

High Country News

A musher wearing a dark jacket and a fur-lined hood is leading a team of sled dogs through a snowy, open landscape. The dogs are harnessed together and pulling a sled. The terrain is covered in snow with some sparse, dry vegetation visible. The background shows a vast, flat expanse of snow under a pale sky.

Mushing on the
Kuskokwim

The natural-gas
pushback

Wyoming at the
end of the world

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The Path
Forward

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Spirit runners enter the 25th Annual Ward Valley Spiritual Gathering held at Ward Valley, California, in February. **Nia MacKnight / High Country News**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.

Tools for the future

Chronic wasting disease is a horrible condition. Over the course of an agonizing year or two, it attacks the brains of infected deer, elk and moose, inexorably weakening the animals until it finally kills them. The symptoms of CWD were first recognized in Colorado in 1967; it has now been documented in 30 states, and is especially prevalent in the Rocky Mountain West. Despite decades of research on CWD and related diseases, scientists have yet to understand exactly how it spreads, much less develop a treatment or a cure.

Now, as *HCN* contributor Christine Peterson writes in this issue, researchers are wondering whether restored populations of predators — mountain lions, bears or wolves — would kill more infected animals than healthy ones, and by doing so help contain the disease and its cruel effects. The hypothesis is far from proven, but it's a new approach to a problem that, so far, has resisted conventional tools.

This issue is rich in stories about innovation born of adversity: In Butte, Montana, ecologists are using detailed weather data and their knowledge of bird behavior to protect migrating flocks from the dangerously acidic waters of the Berkeley Pit. Westerners in need of abortion care are turning to telehealth and other at-home alternatives to overcome new restrictions. And despite the gas industry's determination to fight new climate-friendly building codes, Westerners are electrifying their homes, vehicles and communities more quickly than ever.

Then there are innovators like the artist Lezley Saar, a multimedia artist who uses found objects to summon soothsayers, shamans and healers from her imagination. The resulting series of haunting tableaux speaks to both public and private tragedies; essayist Charlotte Watson Sherman describes Saar's faceless, limbless sculptures as "curers of maladies, as death doulas — as conjuring go-betweens I gaze upon for solace."

With such visions and inventions, we find our path forward.

Michelle Nijhuis, acting editor-in-chief

Amandla Baraka is a filmmaker and photographer inspired by the revolutionaries, artists and poets who raised her. Her work establishes an understanding of humanity through an intimate and empathetic lens.

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Christine Peterson lives in Laramie, Wyoming, and has covered science, the environment and outdoor recreation in Wyoming for more than a decade. Her work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *Outdoor Life* and *Outside*, among others. @PetersonOutside

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Derek Sheffield's most recent poetry collection is *Not for Luck*. His other books include *Dear America: Letters of Hope*, *Habitat*, *Defiance*, and *Democracy and Cascadia Field Guide: Art, Ecology, Poetry*. He is the poetry editor of *Terrain.org*.

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Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Sahn is on leave.



DeAnna Bublitz, left, co-founder of DEER Camp, guides Mason Parker on his first big-game hunt in Montana last November. **Tailyr Irvine**

ON THE COVER

Richie Diehl, a musher and racer, on a training run near his home in Aniak, Alaska. "In my opinion, I think it's a pretty supportive region," Diehl said. "We compete with each other and when we compete with each other, we make each other better."

Katie Basile / High Country News

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LETTERS

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

GREAT AND INFORMATIONAL

I just finished reading “The Sentinel” (March 2023) by Leah Sotile on Butte. Being a resident of Missoula for 44 years, I’m always interested in stories about Montana. I want to commend her on the article; it was extremely well written, well researched and informational. I hope our state legislators will come to their senses.

Judy Frey
Missoula, Montana

Great cover article on Butte, end to end. No more than I would expect from *HCN*, of course. Where else can you read this stuff?

Rick Ross
Sweet Home, Oregon

HUMBLED

The appeal of *High Country News* for me has always been in the news — the contemporary environmental, tribal and social issues that affect Westerners. I will admit that I’ve almost always skipped through the personal essays and memoirs, dismissing them as mere filler.

I am humbled that Nina McConigley’s “Say rabbit” (March

2023) proved me wrong. It brought me to tears. Never has a single page of writing stuck with me so clearly and brought me such strong feelings of empathy for a stranger. Many kudos to her, and to the editorial team for publishing it. Proof that everything printed in *HCN* is worth reading.

Joe Peoria
Colorado Springs, Colorado

REVEALING AND REFRESHING

Thank you for Craig Childs’ beautiful and frank story framing the current status of “Lake” Powell. It is refreshing to see him dig deep into the reservoir in crisis and its possible future.

Shawn Green
La Verkin, Utah

I want to add my voice to what must be a resounding chorus of praise and appreciation for the Glen Canyon story so exquisitely crafted by Craig Childs. The photos are wonderful, as well.

Sally Ashcraft
Montana

I’ve long been a fan of Craig Childs, and so I was eager to get at this piece about the smothered canyon. I must say he did a superb job of documenting the disappearance of the reservoir and the revealing of Glen Canyon.

Chuck Dorsey
Portland, Oregon

SOLAR OPPORTUNITIES

“Save public lands: Put solar on Walmart!” (February 2023) is inspiring. If I were a younger electrician, I’d start a company and begin covering roofs and parking lots.

Kevin Murphy
Faber, Virginia

“Save public lands: Put solar on Walmart” — yes! And on every feasible rooftop, over parking lots, and only as a last resort on public lands or open space. In our rush to build out utility-scale solar, we are squandering an opportunity to democratize energy. Decentralize energy away from the tired hub-and-spoke model and the miles of transmission lines chopping up the landscape. Solar offers us the chance to generate power locally and minimize our electrical footprint. Take the chance. Act locally.

