parts — not to mention the huge toll on the highways and the required manpower and material to keep those roads in good shape. A pipeline makes all that go away.

Darryl Sackmann
Caldwell, Idaho

TOWARD UNDERSTANDING

I subscribed to *HCN* in the '80s and '90s. I enjoyed it because at that time *HCN* seemed to be somewhat more balanced. I can remember articles about farmers

and others who were profiled positively for protecting the environment, yet still retaining farming as their livelihood.

I find no balance at all in today's *HCN*. After I subscribed a few months ago, I was appalled at a snide, sarcastic editorial. It is not necessary to resort to that kind of snideness in a publication. I was as stunned as any by the election of Donald Trump. But I do get it now. The elite and arrogant attitudes of the environmentalists and others do not sit well with many. There has been a distinct lack of respect for good, hard-working people who also love the land, but may not love it in exactly the same way as the people who want to tell them how they must now love the land.

I am hoping for the sake of our country and our planet that rhetoric can be toned down. I was not a Trump supporter. But I am going to sit back and watch. I will applaud the new administration for good decisions and will not automatically be negative about every little thing. If we don't like him, change will come in four years. But the way environmentalists and others handle themselves will go a long way in making the progressives seem or not seem vindictive or sane. The whining and sniveling are appalling.

Karen Jones
Port Ludlow, Washington

High
Country
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House takes aim at regulations

At stake is the power which agencies have used to protect people and nature

BY ELIZABETH SHOGREN

In 1995, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Interior Department's argument that the Endangered Species Act protects rare species' habitat, not just the animals themselves. The court's decision in *Sweet Home v. Babbitt* was key to preserving broad stretches of old-growth forest for the northern spotted owl, an action that contributed to the collapse of the Northwest timber industry. The justices relied in large part on the principle that courts defer to federal agencies as long as their regulations reasonably interpret laws. They cited *Chevron v. Natural Resources Defense Council*, a 1984 Clean Air Act case that for three decades has made it easier for agencies to win when regulations are challenged.

So it's not surprising that House Republicans are determined to undo *Chevron* — part of their ambitious legislative blitz to change the way government works. In the first weeks of the new legislative session, they easily passed three bills that would make it easier to repeal former President Barack Obama's recent regulations, including some aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions, and give the courts and Congress more authority to block new ones.

This is far from tinkering around the edges: The bills already passed by the House envision huge changes to the 1946 Administrative Procedures Act, the basic rulebook for how federal agencies implement laws. Agencies have broad authority to propose and establish regulations without congressional approval, but under one of the current bills, the Regulations from the Executive in Need of Scrutiny (REINS) Act, new regulations could not go into effect without that approval. Under the Regulatory Accountability Act, which also would undo *Chevron*, all court challenges would have to be exhausted before new regulations went into effect. The Midnight Rules Relief Act would make it easier for Congress to overturn Obama's regulations. Currently, under the rarely used Congressional Review Act, Congress has 60 legislative days to reject a rule but must debate each one for up to 10 hours, limiting the number that lawmakers have time to invalidate. The Midnight Rules Relief Act would let Congress lump multiple rules together and eliminate them en masse. "These proposals would in major

ways upend that long-standing consensus and make it very hard for agencies to solve problems and protect Americans," says William Buzbee, professor at Georgetown University Law Center.

Revamping government is exactly what House Republicans hope to do, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., told Washington's conservative Hoover Institution in mid-January. "I'm a firm believer that structure dictates behavior," he says. "You have to get the structure right. Otherwise, you'll get the same behavior and outcome as it goes forward."



U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., along with House Speaker Paul Ryan and House Republican Whip Steve Scalise, R-La., introduce new members of the House Republican leadership team. House Republicans have already passed three bills that would make it easier to repeal former President Barack Obama's recent regulations and give the courts and Congress more authority to block new ones.

JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

Going after *Chevron*, he says, is "key" to re-establishing three co-equal branches of government and lifting the burden rules put on the economy. And requiring Congress to approve any major regulation, as the REINS Act does, would give the people a "voice," he adds, because their elected representatives, not "bureaucrats," would get the final say.

Starting at the end of January, the House plans to begin undoing Obama administration regulations, including Bureau of Land Management rules to better protect streams from surface coal mining and reduce methane leaks from oil and gas fields on public land, McCarthy says. Under the Congressional Review Act, only 51 votes in the Senate are needed to do so.

It's not the first time Republicans have

tried to limit agencies' ability to regulate. In the mid-1990s, the House passed a less ambitious deregulation package that stalled in the Senate. Public concern over a fatal *E. coli* outbreak from tainted hamburger helped then-President Bill Clinton and environmental and other interest groups dissuade most pro-industry Democrats from embracing regulatory reform.

Many analysts predict that most of today's bills also will die in the Senate, since 60 votes are required to overcome a filibuster, and there are only 52 Republican senators. "The math just doesn't work," says Kevin Book, director of ClearView Energy Partners, a D.C.-based research firm.

But Patrick McLaughlin, who directs research on regulations at the conservative Mercatus Center at George Mason University, says the unexpected victory of President Donald Trump reflects voters' frustration with their local economies. That may pressure some Democrats to

reconsider regulatory reform, McLaughlin says: "We shouldn't expect the same results this time."

If regulatory reform measures make it through Congress, some analysts predict that President Donald Trump would veto them, because they could hamper his efforts to replace Obama's regulations with his own.

Either way, Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., top Democrat in the House Resources Committee, says Democrats can resist the larger GOP assault on regulations that protect people and the environment if they stand together. "I'm all set for this fight. I went through my seven steps of grieving. I blamed everybody. Then I came to the decision," Grijalva said. "You can't just wallow. You have to fight back." □

The climate movement's *Brown v. Board of Education*

Does the U.S. Constitution hold the key to climate action?

BY CALLY CARSWELL

The day before Donald Trump's inauguration, a group of environmental lawyers had hoped to depose Rex Tillerson, Trump's nominee for secretary of State, in Dallas, Texas. Julia Olson wanted to grill the former ExxonMobil CEO and American Petroleum Institute board member about climate change: what his industry knew, when they knew it, and how they lobbied the federal government to address — or ignore — the problem.

Industry lawyers disputed the request, and at press time it was unclear if the deposition would actually happen. But if it does, Olson will add Tillerson's testimony to the evidence she is gathering for a trial in Oregon later this year, where she will try to convince a federal judge that the government's failure to stem the climate crisis violates the constitutional rights of her clients — 21 young people not yet old enough to legally buy a drink.

This lawsuit is as broad as most are narrow. Environmental litigation is often incremental, ensuring that the government dots its i's and crosses its t's when permitting energy projects or carving out endangered species habitat. Olson's case is instead designed to upend our entire

fossil fuel-based energy system.

Olson argues that embedded in our rights to life and liberty is the right to a habitable planet — a right imperiled by rising seas and extreme weather. The federal government, she says, has willfully violated that right by unearthing and burning fossil fuels while fully aware of the consequences. And she's representing youth because today's 10-year-olds will be more profoundly impacted by climatic chaos than, say, our 70-year-old president.

The case is grounded in the "public trust" doctrine, which states that the government is obliged to manage certain natural resources for the long-term public good. The idea dates to Roman times and in the U.S. has been mostly applied to waterways. In a landmark 1892 case, the U.S. Supreme Court found that Illinois could not sell a lengthy stretch of Lake Michigan's shoreline to a railroad company because the state held the lake's waters in trust for the people.

The court saw the lake and its shoreline primarily as a corridor of commerce. But the idea of the public trust expanded over time. In 1983, the California Supreme Court stopped Los Angeles from emptying Mono Lake because it would hurt wildlife and diminish the lake's recreational and aesthetic values — also part of the trust.

Olson hopes to establish that the government has an intrinsic responsibility to protect the atmosphere, too. The court will wrestle with questions like: What is a habitable climate system? And at what point is it endangered? "You can't have that conversation in Congress," Olson says. "This will be a legitimate review of why we are in this mess." The trial will cover government leasing programs and tax policies that support fossil fuels, and political decisions to leave meaningful remedies for a warming world for another day.

Ultimately, the plaintiffs want federal policies to reduce carbon emissions enough to prevent catastrophic warming. Judges wouldn't write those policies, but the lawyers want to ensure that they reflect sound science. And they want courts to supervise their implementation, much the way courts oversaw school integration after *Brown v. Board of Education*. "We're looking for swift, game-changing action as soon as we can," Olson says.

"For years, lawyers (tried) to establish a constitutional right to a clean environment, with no success at all," says Michael Gerrard, an environmental law professor at Columbia University. Then, in 2013, Pennsylvania courts struck down a law that blocked local governments from restricting oil and gas drilling, saying it violated the state's constitutional obligation to conserve clean air, water and scenery for future generations.

Olson and her allies also notched some victories: This year, Washington and Massachusetts courts ruled in favor of youth plaintiffs in state-level versions of Olson's federal suit. Those cases, supported along with the Oregon suit by the nonprofit Our Children's Trust, forced state agencies to develop emission-reduction plans.

There was another major breakthrough this November, when a federal judge in Oregon shot down the government's and industry's motions to dismiss, allowing Olson's case to go to trial. "The trial court's decision was quite remarkable and unexpected," Gerrard says. For the first time, a federal judge implied that the Constitution did entitle Americans to a livable environment, and that the question of whether that right was imperiled deserved a hearing. "I have no doubt that the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society," Judge Ann Aiken wrote.

Now Olson must convince the court of the direct connections between federal energy policies and the harms wrought by climate change, and of its authority to make the government change its ways. If she wins, the question becomes whether the case can survive on appeal, even up to the nation's highest court — which could soon welcome a new justice, maybe two, appointed by Trump. □

Some of the 21 plaintiffs, along with attorneys and supporters, gather on the steps of the federal courthouse in Eugene, Oregon, after a hearing demanding the U.S. government take science-based action against climate change in March 2016.