Erik Moeller
Pueblo, Colorado

Finally, someone picked up on the vast wasteland of big-box rooftops. In addition to the energy output, there is also the reduced HVAC load on the space below.

Another missed opportunity are the many rooftops of all the Amazon warehouses across the world. I can’t believe that Amazon hasn’t monetized this and become a utility.

Mark Ryan
Kingston, Washington

IS FISHING A RELIGION?

I wholeheartedly support eliminating invasive fish species we either directly or indirectly introduced, in order to reintroduce the native fish species that we killed and eliminated in the first place (“Can assisted migration save the Rio Grande’s cut-throat?” February 2023).

However, I believe fish have become an icon of a major religion — fishing. There are more creatures, great and small, that need our help. Frogs, salamanders, endangered insects were mentioned; a lake was described as a place where these species had already been killed off by previous invasive fish stocking. (No sale of fishing licenses possible for frogs, is there?) I wish comments like this would make everybody more conscious that fish are one species of a whole, an incredibly rich and diverse environment.

Steve Reese
Salida, Colorado

IMPRESSED AND TOUCHED

I was impressed with the breadth and depth of the articles in January 2023. Just about every article seamlessly addressed an environmental issue and the human component, with representation across the West. I also really appreciated the articles about/from the LGBTQ community over the last year. “Growing up queer in Colorado Springs” touched my heart, as I grew up there and then experienced the loss of my younger brother to suicide there in 2015, a Marine veteran and queer man.

Thank you for excellent reporting and coverage.

Joanna Harter
Lander, Wyoming

CORRECTION

In “Glen Canyon Revealed” (February 2022), a caption misstated the length of Lake Powell’s shoreline in comparison to the United States’ West Coast. At full pool, Powell was 186 miles long; its shoreline was 1,960 miles — longer than the West Coast of the continental U.S. We regret the error.

Fowl migration

Engineers failed to keep snow geese away from a deadly Superfund site. Will ecologists succeed?

BY SARAH TRENT



Snow geese fly away from the Berkeley Pit after a sunrise hazing in 2021. **Courtesy of Mark Mariano**

AS DARKNESS FELL on Nov. 28, 2016, residents of Butte, Montana, heard the unmistakable honking of some 60,000 snow geese circling the Berkeley Pit, a defunct mine now flooded with toxic water. A snowstorm hit that night after an unusually warm autumn, and the geese, caught on a late journey from Canada to California, were forced out of the sky. They blanketed the surface of the water. Onsite staff tried to frighten them off, but an estimated 3,000 birds died.

Two companies — Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO, now a British Petroleum subsidiary) and Montana Resources, which operates the still-active adjacent mine — are responsible for managing the pit, which is a Superfund site. They'd had procedures in place since 1996 to keep birds off the acidic water, which can kill some species within 12 hours. "Wailers" blasted obnoxious alarms year-round to discourage birds from landing; when they landed anyway, staff fired precision rifle shots at the water to scare them off. The measures were extremely effective: Of the thousands of ducks, geese, swans, grebes and more that landed briefly during spring and fall migrations, nearly all continued on. But the 2016 die-off exposed what engineers had overlooked: bird behavior. They didn't know why or when

birds might land in the first place, let alone how to predict another fluke event — a risk that is rising with climate change.

ARCO and Montana Resources were never fined for the die-off, but in 2017, they began pouring money into designing an arsenal of new tools to prevent a repeat. "They did what engineers do, and tried to find a technological way out," said Mark Mariano, a restoration ecologist for Rampart Solutions, an environmental consulting firm. They also formed an advisory group of scientists and birders and hired Rampart Solutions; Mariano became the first ecologist to help update and implement the pit's waterfowl protection plan. His team is bringing new expertise: "When you do try to engineer your way out of a problem, you need to understand waterfowl ecology first."

Some proposed solutions were easily dismissed, even before taking biology into account. The pit — a mile long by a mile and a half wide and surrounded by steep walls — was too big to stretch a net across, dye a bird-detering hue, or cover in tiny floating balls, a proposal mine staff said would cost \$70 million and require building a custom factory in Butte. But the alternatives they developed also had critical flaws.

Engineers tested a propane cannon mounted on an automated drift boat, but it moved too slowly to scare birds. They tried automated lasers and considered lighting a laser net above the water, but that risked trapping birds underneath — and breaking federal aviation law, if a beam strayed into the nearby airport's flight path. They tested a "vortex ring accelerator," a truck-sized cannon that shot bird-detering 200 mph air blasts across the pit, but that ended after the machine caught fire. They even designed fleets of water-borne and aerial drones — but they proved largely useless in bad weather, when migrating waterfowl are most likely to land.

"The parties had been trying to do the right thing, and they just didn't really know how to do it," Mariano said. Instead, he taught miners — who do most of the hazing — about birds. Identification matters: Some species dive instead of fly when startled, so it's best to leave them alone. Mariano also started tracking wind and weather conditions — factors that trigger migration for many species.

Mariano now uses weather reports to predict when large flocks of snow geese might fly over Butte, so staff can use deterrents and have more hazers on site. Snow geese behavior is particularly relevant, because

that species is most likely to die on the pit en masse: They arrive in huge flocks, exhausted. Mariano's colleague, Bailey Tasker, also a restoration ecologist, is now using years of snow geese flight data collected by the U.S. Geological Survey to understand migration triggers and build a more finely tuned forecast. Tasker's research may break ground in other areas, too: She hopes it could help answer long-standing questions, such as whether birds can intuit incoming weather.

All of this will help the mine develop new tools and make better use of existing ones. AI technology, for instance, which mine contractors are developing, could help spot and identify birds on the pit. And a fleet of drone boats, which are limited mostly by battery life, might be useful in storms after all; a precisely timed deployment could prevent a forecast flock from landing.