ROBIN LOZNAK / ZUMA PRESS

Contributing editor Cally Carswell writes from Santa Fe, New Mexico. [@callycarswell](#)





Imperfect produce

In southern Arizona, a cross-border operation saves fresh food from the trash

BY PETER FRIEDERICI

Early on a late-summer Saturday, the six lanes of Tucson's Ina Road were empty and quiet. But in the parking lot of a bland strip mall, a temporary community had blossomed. Between two lines of white-topped buffet tables stood a mountain of produce: multicolored mini peppers gathered into bulging shopping bags, flats of crimson tomatoes, heaps of pale green watermelons.

The display was part of a weekly produce distribution dubbed P.O.W.W.O.W. — or “Produce on Wheels Without Waste.” On an August morning, Yolanda Soto and about a dozen local volunteers supervised as seven tons of imperfect but wholesome vegetables that would otherwise end up in a landfill were farmed out to more than 200 families.

Over the next two hours, people lined up at the tables — young, old, white, Hispanic, Asian — filling up boxes, laundry baskets, little red wagons. “It’s not just the most vulnerable people that come. Some redistribute it to other families,” Soto said. “Others are middle-class and are just trying to stretch their budget.”

An estimated 70 billion pounds of food is wasted in the U.S. each year, at a cost of upwards of \$200 billion a year, or 1,250 calories a day for each one of us. Research suggests that the average American family of four throws away about 15 percent of the food it purchases. Every one of those discarded squashes or wilted lettuce heads carries another cost, too, in the form of the energy, water and fertilizer used to grow

Peter Friederici is an award-winning environmental journalist who directs the Master of Arts in Sustainable Communities Program at Northern Arizona University.



Yolanda Soto with tons of “rescued” produce in the Borderlands Food Bank warehouse in Nogales, Arizona. ALEX PETERSON/GREENER MEDIA

it. Soto regards this excess as a unique opportunity to feed someone whose grocery budget may not be quite enough.

“There’s no more basic right than food,” Soto says, “but it has to be nutritious food. That’s a basic human right.”

The P.O.W.W.O.W. project focuses on the middle part of the food distribution process, between farmers and consumers. During peak seasons — winter and spring — more than 1,500 semi-trucks filled with fruits and vegetables rumble daily through Nogales, a border city and one of the main points of entry for produce imported from Mexico. On the U.S. side, the perishables are loaded into warehouses, then re-loaded into trailers headed for stores and restaurants across the country.

Yet the glossy expectations of super-

Volunteers stand by as shoppers check the offerings at a Produce on Wheels Without Waste meetup at the Calvary North Church in Phoenix. COURTESY BORDERLANDS FOOD PROJECT

market customers and managers mean that a substantial portion of the produce will get thrown out even before it even reaches the stores: tomatoes missing their stems, squashes with raindrop stains, irregularly shaped eggplants — all are discarded. Even perfect pallets of melons can be tossed out if they’re more than the distributors ordered.

Food also gets wasted when it lingers too long at the border. It can take many hours for trucks to be allowed to depart from Mexico, and entry into the U.S. is slow, too. One of Soto’s dreams is to find ways to speed border crossings for truckers hauling fresh produce. An estimated 50 million pounds of produce crosses the border each year, and an unknown portion of that is thrown out because after a long transit, it’s bruised, wilted or starting to rot.

A native of Nogales, Soto is a middle-aged, raven-haired sparkplug of a woman. Before she began working for the Borderlands Food Bank 22 years ago, all the rejected produce ended up in the local landfill. So in 2014, she organized the P.O.W.W.O.W. program, through which truckloads are shipped every weekend to distribution points in the Tucson and Phoenix areas as well as Nogales and its namesake Mexican sister city, rescuing about three-quarters of the produce that would have otherwise gone to waste. For \$10, customers can walk away with up to 60 pounds of it.

By 8 a.m., more than 200 people have paid and loaded up their cars and vans. The squash and eggplants are gone, as are the mini peppers. A 10-year-old named Dustin helps the last few customers find the perfect watermelons from a huge cardboard box. He’s a regular volunteer, as is his dad, Danny Morgan.

Melissa Starks drove 50 miles to Tucson from the mining town of San Manuel after hearing about the program through Facebook. She eyes the last remnants. Is she really going to use that whole flat of tomatoes — 16 beefsteaks, each the size of a softball?

“Oh, yes, we’re going to be using it all,” she says, contemplating. “We’ve got a big family.” She plans to come back for more in a couple of weeks.

When the tomatoes are gone, the boxes and tables are broken down and loaded back into the truck. As the semi pulls away, a couple of volunteers use a hose to wash the watermelon smears off the pavement. By 8:30, there are no longer any signs of the pop-up community that met here — just the puddled runoff gathered in the dip in the middle of the parking lot. □



A male jaguar spotted in southern Arizona in December.

ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

THE LATEST

Backstory

Jaguars once ranged from the U.S. to Argentina, but were listed as federally endangered in 1997. Today, most are found in Mexico and Central America; a male occasionally wanders across the border in search of a mate.

Debate continues over whether the American Southwest represents true jaguar habitat or the northern edge of its extent, and several livestock associations are suing to challenge the designation of critical habitat for the cat there (“The tenuous fate of the Southwest’s last jaguars,” *HCN*, 5/30/16).

Followup

A previously unknown male jaguar appeared in Arizona’s Huachuca Mountains last December, only the second documented in the U.S. in seven years. In late December the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service and bi-national Jaguar Recovery Team released a draft recovery plan that focuses on jaguar conservation in Mexico, and does not include plans for reintroducing females to the Southwest. The Center for Biological Diversity calls it “an extinction plan, not a recovery plan,” saying it fails to restore the species in the U.S.

MAYA L. KAPOOR

► A truckbed is filled with invasive common carp from Malheur Lake. The annual project to remove carp, which harm water quality and migratory bird habitat on the lake, couldn't occur in 2016 because of the occupation at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon.

DEVAN SCHWARTZ/ EARTHFIX



Malheur revisited

The National Wildlife Refuge System is more vulnerable than ever

BY ANNA V. SMITH

Alice Elshoff first saw Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 1959. The 82-year-old, who lives in nearby Bend, Oregon, still goes there “whenever I can get away,” to bird-watch and volunteer. But this spring, on her first visit after the January 2016 occupation by armed anti-federal militants, everything felt surreal, she says: She had to notify refuge staff in advance and stop at the gate for an identification check by armed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees. There were no other visitors and few employees, so it was unusually quiet. Elshoff, vice chair of the board for the Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, and a team of volunteers had come to reseed native grasses destroyed when militiamen bulldozed a new road. “It felt good to be there,” she says, working in the place where the Bundy brothers and their supporters did so much damage. “(We were) trying to make things real again. To undo the bad that had been done.”

Today, a year after the occupation, most of Malheur’s 188,000 acres are open to the public again, but the headquarters, museum and visitor center remain closed as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which oversees the National Wildlife Refuge System, improves security to the buildings and gates. The agency has already spent \$4.3 million repairing

damaged buildings, rebuilding kicked-in walls, and cleaning up trash and backed-up toilets. That’s on top of the roughly \$2 million it spent during the takeover placing temporary law enforcement officers at understaffed refuges across the West to help avoid more militia-type occupations. The agency hopes to have the Malheur headquarters open again by early spring, when the Ross’ geese and sandhill cranes arrive.

The cost of the 41-day occupation has only added to the financial burden on a system that has seen repeated budget cuts and staff reductions. Half the refuges in the U.S. lack their own managers, an increase from 2007 when a third of them lacked managers. Law enforcement employees are at an all-time low, leaving refuges across the U.S. vulnerable. And an unfriendly Congress isn’t likely to provide relief, especially in light of the federal hiring freeze imposed by President Donald Trump.

“It’s a system that’s under greater and greater stress,” says Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), which just released a survey of refuge supervisors assessing agency morale and support. “They have less resources with which to operate, but a bigger job.”

tat for wildlife, including more than 380 endangered and threatened species. Hunting, fishing and wildlife-watching opportunities draw 48 million visitors annually to sites ranging from the remote wilderness of Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the arid mountain ranges of Nevada’s Desert National Wildlife Refuge. Under former President Barack Obama, 14 more national wildlife refuges and conservation areas, seven in the West, were created. But as with national parks, funding hasn’t kept pace with the expansion; since 2010, the refuge system’s budget has dropped approximately 20 percent when adjusted for inflation, and 13 percent of the workforce has quit or retired without being replaced.

“It’s a matter of prioritizing,” says Cynthia Martinez, chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, “and making those hard decisions of what we’re not going to do.” Many visitor centers have had to reduce their hours or even close completely. Staffing cuts mean that, with no one to oversee volunteer projects such as trail maintenance, refuges lose out on services worth an estimated \$2 million per year. Invasive species eradication programs have been severely reduced or done away with altogether. Prescribed burns have suffered, too, declining 44 percent in the last five years as the agency spends ever more on fighting wildfires.

Funding cuts also lead to a rise in “complexing”: the practice of consolidating staffing and equipment for multiple refuges. Not all refuges need a full management staff, but complexing has been used more frequently as budgets and staffing have fallen from the high point of 2010. In PEER’s January survey of national wildlife refuge managers, 94 percent do

Anna V. Smith is an HCN editorial fellow.
@annavtoriasmith

The National Wildlife Refuge System’s 150 million acres provide vital habi-

▼ Ammon Bundy cuts through a section of fence that bordered a rancher's property to let cattle through at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service condemned the action: "Removing fences, damaging any refuge property, or unauthorized use of equipment ... (is) unlawful ... movement of cattle onto the refuge ... constitutes trespassing." THOMAS BOYD/OREGONLIVE



not have enough staff to "meet the core conservation mission" of their refuges. That means problems take longer to be addressed, important projects go undone, and deferring them gets more and more costly. As a whole, the system has a \$2.7 billion maintenance backlog.