"I use the analogy all the time of a hurricane," Mariano said. "You can't stop a hurricane. But if you know one's coming, you usually fare a lot better. You can be prepared. You can throw everything you got at it." ❁



REPORTAGE

Navigating the new health-care deserts

Post-Roe, startups help those seeking abortions shrink travel distances and carbon emissions.

BY CAROLINE TRACEY
PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARISSA GARCIA

IN SEPTEMBER 2020, Kelsey drove nearly 750 miles round-trip to have an abortion. She was living in a state where there was very little abortion care, and she was concerned about the COVID-19 protocols of the clinic closest to her, 160 miles away. So, she went for the next-best option: a clinic in Colorado. Despite staying with a friend to avoid hotel costs, she said she spent over \$700 on travel and the procedure itself.

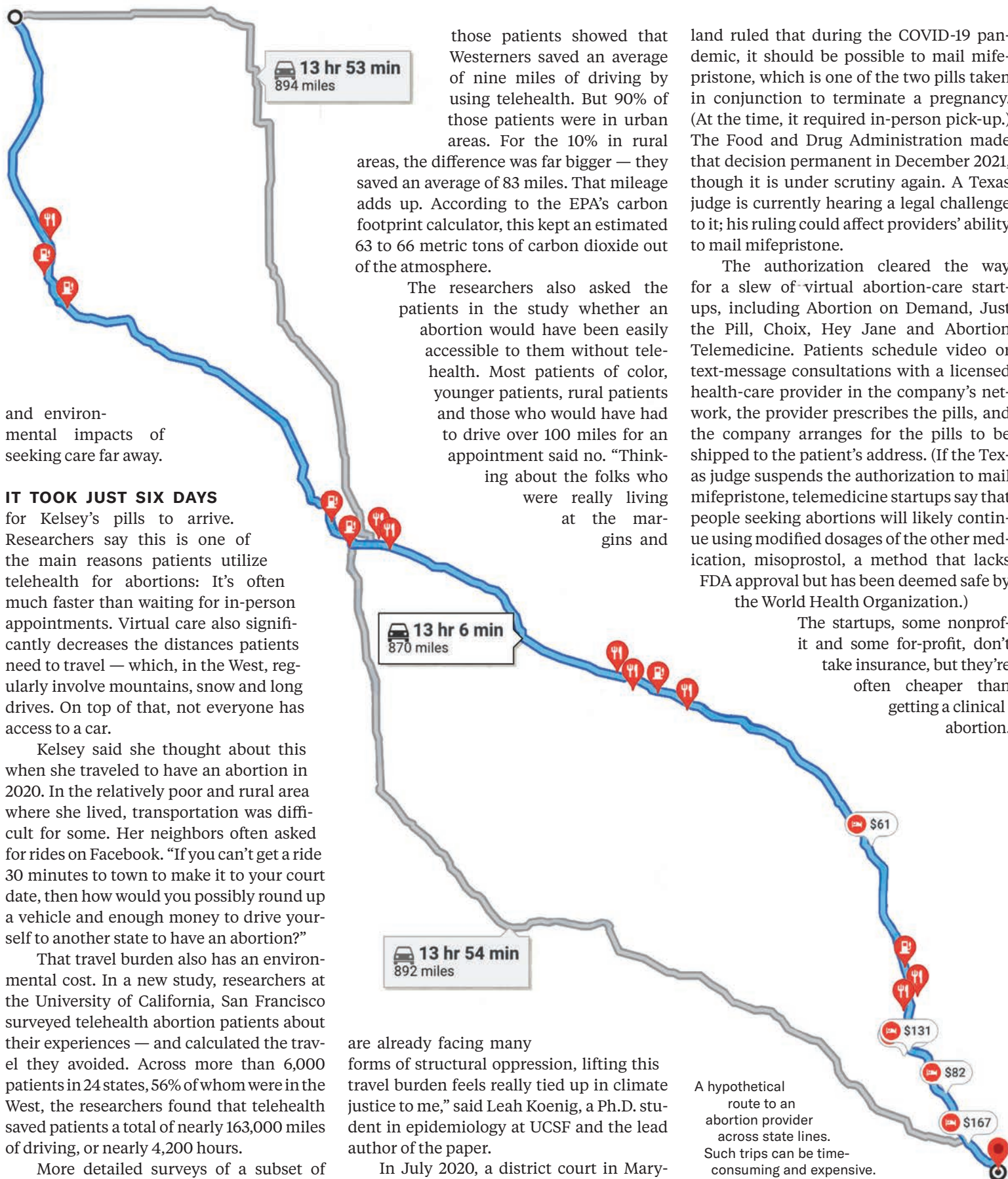
"It wasn't the abortion itself that was awful," she said. "The abortion was very necessary, and I'm very glad that I was able to have it. It was all of the hurdles that were traumatic."

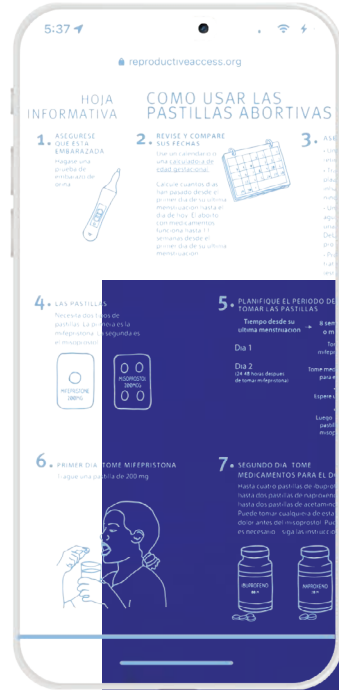
In late 2022, Kelsey, whose name has been changed to protect her privacy, learned that she was pregnant again. By this time, she was living in New Mexico, where abortion remains legal, and there were two providers within 40 minutes of her home. Both clinics, however, like all eight of New Mexico's in-person abortion providers, were overstretched because of increased demand from neighboring states like Tex-

as and Oklahoma, where abortion has been banned. (The increased demand is affecting more than abortion care; it's also delaying other appointments, such as for birth control.) The earliest available appointment was more than a month out.