Fish and Wildlife has always had a shoestring budget, says David Houghton, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, and is now seeing a "perfect storm" of funding problems; the National Wildlife Refuge System is just one of many programs in need. In November, the agency released draft plans for reorganizing the refuge system in eight states, including Colorado, Montana and Wyoming, to reduce staff numbers and decrease the amount of land that's actively managed. "You're not just cutting out the muscle, or the fat," Houghton says, "but you're deep into the marrow of the agency and it has had profound operational issues."

The agency's budget woes and reduced staffing have impacted refuges all over the West. At the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which encompasses six different refuges totaling 1.1 million acres in central Montana, there are now 19 employees, down from 28 in 2010. That means even necessary projects at the second-largest refuge in the Lower 48 get postponed. Staffers can no longer control some common invasive plants on the refuge like Canadian thistle; they've stopped mule deer and elk population surveys and reduced the number of prescribed fires that keep trees from encroaching on plains where ground-nesting birds live. Instead, they spend much of their time maintaining an 800-mile network of roads and other projects for visitor safety and to

keep basic operations running.

The remaining employees are overloaded and work longer hours, says manager Paul Santavy, mentioning a wildlife biologist who spent 150 days studying black-footed ferrets, occasionally alone in a remote camp. "I sing the praises of all my colleagues for their dedication, but the cost of that is they're always fighting burnout," Santavy says. "They're always on the edge of having had enough."

The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement, a national coalition, has reported many examples of problems caused by cutbacks. In Senate testimony from 2016, CARE documented how budget cuts affected outreach to rural communities in Alaska. The Innoko, Nowitna and Koyukuk national wildlife refuges were complexed, and the staff was cut, leaving just one outreach staffer who is now struggling to maintain connections and communication with locals.

In New Mexico's Bosque National Wildlife Refuge, employees have fought to eradicate invasive tamarisk for two decades. But reduced funding for the project has allowed tamarisk to return to areas where it was previously eliminated to prevent it sucking up vital water from refuge waterways.

Before the January takeover, Malheur had 16 employees, but five left afterward, and replacements have yet to be hired. Compare that to the 1990s, when 37 people worked at the refuge. During the occupation, all staffers had to stay away, which meant that an annual project to remove invasive carp, which harm water quality, couldn't occur. Other long-term efforts suffered as well. Chad Karges, the refuge's project leader, had been working with ranchers, tribes, environmentalists

and community members for years, one-on-one and through partnerships. That work played a role in the outcome of the occupation; not many locals flocked to the occupiers' cause. Such efforts, including the High Desert Partnership, have resumed post-occupation and are vital for all refuges in terms of volunteers, public-lands dialogue and support, Houghton says, but often there's not enough time to do necessary outreach.

While the Malheur occupation was in full swing, Santavy says, "the overwhelming message we were getting from our local communities was that they didn't have any patience for that kind of stuff. That wasn't going to happen in their backyard."

The occupation catapulted Oregon's Harney County into the spotlight, along with awareness of national wildlife refuges. This year, the Harney County Bird Festival sold out faster than ever before, out-of-town visitors to the refuge have increased, and the Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge has grown from approximately 100 to 2,000 members, mostly non-locals.

Raising public awareness of national wildlife refuges could be key to helping them recover some funding from crippling budget cuts. "(Refuges are) not well known, and that's a problem politically," says Gary Ivey, president of the Friends of Malheur. Ivey first visited Malheur in 1979, and was dazzled by the hundreds of different bird species that can be seen at the refuge. He worked there as the refuge biologist for 15 years. The out-of-town occupiers' claims that they were returning the refuge to the people rang painfully untrue to him, Ivey says. "It's like somebody being in your own house, breaking in and taking it over."

Now, faced with a Republican Congress that is paving the way to transfer federal land to state control, Ivey, Houghton and others are lobbying for more public support for refuges, to increase their visibility and funding. "Refuges need help," says Ivey; the Malheur occupation was a sign of that. "We're ground zero for threats to refuges."

This past October, Alice Elshoff was working at Malheur again, this time on trail construction, when news came that the first trial of the occupiers had resulted in a not-guilty verdict. A fellow volunteer checked his phone, saying, "You're kidding — on all counts?" Elshoff describes the verdict as "heartbreaking," but says she still looks forward to the refuge headquarters reopening in the spring. Last summer was unusually dry, so she didn't see her favorite long-legged wading bird, the black-necked stilt, in shallow Malheur Lake. But this year, with such a good snowpack in the Steen Mountains, the runoff may yet fill the lake. "Hopefully, this will be a wonderful spring." □

THE LATEST

Backstory

Southern Oregon's Kalmiopsis Wilderness shelters unique plants and the headwaters of several wild and scenic rivers. In 2001, the Biscuit Fire burned a half-million acres, mostly within the wilderness. Afterward, visitation decreased as trails fell into disrepair, until a small band of conservationists began rebuilding them ("How to love a weird and perfect wilderness," *HCN*, 11/28/16). In 2015, Oregon's congressional representatives introduced bills to better protect adjacent roadless areas. **Two proposed nickel mines could affect water quality in the North Fork of the Smith River, which flows out of the Kalmiopsis** and harbors healthy wild steelhead and salmon populations.

Followup

On Jan. 12, the Obama administration **blocked future mining exploration and development on more than 100,000 acres of Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest and Bureau of Land Management land around the Kalmiopsis**. The moratorium will extend for 20 years and includes part of the North Fork of the Smith's watershed, complicating the approval process for the proposed mines and giving Congress time to consider protective legislation.

KATE SCHIMEL



Darlingtonia californica on the North Fork of the Smith River. ZACHARY COLLIER/NW RAFTING CO.

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GRAND CANYON CALLING

By Serena Supplee. 112 pages: \$35.
Lily Canyon Books, 2016.

Grand Canyon Calling gives readers a close look at Utah artist Serena Supplee's work from 2006-2015. Supplee, who studied fine art at Northern Arizona University, has spent 35 years on the Colorado Plateau, recording its shadowy canyons, crashing rivers and moonlit draws. The book features over 50 oil and watercolor paintings, each accompanied by preparatory sketches and commentary by the artist.

It's described as "an artist's relationship with the Grand Canyon," revealing her intimacy with the places she paints, garnered from a decade spent working as a guide on the Colorado, Green and San Juan rivers. Portraying canyon walls and sandstone, sometimes in brash violets, oranges and pinks, and elsewhere in softer earthen tones, Supplee continues to explore the Grand Canyon, a place that has "long captivated the mind and soul of many a romantic Westerner." ANNA. V. SMITH

Lava Falls is powerful. Enter and hang on. *Run Lava Run*, far left. They call this Owl Eyes, an amazing pair of caves in the Kaibab Limestone. *Allies*, left.

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Building a new team

We're happy to welcome two new interns to our Paonia, Colorado, headquarters, where they'll spend the next six months learning more about reporting and writing.

Emily Benson's lifelong love of water began in her childhood in New York's lake-filled Adirondack Mountains. After earning her master's in biology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, she worked in an aquatic ecology lab in Idaho, where she enjoyed "tromping through streams" and trapping fish. She graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz's Science Communication Program last spring and spent the summer interning at *New Scientist* magazine in Cambridge, Mass.

At *HCN*, Emily is excited to bring her science background to bear on "deep, nuanced, contextually rich" stories. She'll still get to tromp through streams, at least once the ice melts, but now she'll get to write about it, too. In the meantime, she plans to cross-country ski as much as she can.

New intern **Rebecca Worby** just can't seem to stay away from Paonia. She spent two month-long writing residencies at Elsewhere Studios, in 2012 and 2013, so this winter marks the native New Yorker's third extended stay in town.

Rebecca, a graduate of Wesleyan University, fell in love with the West six years ago on road trips crisscrossing the region around her mother's home in Santa Fe. Those wanderings inspired her graduate thesis in creative nonfiction at Columbia University, on the legacy of uranium mining in Moab. The project gave her a crash course on federal land agency operations, she says. It also sparked an

interest in the tensions Western communities face as newer industries like recreation replace resource extraction, a topic she hopes to cover at *HCN*.

Rebecca has been writing from New York City in recent years, but she's kept her eye on the West. She's excited to dive into rigorous reporting on environmental issues, especially now: "There's never been a more important time to be writing about the environment," she says.

On Jan. 21, marches for human rights and women's rights occurred throughout the West and the U.S., from urban centers like Seattle to rural areas like our own backyard here in Paonia, Colorado. Major gift officer **Alyssa Pinkerton** travelled all the way to Washington, D.C., from the Front Range (on her own dime, of course) to show her support: "Overwhelmingly, it was a powerful, loving and hopeful experience."

At an after-work get-together on Inauguration Day, copy editor **Diane Sylvain**, who prides herself on her activist past, grimly warned the youngsters, "Just remember, you don't want to be tear-gassed." Unfortunately, Diane had a head cold, and Executive Director **Paul Larmer** heard it differently: "You don't want to be *cheery*-assed? Why not?" Thereby reminding us all that communication is never easy, even if you're on the same team.

Lastly, we have a correction from our Jan. 23 issue. Our story "While wolves still have names" stated that in Wyoming, wolves have been removed from the endangered species list. While they were indeed delisted in 2012, federal protections were restored in 2014. *HCN* regrets the error.

—Anna V. Smith for the staff



Rebecca Worby and Emily Benson, the new *HCN* interns. BROOKE WARREN

RIVER

*"Oh, Eeyore, you are wet!"
said Piglet, feeling him.*

*Eeyore shook himself, and asked somebody to
explain to Piglet what happened when you
had been inside a river for quite a long time.*

—A. A. Milne

*Between every two pine trees there is a door
leading to a new way of life.*

—John Muir

The first American veteran on Idaho's main stem of the Salmon River was Capt. William Clark. He and Meriwether Lewis had split up to search for a route to the Pacific, but this one was not panning out. The rapids were too rough for the expedition's 1,000-pound dugout canoes, and the canyons proved too steep to portage around the whitewater. After exploring the upper reaches in moccasins, Clark complained, "I Sliped & bruised my leg very much on a rock." With that, he etched his name in a pine tree and got the heck out of there. He called this the River of No Return. That was in 1805.

Eventually, other explorers, fortune-seekers and recluses followed, braving the rough terrain to stake mining claims downstream. True to its cognomen as the River of No Return, it accommodated one-way traffic only. The miners built huge wooden boats laden with supplies and ventured down the rapids. If man and boat survived the passage, the boat would get cannibalized for a cabin and the miner would lay in for a long, long while.

The steep country that hemmed in the river was never ideal for human habitation. In 1980, Congress made the isolation official, designating the river and its surrounding mountains the largest chunk of the wilderness system in the Lower 48. The



OF HEALING

FEATURE BY FLORENCE WILLIAMS | ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRAHAM SMITH

Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, sometimes just called “the Frank,” stretches across 2.3 million acres in the part of Idaho that starts to get skinny. The river running through it carves a long, forested gorge deeper than the Grand Canyon.

It was through that gorge that another group of American veterans — all women, all scarred emotionally and physically by their service — descended in the summer of 2014. Like Clark, they were also on a voyage of discovery in the American wilds. I wanted to witness it. If one minute of gazing up at a eucalyptus tree makes people more generous, and three days makes them more socially connected, calm and inspired, what could a week unleash? Were the inverse-PTSD effects of awe real, and if so, would they show up in the brains that needed them most?

You have to be brave to venture down the Salmon, and a little bit addled. This group of women, sponsored by an Idaho-based nonprofit called Higher Ground, was both. Participants had to be former or current members of the military who suffer from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. When I learned the organization was willing to invite a journalist, I signed on.

This was Higher Ground’s first all-women’s river trip. The

plan was to float 81 miles of the river, try our skills at kayaking, rowing and paddle-boarding (non-mandatory), participate in “processing” groups and team-building activities (mandatory), eat together, collapse into tents, and then do it all over again the next day. On the sixth day, we’d leave the river, flying home off a dirt strip in small planes. Unlike the miners, we’d be returning to civilization, hopefully a little bit changed.

The night before launching our boats at the end of a dirt road, I met up with the women, gathered on a restaurant patio for pizza in the no-traffic-light town of Stanley, rimmed by the vaulting, aptly named Sawtooth Mountains. This clearly was not your usual river-rat crowd. These women were on the whole younger, more ethnically diverse and less able-bodied. The nine former service members carried an assortment of cigarettes, butch hairstyles, tattoos, piercings and physical supports that included a cane, orthopedic tape and an arm splint. Collectively, they brought a small pharmacy’s worth of anti-anxiety drugs, antidepressants, anti-seizure meds, painkillers, digestive aids and sleeping pills. One service dog, Major, a yellow lab mix, wore a bib that read “Do Not Pet.” The warning could have applied to anyone. Heavy-lidded and surly after a long day of travel, they were not about to smile for a bunch of cowtown selfies.

**You have
to be brave
to venture
down the
Salmon, and
a little bit
crazy.**



The recreation therapists, Brenna Partridge and Kirstin Webster, handed out matching black fleece jackets emblazoned with the unique crest of this “unit” — HG-714-RA, which stood for Higher Ground, July 14, Rafting. (Other Higher Ground units, typically coed or all-male, might spend a week fly-fishing or skiing or doing lake sports.)

Partridge smiled and asked us to introduce ourselves and talk about why we wanted to be on the trip. Marsha Anderson (some names, including hers, have been changed) described being medevaced out of Afghanistan on a stretcher, convinced for a while that she was already dead. It took her 13 months to relearn to walk. Now she felt angry, misunderstood by her family, and cheated of the sports she loved like surfing and cycling. She was hoping to find some new ones, along with new friends who had been through what she’d been through.

Carla Garcia, 35, described how she’d volunteered for the first Iraq invasion in 2003 and then returned as a vehicle commander running fuel convoys across the war zone from Al Taqaddum. In 2005, her truck hit a roadside bomb and she was blasted from it, landing on her head. Her driver died. During her third tour, in Mosul, another bomb exploded, crashing her head against the vehicle roof and pelting her with shrapnel. Garcia pulled her ailing driver from the smoking wreckage and fought off insurgents with her M-16 until she passed out.

(She received both a combat action badge and a Purple Heart, I found out later.) Doctors induced a weeklong coma to relieve pressure in her brain. Afterward, she had to learn how to talk. In addition to chronic pain, she suffers seizures, headaches, mood swings and nightmares. She can’t walk far, won’t drive, and can barely stand being in any kind of vehicle. “I don’t like crowds and I don’t like people,” she said. “This will be hard.”

After dinner, we grouped for the processing talk, our first one, to articulate goals for the trip. That’s when Kate Day, a Navy vet in her 50s from Las Vegas, mentioned her three-year stint of homelessness, a stay in a mental institution and her near-inability to leave her house. Two other women chimed in that they, too, had been institutionalized. One said she was still so depressed she didn’t want to keep living. Another said her anger and misery had alienated her whole family. Another, sitting expressionless, said in a flat voice that said she wanted some time to “be in the moment and not zone out.” A skinny blonde wearing a sparkly blue sundress and pink sunglasses, whom I’ll call Pam Hana, showed the opposite affect: maniacally chatty, never still. She woke up scared and crying because she hated airplanes and had successfully avoided them for years until this trip.

Tania Herrera, wearing a Gilliganesque fishing hat over her dark, cropped hair, talked about being limited by her body. First struck by shrapnel near Fallujah, then catapulted by a car bomb along her convoy route and finally struck by pieces of a collapsing mosque hit by a grenade, the former Army gunner now had one working arm, a bad leg and a brain that didn’t work too fast. Thirty-four years old, she rarely left her house near Fort Bragg. “It sucks to think that’s the way life is going to be, stuck in a rut,” she said. “It seems like a life sentence.”

Petite with smooth skin and a friendly, wide mouth, Herrera also told us that she now had trouble making friends, and on top of that, she had some serious hair issues. “I used to have long hair but can’t figure out how to do it with one arm,” she said. “I used to sit on my hair like Medea. I’m not that girly, but to have it stripped away from you is hard. I don’t want to go to family weddings because I can’t look pretty.”

Partridge, the group leader, gave Herrera her marching orders: “Find someone to bond with. This is your unit now.”

In the days following, more details of their battered lives would come out during processing, in one-on-one talks or in small groups. As a general rule, the younger women had seen combat, even though technically they weren’t supposed to be in combat roles at the time. That was a central irony of serving in recent wars, and yet, because they were women, it was often harder for them than for men to get diagnosed as having combat-related PTSD. Many of the older women were here because they suffered military sexual trauma (MST). One was gang-raped by eight men, including her commanding officers, while stationed in Okinawa; another was attacked in the Navy by her master-at-arms. Another was assaulted by a civilian while on leave in Europe. In only one instance did the perpetrators meet justice, and that was the civilian.

In both types of PTSD, the consequences are similar: life-altering social, professional and psychological impairments.



Every big war has its signature wounds. If the Civil War didn't kill you, you were likely to end up with amputations. Surgeons in World War I advanced the art of facial plastic surgery. (Noses were destroyed by mustard gas.) Gulf War veterans barely saw combat, but many suffer from mysterious symptoms believed to be linked to nerve agents. PTSD was common after most of these wars — even Homer wrote about it — but it went by different names: shell shock, soldier's heart, combat fatigue. Frederick Law Olmsted, who, in addition to being a badass nature guru, was witness to just about every significant beat of the 19th century, from plantation slavery to the gold rush to the invention of suburbia, described the Union soldiers after the Battle of Manassas as a “disintegrated herd. ... They start and turn pale at the breaking of a stick or the crack of a percussion cap. ... It is a terrific disease.” PTSD wasn't officially named and recognized by the Veterans Administration until 1980.

In the general population, about 8 percent of us will experience PTSD. Among veterans, that figure is about 18 percent, but a recent examination of the data for over a million veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq found a 27 percent rate (with over 70 percent of that coexisting with depression.) The fingerprints of the recent wars are so far clear: PTSD, traumatic brain injury (TBI) from heavy use of explosives, and sexual assault.

Some studies suggest that women experience PTSD at slightly higher rates than men, or they may just more readily admit to having it. According to the latest iteration of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, symptoms of PTSD cluster around four subgroups: re-experiencing (flashbacks, nightmares), avoidance and withdrawal, bad moods and depression, and hyperarousal, such as jumpiness, vigilance, aggression and sleep problems. Women, who now make up about 15 percent of the military, express some symptoms differently, experiencing higher rates of anxiety and eating disorders. They are two to four times more likely than other women to be homeless; men have more problems with violent aggression and substance abuse, but plenty of women experience these also.

By all indications, the women on our trip were like Tania Herrera, who'd been an eager, straight-A high school student from North Philly: highly competent, enthusiastic recruits when they started out. Their intelligence and toughness were still in evidence. But pieces of them had crumpled. They no longer felt whole, or secure, or capable. Now they were grieving their lost selves. As Herrera put it during one group session, “I never thought I'd be 34 and unable to take care of myself. When I went to war, I thought either you die or you make it out. I didn't factor in what if you came out different than when you went in.”