So Kelsey turned to the website of Aid Access, a European nonprofit that enables doctors to provide virtual consultations and abortion pills by mail around the world. She was connected with a clinic in Las Cruces that prescribed the medication, and an online pharmacy sent it to her.

As more states enact abortion bans following the Supreme Court's June 2022 decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, researchers expect the distance many patients have to travel will triple. By choosing telemedicine and self-management, Kelsey joined the increasing number of Westerners able to avoid long-distance travel to clinics. These at-home alternatives, which studies show are as safe as clinical abortions, can improve abortion access in the health-care deserts of the rural West while reducing the cost, travel





Though they can only operate in states where abortion is legal, they are able to serve people who aren't from those states, with one caveat: In order to have a consultation and receive a prescription, the patient needs to physically be in a state where abortion is legal. The travel this requires involves the same equity issues that clinical abortions do, but going to a hotel or friend's home for a telehealth appointment can be easier and faster than waiting for a clinical appointment.

Aid Access, which Kelsey contacted, operates slightly differently than the startups. In states where telehealth abortion is legal, it functions the same way they do, partnering with local clinics to prescribe pills and offer consultations. But in states with bans, it works around the U.S. legal and health systems: A doctor in Europe, where U.S. laws have no jurisdiction, prescribes the pills, and a pharmacy in India mails them. This enables even people who live in states that have criminalized abortion to obtain pills by mail, though they still lack access to a consultation. The approach relies on a legal loophole. Although in most cases, it's illegal to import medicines, the FDA seldom enforces that rule for prescription drugs that are imported for a person's own use.

Abortions like this are considered "self-managed," a term doctors and researchers use to refer to abortions that take place outside the health system. Such abortions were once associated with back-alley procedures, but now the use of medications is far more common. Before May 2022, when the Supreme Court's plans to overturn *Roe v. Wade* leaked out, Aid Access received an average of 83 requests a day from the U.S. for pills for self-managed abortions; after the

draft decision was announced, the requests jumped to more than 200 a day.

Kelsey knew about telehealth and self-managed options when she traveled to Colorado in 2020. "I thought really hard about it," she said, wanting to avoid the trip. But in the end, she said, she got spooked: "I had never had this happen to me before, so I didn't know what it was going to be like, and I kind of wanted a doctor." This time, she said, "I didn't feel like waiting a month, and I'd had a medication abortion before with no complications. So, I was just kind of like, fuck it, let's go with this."

Doctors and researchers emphasize that the pills are safe. In over half of all abortions in the U.S. — including many clinical abortions, such as Kelsey's first — physicians use medication. According to another UCSF study, adverse reactions that require blood transfusion, surgery or hospital admission occur in less than half a percent of medication abortions. Even when pills are prescribed in person, they're often taken at home.

Still, like other aspects of reproductive care in the U.S., the legal landscape of medication abortions is in flux. In addition to the litigation over mailing mifepristone, some states have sought to prosecute self-managed abortions, either banning them outright or using indirect laws, like those governing the disposal of human remains. In at least one instance in Ohio, a criminal case involving mail-order abortion pills resulted in a conviction. And in January, the attorney general of Alabama announced that individuals who had medication abortions in the state could be prosecuted under a law aimed at protecting children from chemicals in homes.

For Kelsey and many others, telehealth offers convenience and efficiency. But for some patients in the West, telehealth provides more than comfort — it's the only feasible choice. "For various parts of the country, including rural regions in the West, telehealth clinics are filling health-care deserts while also reducing the travel, costs, logistics, and environmental impacts of having an abortion," Andréa Becker, one of the other researchers on the UCSF study, wrote in an email. "It's critical to give people the option to choose the abortion process that works for them, whether that's in a clinic or from their couch." ✨

A lasting victory

The campaign for Ave Kwa Ame National Monument began with the fight for Ward Valley.

BY ANNA V. SMITH
PHOTOS BY NIA MACKNIGHT

THE PROTEST encampment was easily visible from Highway 40 going West from Needles, California — a cluster of olive-green Army tents that stood out from the low-lying creosote bushes and sagebrush that cover the expanse of Ward Valley. At its height, the camp held two kitchens (one vegetarian, one not), a security detail, bathroom facilities and a few hundred people — a coalition of five tribal nations, anti-nuclear activists, veterans, environmentalists and American Indian Movement supporters. They were there to resist a public-lands trade between the

federal government and the state of California that would allow U.S. Ecology, a waste disposal company, to build a 1,000-acre, unlined nuclear waste dump that threatened both desert tortoises and groundwater. “It became like a little village, a working village,” recalled David Harper, a member of the Colorado River Indian Tribes who was a tribal spokesperson at the time.

The Bureau of Land Management had announced it would start evicting the protesters at midnight on Feb. 13, 1998. But that day, tribal elders decided that they would not leave. Federal

officials and tribal spokespeople met to negotiate at a blockade on the highway overpass. The leaders of the standoff were committed to nonviolence, but the atmosphere felt tense and uncertain. At a press conference, elders in ribbon dresses and beadwork sat under the sun in folded chairs, backed by tall banners that read, in part, “Save the Colorado River.” “We can no longer stand by, as people, to allow this to continue to happen to us,” said then-Fort Mojave Tribal Chairperson Nora McDowell, her black curls framing her face and her voice quavering at times.

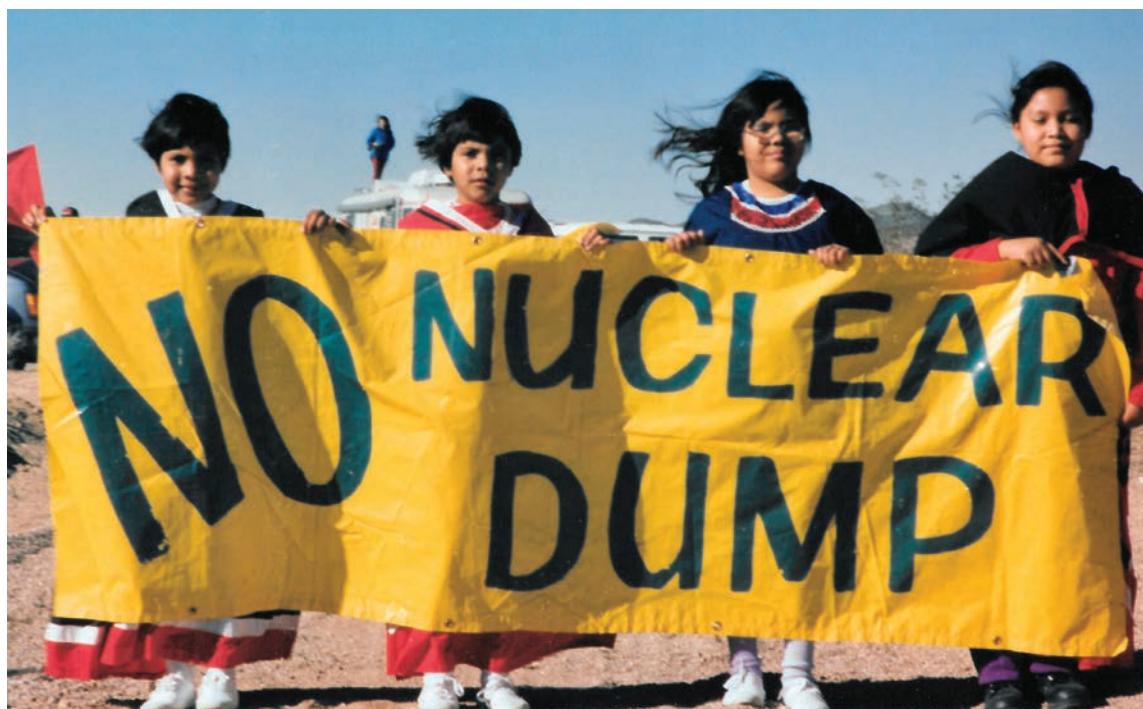
After 113 days, the BLM rescinded the eviction order. A year later, a federal court ruling finalized the victory: There would be no dump at Ward Valley. The protest served as a nexus of the decade’s political issues in Indian Country — a test of the Clinton administration’s commitment to tribal consultation and the Endangered Species Act, as well as of new federal laws and policies on environmental justice and sacred site protections. It was also a time of cultural upwelling — the camp provided space for elders

to share stories, knowledge and ceremony with the thoroughly intergenerational community. Children and teens took part alongside everyone else. Doelena Van Fleet was one of those kids; her father, Victor, was a key organizer. The encampment period was a kind of “restoration,” she said. “Because of their actions, our voices can be heard now.”

ON A BRIGHT, chilly Saturday in February, a hundred or so people gathered at the same spot where the tents once stood in Ward Valley. The elders of that time have passed on, while others from the camp have since become elders themselves. The small children that ran around the camp are now on tribal councils. Nora McDowell, now in her 60s and project manager for the tribe’s Pipa Aha Macav Cultural Center, read a list of names in remembrance. Both Native and non-Native speakers shared memories: the sleet and hail, chasing after tents blowing away across the valley, reaffirming the power of collective action, and the importance of knowing — and standing up for — the place you come from. They celebrate every year, but this February was special; it marked 25 years since the encampment and ensuing victory, a mile marker of time.

Colleen Garcia, a Fort Mojave tribal council member who was at the encampment, stood at the microphone in front of the crowd. “We are Mojaves,” she said to shouts of confirmation. “Others will come and go. But we people here will be here forever.”

In Garcia’s comments, one can hear the echoes of the past — decades ago, the Fort Mojave



Youth from the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe hold a banner during the Ward Valley standoff in 1998.

Courtesy of Molly Johnson

Indian Tribe's then-vice chairman, Llewellyn Barrackman, voiced the same sentiment to reporters. "For us, as Mojaves, we're born and raised here and this is our roots," he said. "U.S. Ecology people come here from elsewhere, and maybe 10 years

from now they get transferred. But us, we're going to be here until we die." The BLM acreage of Ward Valley, like all public lands, is ancestral tribal land, in this case of the Mojave, Quechan, Cocopah, Colorado River Indian Tribes, Chemehuevi and others.

And though Ward Valley was the focus of the nuclear waste dump conflict, it's part of a broader region known as Avi Kwa Ame, which is just as important to the tribes in the region.

The landscape at Avi Kwa Ame is a reminder that rocks, in

fact, move. Tilted granite shelves jut from the earth's surface, rock walls crumble to the valley floor below. Shapes of smooth rock sag and gape like melted candles, while bursts of green yucca dot the landscape. This is the origin place of 10 Yuman-speaking tribes, and

Clockwise from right:

Community members and allies gather in February for the 25th anniversary of the Ward Valley standoff.

Alanna Russell, of the Colorado River Tribes, at Ward Valley in February.

Avi Kwa Ame is a sacred site and the center of creation for 10 Yuman-speaking tribes.

Doelena Van Fleet observes the crowd at the Ward Valley Spiritual Gathering.



considered sacred by more. In 1999, the same year that a court ruling protected Ward Valley from the nuclear waste dump, Avi Kwa Ame was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, a first step toward legal protection.