The women described daily lives involving constant physical pain. They couldn't concentrate well. They were sometimes jumpy, depressed. They didn't like being with people, but they didn't like being alone all the time. The wars had taken away their ability to sleep well.

It was time for the women to get out of their lives and into the river. The first named rapid, called Killum, came up fast. I was paddling one of the four inflatable kayaks, and I saw the kayak in front of me meet a short wall of water and flip. I hit the same cold sideways wave, my paddle dove, and I flipped, too. Happily, the Class II and III rapids in this stretch are more wave than rock, and they are short, interspersed with deep, calm stretches. I managed to claw back into my boat. The six women paddling the raft cheered me and the other kayakers on.

Many rapids followed before camp, and I was alternately ex-

hilarated, nervous, cold and determined in that I'm-committed-now kind of way. Entering a rapid, your vision narrows and so does your focus. Your heart rate picks up, your breath quickens, and your skin temperature rises. Your gut begins to tighten. In small doses like this, the adrenaline rush is fun. You feel present; the B-roll of your mind falls away, and there's a heady release of endorphins when you're safely through. Kayakers sometimes call paddling big water “combat boating,” and when hard-shell boaters roll their overturned kayaks back upright while still strapped in, it's called a combat roll.

I saw the basic inanity of this metaphor while surrounded by these very real veterans. In war combat, the stress response isn't small or ephemeral. It's big. And it lasts for days, sometimes weeks or months. It lasts so long that the brain changes — more in some people than in others. Blame evolution. Our nervous systems are naturally hardwired for fear, telling us what to avoid and how to stay safe. Some psychologists argue that fear is our oldest emotion, existing in the earliest planetary life forms and predating even the drive to reproduce. It starts deep in our brainstem, in the Milk Dud-sized amygdala.

When fear alone rules us, we lack the smarts to do much of anything creative, or interpersonal, or spatially demanding. Part of what makes us human is that our brains evolved a neocortex, the place where we plan and puzzle and tell ourselves we're being drama queens. A fright causes a neurological tug of war between the old and new brains. In the deep clutch of fear, our primitive brainstem overrides our problem-solving neocortex, and we become stupid. With PTSD, the brain stays locked into amygdala hyperdrive. Failing to bounce back to baseline, it loses the ability to distinguish between a real and a perceived threat. That's why soldiers with PTSD often cannot tolerate driving or shopping or loud noises even in safe places when they return home.

But there's a reason we feel fear. It may have given us the gift of memory. The very reason we remember anything may be that we must remember near-misses, narrowly avoided dangers, and attacks from predators and enemies. Thanks to fear, we enjoy the smell of madeleines and the writers who write about them.

At its root, PTSD is a memory disorder. Brain scans of people suffering PTSD show cellular and volume changes in the hippocampus, a region that helps process memories and sits very close to the amygdala. In frightened lab animals, the fear hormones — glucocorticoids like cortisol, norepinephrine or adrenaline — flood receptors on the hippocampus and impair memory. It appears that persistent trauma memories shrink the hippocampus, and it's well-established that PTSD leads to emotional as well as cognitive problems, such as poor focus and short-term memory deficits.

Physiologically, chronic, heightened stress looks like this: higher blood pressure, cellular inflammation, and a higher risk for cardiac disease. Longitudinal studies show that veterans with PTSD are sicker, in more pain, and die younger than their non-PTSD peers. They are also 4.5 times more likely to have substance abuse issues. Veterans are twice as likely to be divorced, and female veterans commit suicide at nearly six times the rate of other women.

Groups like Higher Ground — and there are many, from those offering surfing and fly-fishing programs for vets to a hospital in Los Angeles that promotes bonding between humans and abused parrots with symptoms resembling PTSD — believe that engaging with nature or wildlife can reduce trauma symptoms. Adventure sports like kayaking provide a laser focus for an unfocused mind, as well as a welcome distraction from unwelcome thoughts. The physical exertion often leads to better sleep, and the sensory elements of nature can

“When I went to war, I thought either you die or you make it out. I didn't factor in what if you came out different than when you went in.”

—Tania Herrera,
veteran who was
injured in Afghanistan





calm the nervous system.

Even knowing all this, I couldn't help but worry a bit about these women in such an uncontrolled environment. What if they got pinned on a rock or had a bad swim? One of the kayakers was Marsha Anderson, who'd been a ski racer in her youth in Wyoming. Now she had nerve damage in an arm and a leg from an explosion in Afghanistan in 2009, and she hurt all the time. After her injury, she couldn't walk for a year. She seemed fragile. When a rapid spat Anderson out of her inflatable boat in midafternoon, I held her boat next to mine and helped haul her back in. Then Herrera, riding in a double kayak, her right arm bearing her high-tech brace with a GoPro camera attached to it, went over. I wondered how she would get back in the high, slippery boat with one working arm; but her partner, a Higher Ground staffer, stayed in the river and heaved her over the gunnels.

If these women came expecting a relaxing repose on the beach-lined river, this wasn't it. We weren't even allowed cocktails. Could they handle this sort of extreme adventure? These women lived in a constant playback of memories and anxieties. Maybe they should be home snuggling with their service dogs and using a rowing machine?

Or maybe not. Anderson, a Korean American in her early 30s with short hair, sat smiling while she ate an eggroll that evening. "I never thought I'd go by myself down a river," she said. "I'm exhausted from the adrenaline." She recalled the words of a yoga instructor: "Anxiety is just excitement without breath." The river was teaching her to breathe. "I wasn't sure I was going to go back in and keep kayaking," she continued, "but I did, and I was trying to breathe in every rapid." She clearly liked being a badass. As for Herrera, who was still relearning how to take basic care of herself, paddling a kayak was a revelation. She didn't seem to mind the unplanned swim at all. She found that she could tape her bad hand around the paddle shaft and use the other arm for most of the power. Seeing her in the boat, I was reminded of another one-armed veteran who made a similar river voyage 145 years ago, Maj. John Wesley Powell. Wounded during the Civil War and commissioned to survey the frothy Colorado, he seemed to relish every minute of it: "We have an unknown distance yet to run; an unknown river yet to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not."

When Herrera flipped, she even had the presence of mind to salvage her combat-medal-bedecked Gilligan hat. "I was really happy that I was able to contribute and not have everyone do work for me," she said. "It was neat to do something physical. At home, I can barely get my own mail."

The rafters, too, had a good day. Anjah Mason, the expressionless Army vet who had told us she wanted to stop zoning out, described almost having a panic attack on the boat, but then talking herself through it. She'd learned how to adapt to a wholly new situation, and she was pleased.

Everyone was hungry. No one stayed up late. Manic Pam Hana finished a cigarette and then fell asleep in front of her tent under the still-bright Northern Rockies sky at 8 p.m.

I began the next day with my signature outdoor ailment, a bee sting. Catalina Lopez administered rubbing alcohol and Benadryl and told me to keep tabs on the swelling. A former Army nurse, she had served for 15 years in the Balkans, Somalia and Iraq, and was haunted by recurring dreams of blood and severed body parts. Once, while I was eating lunch, she had described watching an unconscious guard's brain swell and swell in the hospital. She told me normal intracranial pressure was 10, but this guy's meter was reading 20, then 30 and then 85 — "and then I could see his cranium start to move."

"We have an unknown distance yet to run; an unknown river yet to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not."

—John Wesley Powell, during his survey of the Colorado River 145 years ago

I looked at my sandwich.
 “You see where I’m going with this.”
 I nodded.
 “Do you want me to stop?”
 “Yes, please.”

That second day, I joined the increasingly sociable paddle raft. At some point, Tania Herrera, sitting on the raft tube across from me in the bow, started singing, “I kissed a bug and I liked it.” She told stories about being in Iraq. She was part of an all-woman transport truck they nicknamed the Maxi Pad. Then someone asked me why I wanted to write about breasts,



the topic of my first book. That inspired Herrera to come up with a name for our rubber boat: the Boob Tube.

It was a long day on the river, a hot, 20-mile paddle punctuated by swimming and a beachside lunch. The canyon in this section is steep and dotted with large ponderosa pines that emerge from shiny black gneiss outcrops. We were passing through the middle of the ancient Idaho batholith. Angela Day, a blond, plump Navy veteran, bobbed along in her kayak like a mellow duck, not working too hard and giggling through the waves. Anderson, the nerve-damaged former ski racer,

rode the stand-up paddleboard; in the rapids it became more of a kneeling board, and sometimes an upside-down board. In the afternoon, nurse Lopez spilled out of her kayak in a tricky rapid. From the Boob Tube, I could see the panic in her face, the desperate gulps of air and water. She got back in the kayak, but she wasn’t happy about it.

At processing that evening, she looked defeated. Facilitator Partridge had asked the group what their passions were. “I used to be passionate about everything,” said Lopez, whose PTSD and a chronic back injury got her medical retirement from the Army. “Life, work, nature. Even today I was passionate about kayaking until, what the fuck, and now I expect to be disappointed by everything.” She shrugged. “Maybe I’ll get back in, I don’t know.”

Anjah Mason said she didn’t know what she was passionate about. “I used to be passionate about my family.”

Connie Smith, a former Navy captain from Texas, said she was passionate about her work training service dogs.

Angela Day said she was passionate about her relationship with the Lord. “Today, in the kayak, I was like, ‘Come on, Lord, bring it on! You can do better than that!’ ”

Linda Brown, soft-spoken, in her 50s, said she was passionate about outdoor sports. “I can’t say I’m passionate for any length of time, but I do believe I’m passionate about the outdoors, trees especially.”

Pam Hana, still manic, bouncing on her chair, said, “I’m passionate about staying single and frickin’ free! I’m loving it! Seriously!”