Last fall, President Joe Biden announced that he intended to designate Avi Kwa Ame a national monument, one that would cover 450,000 acres of BLM land just north of Ward Valley. The boundaries would connect wilderness lands managed by the National Park Service and BLM — though, in truth, Avi Kwa Ame is boundless. The designation would do more than prohibit solar or wind development. It would also protect the core cultural traditions that were empowered in Ward Valley, and it could include co-stewardship, one of the administration's stated goals. "Because we have the history of that work, it was really a strong argument for how this could be mutually beneficial, not just to solidify that work, but to honor and respect all of the blood, sweat and tears that have gone into protecting this landscape," said Ashley Hemmers, Fort Mojave tribal administrator.

TODAY, TRIBAL NATIONS are working with a federal government that is more receptive to tribal knowledge and co-stewardship of public lands than it was in the past. In the 1990s, in response to concerns that tribes were not thoroughly consulted, then-Interior Deputy Secretary John Garamendi told Fort Mojave tribal member and Ward Valley spokesperson Steve Lopez that "the discussions really need to happen between the state and the Department of the Interior."

But not far from Ward Valley, efforts to exploit ancestral tribal land continue: Corporations want

to mine gold on Conglomerate Mesa in California; lithium in Thacker Pass, Nevada; and copper in Oak Flat, Arizona, despite sustained opposition from tribes and their allies, and an administration that has prioritized tribal sovereignty. Existing laws have so far failed to provide reliable protection for these lands. Even places with designated protection from development are threatened by increased visitation; lax oversight leads to problems like the vandalism of petroglyphs. Today, "there's more knowledge about the responsibility that the federal government has for tribal consultation on projects on public lands," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist and former BLM employee who supported the tribes at the standoff. But consultation is inconsistent across the agency. "It seems like that's being decided more in the courts instead of where it should be decided, which is with Native nations."

The success of the 1998 encampment hinged on relationship building, and on non-Native allies' recognition of the tribes' cultural and political sovereignty. A similar spirit is evident around Avi Kwa Ame today, owing to the same tribes. Other national monuments, including Bears Ears, have faced opposition from locals and state and federal politicians. But the boundaries for Avi Kwa Ame have the support of nearby towns, their congressional representatives and all federally recognized tribes in Arizona and Nevada. "We really — as a tribe — learned through (Ward Valley) how to critically engage multiple stakeholders for the overall good of the landscape and environment," said Hemmers.

Or, as David Harper put it, "In Ward Valley, the people's culture rose." ❀

POEM

Golden Jubilee

Derek Sheffield

A life of bending low
to drop a seed and pat it home,
of striding back and forth
to hoe and water and wait.

The rows run straight as ever
as Uncle's prized corn grows
in the same squared ground
since before I was born.

What do they mean?
Those sun-struck afternoons
after church we gathered
in the grass beside his rows

to talk and sing and scoop
buttery kernels steaming
onto plates. This year and last
Uncle's corn grows with help.

Left to himself he might wander,
wonder why nothing came up
where no seed went.
When he can speak it,

my name these days
is the deepening hole
where he will soon go, a life
of growing under the sun

those first green stalks,
those shining silks.
Straight as ever run the rows.

WEB EXTRA

Listen to Derek Sheffield recite his poem at hcn.org/golden-jubilee



DEER Camp co-founder DeAnna Bublitz (left) guides Mason Parker on his first big-game hunt in Montana last November. **Tailor Irvine**

REPORTAGE

Deer camp for all

Hunting mentor DeAnna Bublitz breaks down stereotypes.

BY KATHLEEN SHANNON

TWENTY-FIVE MILES southwest of Missoula, Montana, DeAnna Bublitz steered her Subaru Forester into a snowy parking lot. As she stepped into the mid-November chill, wearing camouflage and a blaze-orange beanie, several men looked up from their revving snowmobiles.

“Where’s your rifle?” one asked, teasing.

“I already got my buck this season,” Bublitz said, calmly

returning his gaze from behind blue-framed glasses. For her, it was a routine interaction: When she’s out hunting, or at the shooting range, she’s often asked where her husband is, or — despite her gear and confident shot — if she’s ever been hunting before. She answers with hard-won authority.

Bublitz, 39, was out that day not to hunt, but to mentor a new hunter — a role she’s aspired to

since she started hunting almost a decade ago.

As a novice hunter, Bublitz faced the usual barriers: the high cost of gear, a complex permitting system and the need for guidance from seasoned hunters. But she also faced additional challenges familiar to women and other marginalized groups, including threats to her personal safety in the woods and a lack of acceptance from the “old guard.”

Bublitz wanted to reduce those barriers for others, and in 2020, she and fellow hunter Madeline Damon founded DEER Camp. The organization’s name — which stands for Diversity, Equity, Education, Representation — is a response to the stereotype of a deer camp as “just a bunch of old white guys around a fire with, you know, some PBR or something at a cabin,” Bublitz said.

DEER Camp is not an official business and is unlikely to

become one. Bublitz’s goal isn’t to make money, she said, but rather to create “a little nucleus for people to connect.”

Bublitz moved to Montana from New York in 2012 after earning a doctorate in microbiology and molecular genetics. She didn’t grow up around guns. But she became more comfortable with them after she went trapshooting with a Montana neighbor, who helped her find her dominant eye and grip.

Her growing skills, along with easy access to public land, inspired her to take on what she called “the ‘dirty work’ behind meat consumption”: harvesting her own. Learning the local landscape as a hunter offers more than food, she said: The more connected people feel to the land, the more likely they are to conserve it, regardless of their political beliefs. “The only politics that I wear on my sleeve

are the politics of conservation,” she said. “I think, for the most part, that’s the only thing that’s important in this sphere.”

Bublitz slowly built her gear collection into a “library” that she has since opened to fellow hunters. She also found mentors, many of whom were men. Their guidance was invaluable, but it also introduced a new challenge — an internal one. “My brain turns a certain switch off, and I just become a follower with them,” Bublitz said. But when she hunted with other women, she noticed that she took on more responsibility, watching out for her companions and hunting more strategically.

ABOUT ONE IN FIVE Montanans held a hunting license in 2020, paying the state a total of about \$40 million in fees. That cash, plus a 1930s-era tax on hunting gear, remains the primary funding source for the state’s wildlife agency, after the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act, which would have established additional funding sources for wildlife management, failed to pass the U.S. Senate in late 2022.

Each year, Montana’s wildlife agency uses species population data to determine the number of hunting tags it will offer. It relies on hunters not only for money, but to help keep deer, elk and other wildlife populations to sizes that the existing habitat can support and humans will tolerate.

Fewer than 4% of Americans hunt, however, and that number is declining. Of that diminishing group, a whopping 97% are white, and 90% are men.

But more hunters mean more funding for wildlife management — and Bublitz says that women often find hunting particularly rewarding. “A lot of women feel this sense of being proud that they’re out there, and they can do

this thing that’s seen as typically a man’s thing, like: ‘Hell yeah, I can do it,’” Bublitz said.

Most people involved with DEER Camp are women, but not all. Mason Parker, 35, grew up hunting fowl in Oklahoma, and his recent outing with Bublitz was his first large-animal hunt in the Rockies.

Last year, Parker published a collection of essays, *Until the Red Swallows It All*, analyzing his relationship with the earth as it shifts with climate change. Its dedication reads: “For the roadkill.” Parker thought his politics would put him at odds with most Montana hunters, but he’s been pleasantly surprised by the widening “ideological umbrella under which people hunt.”

In the woods, Parker followed Bublitz as she moved carefully up a steep hill. She pointed out deer tracks and found nests in the snow where the animals had bedded down the night before. By midafternoon, they’d seen four deer, but they were all does. Parker’s tag was for a buck.

As Parker and Bublitz hiked east along the ridgeline, flanked by ponderosa pines and golden larches, they spotted a buck on the slope below, its antlers disguised by fallen trees. They considered their options in hushed tones. Finally, Parker slid forward in the snow, prone, his gun at his shoulder.

But the buck suddenly jumped up and bounded away. Today wouldn’t be Parker’s first deer harvest. In fact, he hadn’t fired a single bullet. Anything less than a clean hit could result in an injured deer suffering a slow death. If Parker couldn’t get a sure shot, he wouldn’t take one at all.

“The only politics that I wear on my sleeve are the politics of conservation,” says DeAnna Bublitz.
Tailyr Irvine

NEXT TO THE DARK shelves of canned goods at Missoula’s food bank, a deer carcass hung from its hind leg over a blue tarp. Its head and hide had been removed, leaving a body of lean meat under a shiny layer of connective tissue.

Bublitz had prepped it for a butchering workshop she offers through DEER Camp with the Missoula Urban Demonstration Project, an organization that promotes DIY sustainability. A dozen participants, mostly women, eyed the deer quietly as they trickled in.

“How big is it?” one asked.

“I’d call it three and a half points,” Bublitz said, referring to the number of spikes on the buck’s antlers. As an average-sized white-tailed deer, it would yield more than 50 pounds of meat.

Bublitz handed out a diagram identifying the cuts of meat — the round, the chuck, the backstrap — and grabbed a sharp knife. Wearing blue rain boots, she padded around the hanging deer.

She explained the cuts in layman’s terms. “I call it the football,” she said, pointing out the sirloin. Her chipped nail polish was accentuated with dried blood.

The quarters landed on stainless steel prep tables, where Bublitz set out bowls for different cuts. She saved the least palatable chunks for her dog, Cricket. As the women gathered around the tables to work, the silence broke. They traded hunting stories, laughing and commiserating about their brushes with patronizing male hunters. “Nobody’s coy about it,” Bublitz said later, reflecting on the workshop. “You immediately share horror stories or funny stories or whatever.” As the banter continued, the sterile kitchen began to feel like a warm home.

Jody McLauchlin, one of Bublitz’s students, was excited to learn about butchery. “It’s nice to see other people do it,” she said. “And to see women do it.” She’d always wanted to be more involved in her husband’s hunting trips; in fact, she said, he was hunting that same evening.

As the workshop wound down, McLauchlin checked her phone and announced that her husband had just harvested a deer. Excitement rippled around the room. Later, when that carcass was hanging in her own garage, McLauchlin would be the one leading the charge. ✨



The natural gas pushback

Local communities want to electrify, but gas interests have other ideas.

BY NICK BOWLIN

PHOTO BY LUNA ANNA ARCHEY

GUNNISON, COLORADO, at 7,700 feet above sea level, sees some of the coldest temperatures in the Lower 48. Its 6,000 or so inhabitants, especially low-income residents in older, poorly insulated housing, use more energy — often from natural gas — than their lowland counterparts.

Last year, Gunnison's city government proposed cutting both greenhouse gas emissions and utility bills by making new homes more efficient and less reliant on fossil fuels.

But Gunnison soon encountered the same obstacle that other communities do when they try to move toward electric heat pumps, stoves and water heaters: natural gas providers.

By vigorously campaigning against electrification policies in what are normally local battles, national natural gas utilities have opened a new front in the decarbonization struggle: building codes.

Building codes can either accelerate local carbon emission reductions or lock in fossil fuel infrastructure, according to David Konisky, a professor at Indiana University who studies environmental and energy politics and policy. When code changes nibble at utilities' market share, however, the corporations bite back.

"It's not surprising that they will fight against these reforms," Konisky said. "It's cutting into their standard business model of people using natural gas for cooking or heating in their homes."