Herrera said she used to be passionate about her job in the Army. “I was a lead gunner in Iraq, in a turret, with a headset. My kid dream came true, of a car that talked to me. I wanted to be Knight Rider with the biggest gun and the coolest clothes. I remember thanking God for allowing my dream to come true.” She looked at the sand. “It’s so hard to create a dream again and go forward. That’s where I get stuck. How do I do that now with all these barriers, these health issues, the medicines, the bad relationships, no money, the disability?”

Angela Day said, “I don’t want to leave my safety zone.”

“You left it today on the river,” Partridge said.

“Yes. But it’s become normal for me to leave the house only once a month, to buy groceries. I do have a deep personal dream not to be that way.”

“Like when you’re on the river, sometimes you have to ask for help,” said Partridge. “People have your back.”

“It was the funnest day ever today!” said Hana.

“For you.” Lopez glowered.

We fell into a pattern of running the rapids, processing the day, making and breaking camp, telling stories, coming together sometimes and other times dropping off into pockets of introspection or quiet or just plain tiredness, not unlike riffles and eddies, the rhythm of the river. Before breakfast, we practiced group yoga. Several people grabbed a quick cigarette before they arranged themselves into lotus position, which never failed to crack me up. Day’s dog, Major, lay at her feet at all times and seemed perplexed by the strange body positions. Even impassive Mason, who moved as little as possible, swiveled her torso for gentle twists. Skinny Hana was usually cold but always smiled. I noticed she was babbling less.

Each day, there was more laughter. Lopez made nicknames for our guides, who rowed the gear boats, cooked the food, set up our tents and then left us alone. They were all young,

strong, and mostly male. She dubbed the clean-cut trip leader, Reid, Captain America. Another, burlier guy with long hair became Fabio. Like an Army unit but with better hair, they had their jobs, routines and ways of contributing to the group. Some were funny, some wise, some watchful.

"This is not unlike war," Herrera told me. "There's something that can kill you. There's a tight group that depends on you for survival, and everyone is a part of it. Bonds develop that have meaning. Life is better when it's simple. Here, like in the Army, you don't have 40 different options for toothpaste. You have your place. We all have it."

It's no wonder there is a storied American legacy of damaged soldiers heading for the wilderness. The backwoods of Idaho, Montana and Alaska are notoriously peopled by veterans. After Vietnam, men went there who felt misunderstood by civilization and found the greatest peace away from it. But despite its strong anecdotal legacy, the wilderness is not recognized by the Veterans Administration, or even by most psychologists, as a legitimate healing tool. It's largely been the veterans themselves, privately funded and socially inclined, who are driving the current renaissance of programs aimed at helping service members.

David Scheinfeld, who has led Outward Bound backpacking courses for veterans for 11 years, uses the term "therapeutic adventure," but doesn't necessarily share that with the participants. He has seen so many lives transformed by six-day trips in the wild that he decided to study them for his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Texas, Austin. He wanted to know what was making the approach successful while the other standard interventions — cognitive behavior therapy and medication — were falling short.

When Scheinfeld assessed 159 veterans, he found that Outward Bound participants experienced 9 to 19 percent improvement in mental health; vets in the control group showed no such gains. The Outward Bound groups still showed the boost a month after the trips ended.

Why did the trips work? Scheinfeld noted that the participants, mostly male, tended to encourage each other to give counseling another try and stick with it. "There were always a couple in each group who were helped by counseling, and they became de facto mentors," he said. Because of this, the participants showed a greater openness seeking treatment after the trips, and they were less likely to drop out of treatment. Another reason for success: The trip itself, being in the wilderness and part of a supportive group, counted as extended therapy, and for many hours a day, not the usual one hour per week offered by the VA. "It's hard for these guys to sit in a room with four walls and talk about their feelings," said Scheinfeld. "It just happens best when they're in a natural setting. It draws them out."

Other studies have shown similar results. Neil Lundberg of Brigham Young University looked at 22 participants from two Higher Ground trips in 2010. Compared to a similar group of veterans on a waiting list, they showed significant decreases — of up to 40 percent — in flashbacks, emotional numbing and hyperarousal after the trips. But not everyone is convinced. Craig Bryan, a psychologist and Air Force veteran who directs the University of Utah's National Center for Veterans Studies, remains skeptical of nature-based treatment. Most of the studies out there, he said, are small, lack a meaningful control group, and don't follow participants for very long. "It's possible these treatments are better than existing treatments, but we just don't know," he said. "We don't have the data to back it up. I want to see randomized control studies, bigger studies."

To collect more data on its programs, Outward Bound is partnering with the Sierra Club and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to run a large pilot study out of the Seattle Veterans Administration. Between them, Outward Bound and the Sierra Club reach hundreds of veterans per year. Stacy Bare is helping to coordinate the study for Outward Bound. A veteran who credits his time in the wilderness with saving his life, Bare understands the need for better metrics.

"It's amazing to me that we don't know more," said Bare. "I think we all believe in the power and mystery of the great outdoors, but these are difficult things to quantify by science. Is it difficult to do a double-blind control study in nature? Very. I don't think we have to hit that standard, but we have to have a more systematic approach to how we evaluate the effects of the outdoors."

During the last days on the river, we floated through a landscape that had been ravaged by wildfire in 2000 and again in 2012. At the site of the older blaze, new teenaged evergreens were rising. Around the charred stalks of the more recent fire lay a carpet of brilliant green grass. It was a powerful reminder that life cycles onward. One morning, I sat on a big gear raft next to Linda Brown, the older vet who had been institutionalized for depression. She sat with her arms wrapped around her life jacket, her sandaled feet propped on the front tube of the boat. "The trees can't control their lives," she'd said, speaking so softly she practically whispered. "We can't always control what happens to us. The trees can teach us acceptance. And metamorphosis."

Months later, most of the women of Unit HG-714-RA would look back and say rafting in Idaho helped them on their long journeys to recovery. At least one of them, Catalina Lopez, nurse of exploding heads, would say it didn't. Statistically, this seems about right. In other mental health studies, for example in Finland, about 15 percent of subjects remain wholly unmoved by their time in nature. Sometimes it's because they just hate it there. They hate the bugs, the breeze, the big sky. Their nervous systems will never calm down outdoors.

That wasn't Lopez's problem. She said the trip just wasn't nearly long enough. Not long enough for her to turn off her nightmares. Not long enough to stop her from sleep-driving through corn stubble at midnight on Ambien. Not long enough for her to start believing again in other people. Certainly not long enough to gain confidence swimming through swift currents. Many wilderness therapy programs for troubled adolescents run weeks and weeks, even months.

Although Higher Ground gives each participant a "recreation fund" to keep pursuing an outdoor sport at home, Lopez told me she still hadn't decided whether she would use it. But Marsha Anderson and Carla Garcia would go surfing, sometimes together, in Southern California. Formerly passive Anjah Mason had joined a gym, determined to lose 20 pounds. I was amazed at her transformation. She now routinely hikes near her home, and she wanted camping gear. Pam Hana had been cycling and wanted to use her rec funds to buy a mountain bike.

As for Herrera, she told me she was signing up for another river trip, this time with Outward Bound. "I liked the river. I liked to be successful," she said. And she was scoping out other programs as well, a shooting trip in the countryside in Alabama, maybe skydiving or rock-climbing if she could find a place that adapts to disabilities. "I want to find something to do every summer," she said.

And, she told me with pride, she was growing her hair out. □

"It's so hard to create a dream again and go forward. That's where I get stuck."

—Tania Herrera,
veteran who was
injured in Afghanistan



Florence Williams is a Washington, D.C.-based journalist and the author of the forthcoming *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes us Happier, Healthier and More Creative*, from which this essay is excerpted. Her first book, *Breasts: A Natural and Unnatural History*, won the 2013 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. She is also a former intern and staffer of *High Country News* who now serves on its board of directors. [@flowill](#)

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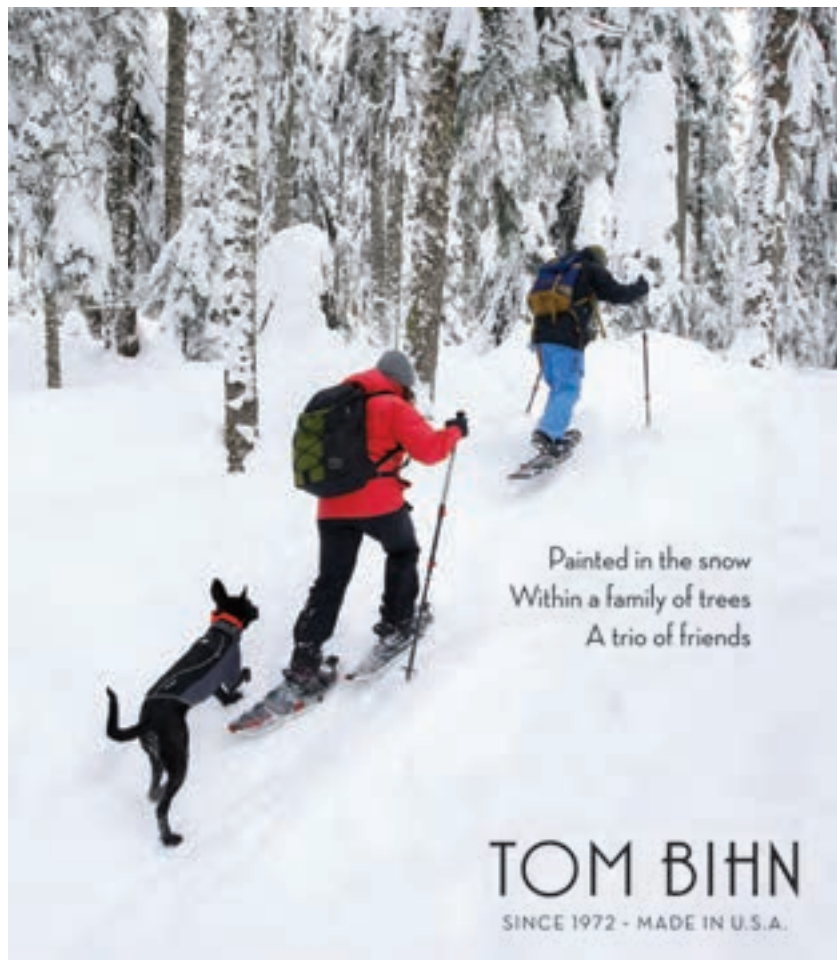
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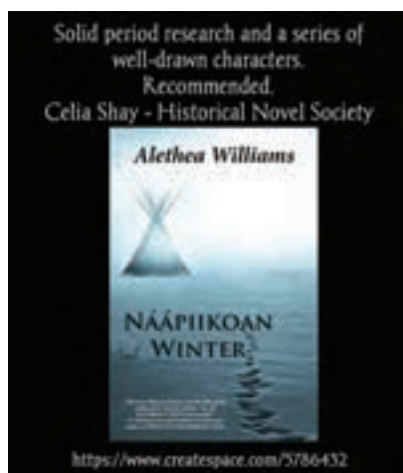
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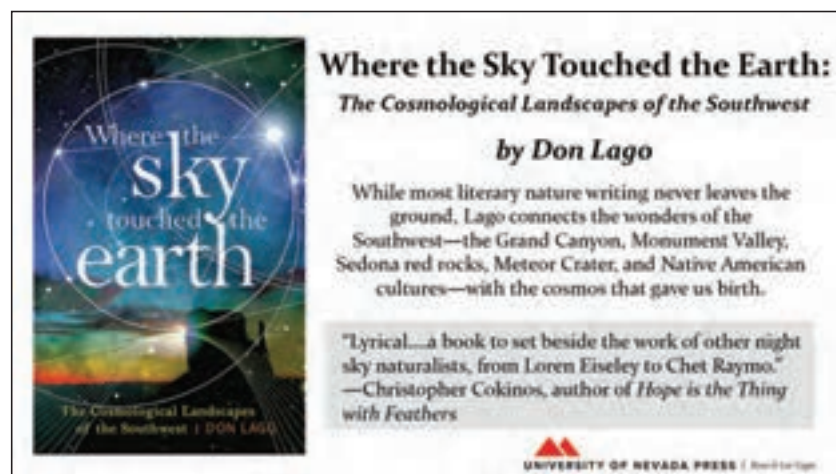
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High Country News





A Pomeranian walks in Freedom Plaza, in downtown Washington, D.C.
MR.TINDC/CC FLICKR

A dog in the White House



OPINION BY
ANDREW
GULLIFORD

I'm not sure why so many rural Westerners voted for President Donald Trump. He doesn't drive a pickup with a gun rack. He doesn't wear Levis or Wranglers, and his hairstyle certainly wouldn't work in a Wyoming wind. He's never fixed fence, bucked bales, cut wheat or field-dressed an elk. But most important, he doesn't have a dog, and he needs a canine companion in the White House, especially since his wife, Melania, apparently plans to stay for months in Manhattan with their son.

What's the de facto bachelor president going to do? He'll need a warm heart and a cold nose to come home to. Who's going to bring him his slippers and fetch his newspaper? Oh, I forgot. He doesn't read the news. No matter. He still needs a dog.

Every president has had one. Trump scorns tradition, but maybe a furry, friendly creature with paws will make the president pause and not send out so many bombastic tweets. He is going to need a wagging tail to cheer him up. Yes, he has lapdogs in his presidential Cabinet, but that's not the same. As Harry Truman famously said, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog."

George H.W. Bush had a springer spaniel named Millie. *Millie's Book*, as dictated by the dog to Barbara Bush, outsold the president's own memoirs. LBJ famously picked up his beagles — named Him and Her — by the ears, "to make them bark," he said. A maudlin speech by Richard Nixon about his cocker spaniel Checkers helped save Tricky Dick's political career at one point. The public adored FDR's Scottie, named Fala.

James Garfield named his dog Veto. George Washington began his presidency with black-and-tan Virginia hounds. James Buchanan's Newfoundland often lay motionless for hours, doing nothing, with one eye open and the other eye closed, rather like Congress. President Rutherford B. Hayes, like Trump, lost the popular vote and squeaked by with a narrow electoral victory, thereby earning the nickname "Rutherford." Hayes sought comfort in his dogs, surrounding himself with a cocker spaniel, a small black mutt, a mastiff, a greyhound, a pair of shepherds and two hunting pups.

My own presidential hero, Theodore Roosevelt, came to Pennsylvania Avenue with a Pekingese, a St. Bernard, and enough other dogs to fill an animal shelter. Among others, Teddy had a Manchester terrier, a Chesapeake retriever, a bull terrier named Pete and a Jack Russell called Skip — the president's favorite dog, because he found it while he was hunting bears in Colorado.

We Westerners love our dogs. They do-si-do in the back of our pickup trucks, guard sheep, herd cattle, flush pheasants, and always seem glad to see us. Trump has never tied a bandanna around his neck. Trump doesn't have mud on his boots; he doesn't even have boots. He needs cowboy boots, a snap-button shirt, leather work gloves, and a pair of fencing pliers in his hip pocket, but most of all he needs a dog. How can you trust a man without a dog?

A lot of rural Westerners voted for Trump. If he's going to be our head of state, then he needs a dog to talk to and share confidential briefings with. A good

dog listens well, responds to treats, and rarely barks back.

But what kind of dog? Out West, we have a variety of working dogs and canine companions. We live with Labrador retrievers, border collies, Australian shepherds and blue heelers. But unlike the dogs that roam ranches and our cherished public lands, Trump's pup would live in a penthouse when not in the White House. What kind of dog would fit Trump's lifestyle? Would it be a fluffy toy poodle with ribbons, a diamond-studded collar and toenails painted pink? It would have to be a female dog, because a male dog might be too competitive and garner too much attention.

I recommend a Chihuahua, but we'd have to be sure the dog arrived in the country legally and acquired a green card. Maybe Putin could send Trump a Russian wolfhound, but I'd be leery of a hidden microphone in the dog's collar. Perhaps the best fit for Trump would be a Pomeranian. The hairstyle would work. It's a yappy little dog with attitude that needs constant grooming, affection and attention. On second thought, however, maybe Trump should get a fish in a bowl, or a cat. □

Andrew Gulliford is a professor of history and environmental studies at Fort Lewis College in Colorado.

WEB EXTRA

To see all the current Writers on the Range columns, and archives, visit hcn.org

Writers on the Range is a syndicated service of High Country News, providing three opinion columns each week to more than 200 media outlets around the West. For more information, contact Betsy Marston, betsym@hcn.org, 970-527-4898.

Seeing the unseen: nature in the city

The West has a reputation for its natural beauty, and deservedly so. But most of us need a day off from work and a full tank of gas just to get to the sort of remote, wild vistas that nourish our souls — and our Instagram feeds. After all, the modern West is the most urbanized part of the country, with 90 percent of us living in cities.

But there is nature in urban areas, too — of a subtler and stranger variety than you might think.

Learning to see and appreciate this quixotic ecosystem could be the next step in creating a healthy, honest relationship between Westerners and their environment.

An excellent if unorthodox guidebook has been published by an amateur natural

historian in the San Francisco Bay area. In *Unseen City: The Majesty of Pigeons, The Discreet Charm of Snails & Other Wonders of the Urban Wilderness*, we follow Nathanael Johnson, a food writer at the environmental magazine *Grist*, and his daughter, Josephine, as they observe and research the complex lives and ecological interactions of urban weeds, squirrels, pigeons, ants and trees.

We learn that the adult pigeon produces 25 pounds of feces a year, that squirrels have flourished nearly unchanged for 5 million years, that roasted ginkgo seeds have the texture of “stiff gnocchi,” and that no one knows why crows are black.

It makes sense that this call for a new urban naturalism should come from a food writer. Urban agriculture has been growing for years now, the compact backyard chicken coop and gaily painted raised bed on the parking strip now seemingly permanent fixtures of the city landscape. Its even hipper cousin, urban

foraging, has also received a lot of attention over the past few years, with food trendsetters like Daniel Patterson, former head chef of San Francisco’s Coi, using wild oxalis and lichens, and Denver-based Hunt & Gather combing the peri-urban fringe for mushrooms to supply over 60 Front Range restaurants. Food has become the new medium through which city people engage with other living things on their home turf. And Johnson doesn’t hesitate to nibble on some of the species he studies — like those ginkgo seeds.

Johnson writes at a time when our culture is experiencing a long, slow melting of the conceptual division between people and nature. Thanks to climate change, population growth and critiques of purist wilderness concepts by thinkers like historian William Cronon, people are becoming less willing to define



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nature as only that which is untouched by humanity. By the same token, they are more open to seeing nature in our own species' densest congregations — to acknowledge a volunteer cherry seedling in an ill-maintained gutter as a valid part of nature rather than just a token of squalid neglect. Where urban parents once taught their children not to pick up "dirty" bird feathers on the street, they now lovingly preserve tattered pigeon primaries as a sign of their offspring's deep connection to nature.

Learning about the species on your block — not only their names, but their role in the city's ecosystem — can be a source of immense pleasure. But Johnson believes it is more than that. "If we come to love nature not only when it is rare and beautiful, but also when it is commonplace and even annoying, I believe it will heal the great wound of our species: self-imposed isolation from the rest of life, loneliness for nature."



Unseen City is by turns heartfelt, astonishing and very funny. It's much more than a mere collection of curious facts about urban species. Think of it as a sort of naturalist *amuse-bouche* — a tantalizing sample of the pleasures available to anyone who makes the effort to really look at the species with which we share the urban world. The plant and animal accounts are book-ended by practical advice for the would-be urban naturalist and an emotional plea that city-dwellers take the time to notice the vigorous life that intertwines almost invisibly with the human environment. Such looking, Johnson says, offers a cure for a dearth of wonder in our daily lives. "Simply watch the natural world closely and patiently until your eyes burn through the scrim hung by your expectations and you catch sight of something wholly unexpected," he writes.

BY EMMA MARRIS



Unseen City: The Majesty of Pigeons, The Discreet Charm of Snails & Other Wonders of the Urban Wilderness.

Nathanael Johnson
256 pages, hardcover:
\$24.99.
Rodale, 2016



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Geography of control

ESSAY BY KATHERINE E. STANDEFER

The desert taught me to be naked the fall I was 18, stepping nervously out of my shorts and sports bra on the tamarisk-choked banks of the San Juan. Above us, Mexican Hat rose tilted and precarious, looking less like a sombrero than a red cartoon anvil set to drop.

Six of us stood barefoot in the mud: three women and three men. “Let’s get naked and start the revolution,” one of the men said, and charged into the river.

I hadn’t been naked in front of someone since I was a child. In the sprawling suburbs of Chicago where I’d grown up, no one stripped down. At least, my friends didn’t: If plenty of teenagers were whooping their nude way into Lake Michigan, I was of the

I wore sweatpants to school, gave up on school dances, and quit shaving.

But in this corner of the Colorado Plateau our bodies looked different, slipping into the milky waters of the San Juan. Mine felt different, too. I ducked into the current, feeling the cold water lick along my armpits and between my legs, stilling my sunburn. Here, the body fit: soothed, held, curvy and strong.

In the desert, beauty is the way a place has been tangled with: rock thrust upward through the crust of the earth, terrifying pours of water from a sudden-dark sky, tumbles of mud and rock racing downstream. The desert is all stretch marks, a shifting old skin, ugly and devastating in its resilience. And for every inch of it covered by detritus, another corner is exposed, glaring whitely under the full moon. Small white flowers erupt in last year’s wash.

Where I grew up, land was fixed into endless patterns of tract homes and ball fields. We planted zinnias and marigolds in rows. What I hungered for was the tangled thicket, the untouched marsh, but by the time I reached high school little remained. Everywhere, strip malls lined big roads. My classmates, too, seemed trimmed and predictable, eyebrows disciplined into perfect arches; it was no surprise that I disdained my own lumpiness, my unbridledness.

Nakedness was about rebellion, never about acceptance. But in the desert, there was no one around to judge my body when I slipped off my shorts — just these five people, and they seemed more concerned about swimming to the other bank to sun themselves on the rocks. Perhaps it didn’t take bravery to go unclothed. But I was still around; the revolution in that water was not that others saw my nakedness, but that I could let myself be. Somehow the sight of myself dimmed; self-consciousness began to melt away. In a place where nothing was plucked, it made sense that I could be OK as I was — ever-changing, gorgeous with catastrophe.

In the years afterward, I would be joyously, obsessively naked, baring my breasts comically off mountaintops. But I would also be angrily naked, obnoxiously naked, naked to make a point, the way liberal arts freshmen are wont to be. At my parents’ house in Illinois, my mother called after me, “Put some clothes on! We don’t need to see your naked body.” I was naked in protest of something I was just learning to put a finger on, something to do with how deeply our lives were sculpted, the way we required our bodies be trimmed and tucked and hidden — our disdain for the animal form, our unwillingness to let both land and bodies just be. In the context of my hometown, this new self-acceptance seemed miraculous, like a boil of red mud surging into the suburbs — and so I provoked, pushing back against the geography of control, what I’d been told I was supposed to be and not be.

Later, I realized that I wasn’t so much trying to convince others as straining to hear my own voice. I wanted to carry that sense of my body as beautiful, no matter where I went. I wanted to hold some kind of deeper wild, stretch-marked and sunburned, imperfect and stunning.

That first night we left the San Juan and slept high on a plateau, surrounded by piñon and juniper, burning long-dead limbs into a sweet smoke. The stars webbed around us, infinite and sharp. And I slept with the full sense of my own animal, the way my body turned air and water into the fuel for a day, the way bare feet gripped steep sandstone, the perfect ways curves fit the contour of slickrock. □

Katherine E. Standefer’s work appears in Best American Essays 2016. @girlmakesfire



Katie Lee, the “desert goddess,” in a water-filled pothole at Llewellyn Gulch in September 1958. The folk singer-turned-activist joined archaeologists and river runners on a raft journey to document cultural sites and side canyons that would be flooded by the Glen Canyon dam project. Now 97, Lee says, “I feel more comfortable naked than clothed.”

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY, CLINE LIBRARY (TAD NICHOLS)

other sort — a never-been-kissed teetotaler and youth-group leader. Nakedness seemed inextricable from rebellion. It had to do with drunkenness, with sex, which to me seemed both terrifying and wrong.

More than that, I hated my body. Since puberty, it had never fit in the spaces it was supposed to go. It seemed impossible that someone would want to see it. And while I could have chosen to prune and pick and starve it into shape, my other option was to ignore my body entirely, to let it grow and spread.



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HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

UTAH

Two decades ago, Peter Metcalf, then-CEO of Black Diamond Equipment, had the foresight to bring the Outdoor Retailer Trade Show to Utah. It's now a big deal: The twice-yearly shows bring in nearly \$50 million to the state, while Utah's booming outdoor industry generates nearly \$12 billion a year along with 120,000 jobs. So why, asked Metcalf, in a blistering column in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, have state leaders "unleashed an all-out assault against Utah's protected public lands and Utah's newest monument"? He pointed out that four of Utah's five iconic national parks were created through the Antiquities Act — "as was Bears Ears National Monument" — and argued that what our public lands need is not privatization or financial starvation but support and stewardship. If the governor and Legislature continue to press their anti-public lands agenda, Metcalf warned, the Outdoor Retailer shows "must leave Utah" in 2018, when the current contract expires. The outdoor recreation industry must not be "complicit collaborators in our own demise," he says. "It's time for the industry to again find its voice, speak truth and power to power."

THE WEST

Watch out: Backpacks can be hazardous to your health. Mickey Wilson, 28, a prize-winning slackliner and part-time ski instructor, had just gotten off a chair lift at Colorado's Arapahoe Basin ski area, he told the *Denver Post*, when he saw the man ahead of him, a friend of some friends, dangling from a chair by his neck. The man's backpack snagged somehow when he tried to get off, and he was now hanging helplessly, strangling. The lift halted, and Wilson said he and a few bystanders tried to build a human pyramid to reach the man, but they kept falling over. "That's when I realized — it all kind of snapped together — that I can climb this tower and get to him. ... I kind of stopped thinking and just started acting." In about five minutes, Wilson recalled, he'd climbed the lift tower and shimmed along the line to the chair holding the unconscious man. Ski patrollers arrived just then and one of them tossed Wilson a knife; he cut the



ARIZONA When the federal signs don't work, make them "yerself." GREG WOODALL

backpack straps holding the man, who fell some 10-15 feet. Afterward, the man, identified only as Richard, was reunited with Wilson on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. He survived with only a "tweaked neck," a broken rib and some bruises. As for Wilson, he told the *Post*, "Just seeing a person get the life sucked out of them ... was one of the most scary things I've ever seen, honestly."

A similar accident happened at Utah's Sundance Mountain Resort, also in early January, when a child was caught in a chairlift by his backpack. The Associated Press reports that two lift operators used a ladder to free the boy.

In a happier encounter at the Purgatory ski resort near Durango, Colorado, an insouciant Canada lynx padded across the snow in full view of dozens of amazed skiers. Airrick Hix posted a brief video on Facebook, saying, "That just happened!!! The majestic lynx!!!" The tufted-eared wildcat, which wasn't wearing a tracking collar,

appeared unfazed by the attention, reports the *Denver Post*. Lynx were extinct in the state until 1999, when state wildlife officials began restoring them to the San Juan Mountains of south-western Colorado. Sadly, however, the lynx was later found dead near a ski lift. The cause was a throat tumor, according to the Colorado Parks and Wildlife agency.

THE WEST

A cow moose trapped in the icy St. Joe River in Idaho had almost frozen to death when four good Samaritans plunged into action. County Judge Doug Payne, the first to spot the suffering animal, enlisted Fish and Game officer Julie Lininger, and they flagged down two passersby. Together, the four fashioned a tow rope and hauled the moose to safety, according to *The Week*. It took 30 minutes to free the moose, but she seemed fine when she joined her calf on the riverbank. A chilled Lininger said everybody then scurried off the ice and went home "with a great story."

In Yoder, Kansas, two butchers trying to kill a bison that was "confined inside a trailer," have a less happy tale to tell. The bison kept turning away, so Duane Helms walked to the end of the trailer to try to turn the massive animal around, in order to give the shooter, who was perched on a ladder, room to shoot. But the bison balked, bumped into the side of the trailer and dislodged the ladder, causing the rifle to fire and wound Helms in the leg. No word on what the bison did next, or whether it planned to plead self-defense in court.

And in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, a wandering bighorn ram encountered a formidable foe but easily vanquished him with a resounding crash, reports the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*. The foe was the ram's own image as reflected in the window glass of the door — now broken — of a business on the ground floor of the historic Hotel Colorado.

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see hcn.org.

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.



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“There was danger, and I had to stand
at the exact same moment that
I could not stand.”

Laura Pritchett, in her essay "Knocked down by the election? Here's how to move on," from *Writers on the Range*, hcn.org/wotr