IN JULY 2021, Gunnison's city council passed a robust climate plan aimed at cutting aggregate greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030. The plan found that buildings produce 61% of county carbon emissions. The city's 2022 proposal, building on the previous version, hoped to cut emissions by electrifying all new residential and commercial structures and half of remodels by 2030. This meant aligning Gunnison's building code with current International Code Council standards. Most American municipalities use some version of ICC policy. The most up-to-date policy requires new construction to be built "electric-ready," so that switching from natural gas to electric appliances — and installing solar panels — is easier and cheaper.

But Dallas-based Atmos Energy Corp., one of the nation's largest natural gas utilities and a primary provider for Gunnison, elbowed its way into the process.

On Sept. 2, Atmos public affairs manager, Kurtis Paradisa, emailed the city government that his company would be "educating" its customers about its stance on electrification. In a mass email, Atmos warned Gunnison that the proposed changes "will have a big impact on housing affordability and restrict your choices for energy and innovative technologies." (These emails were obtained in a record request by the Energy and Policy Institute, a utility watchdog group, and reviewed by *High Country News*).

Gunnison Mayor Diego Plata called Atmos an important partner to the Gunnison community. But he acknowledged that the proposed code update would have "hit directly into their entire business strategy and plan."

In a separate letter to Plata, Atmos Vice President of Marketing Ken Fogle argued that Coloradans overwhelmingly prefer natural gas, citing a study from the American Gas Association. This national trade group — Atmos is a member — spends millions of dollars annually on campaign donations and lobbying. Fogle also stated that the new policies would raise energy costs for Atmos' Gunnison customers by more than \$1,200 per year and that fueling appliances with natural gas results in lower carbon emissions than all-electric homes.

"We do believe that a balanced energy approach that includes natural gas and preserves energy choice, rather than supporting specific fuels or technologies, will achieve

goals of reducing emissions while maintaining energy reliability," Paradisa wrote in response to questions emailed by *High Country News*.

But Atmos' claims appear based on questionable assumptions. Fogle's energy-cost calculations rely on higher electricity costs than Gunnison's standard rate and on Atmos' natural gas costs from April 2022. Natural gas bills have shot up recently due to high demand here and overseas, as European countries scramble to find non-Russian energy sources. In September, the Colorado Public Utility Commission approved Atmos' request to raise customers' rates to account for higher gas costs.

As John Cattles, assistant county manager for operations and sustainability, noted in an email to Russ Forest, Gunnison's then-city manager, Atmos was also comparing high-efficiency gas appliances to low-efficiency electrical appliances. Heat pumps can be several times more efficient than the most efficient gas furnaces even in cold climates, despite the industry's frequent claim that they don't work in extreme cold. And Fogle's statement that natural gas has comparatively low carbon emissions appeared to omit the emissions from its extraction and transport.

Atmos found allies, however. In an email to Paradisa, city building official Eric Jansen said that he was "leaning toward recommending that the City just sticks with the currently adopted energy code," or that it opt for "amending the heck out of" the proposed new code. This recommendation, he told Paradisa, would include "no mention of electrification" in the new building codes. Gunnison's council members, he said, "have no inclination of going all electric any time soon."

Gunnison's debate echoed one that took place in Scottsdale, Arizona. Early last year, the city set out to update its building codes, despite a 2020 Arizona law that prohibits local governments from banning natural gas and blocks cities from implementing other energy-efficient building measures.

Scottsdale's natural gas utility — Las Vegas-based Southwest Gas — fought back. In a letter to the city's Building Advisory Board of Appeals dated March 2, Matthew Ligouri, senior public affairs manager for Southwest Gas, echoed many of the points Atmos made in Gunnison, even citing several American Gas Association studies. At a



public meeting, Ligouri called the proposed building codes a “hard-left, ideological goal.” To date, the city has not attempted to adopt the electric-ready building codes.

In Gunnison, at a mid-October council meeting, Fogle testified and some residents spoke out against the policies. Ultimately, the city council voted to table discussion of electric-ready building codes. Jansen said Gunnison wasn’t ready for widespread electrification. (Jansen did not respond to a list of emailed questions.)

In the end, the city adopted policies that encourage solar-ready construction, while most of the energy-efficient building policies were set aside for three years.

Mayor Plata agreed with the decision, saying that the city’s grid was not up to the task. But Atmos’ tactics concern him. “Was it a little unsettling to see them reach out to all their clients and advocate that they come to council meetings and oppose this? Yes, I would say that was a little bit of pressure.”

Plata added that, given the urgency of the climate crisis, he hopes the city adopts energy-efficient building codes in three years.

AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL, Republicans turned a federal agency’s plan to gather pub-

lic comment on indoor air pollution from gas stoves into culture war fodder. But most fights over natural gas occur at the state and local level.

Democratic-led states are moving away from the fuel. California plans to ban all natural gas home and water heaters by 2030. Elected officials in Eugene, Oregon, banned natural gas hookups in new construction despite pushback from NW Natural, the state’s largest natural gas utility.

And though Gunnison failed to pass new building codes, nearby ski towns Aspen and Crested Butte recently succeeded, while Colorado’s Air Quality Control Commission is considering energy-efficient requirements for large buildings.

Meanwhile, a group called Coloradans for Energy Access emerged last year to fight what it calls “forced electrification” policies. Jennifer Altieri, Atmos’ then-vice president of public affairs for its Colorado-Kansas division, was listed as board chair in the group’s 2021 nonprofit tax documents.

In Ohio, Gov. Mike DeWine, R, signed a bill on Jan. 6 that legally defines natural gas as a “green energy” source. A dark-money group backed by Ohio utilities — with ties to the American Gas Association — was instru-

Cillian Liam Barrett and Edward Morrison install a heat pump system in the attic of a new accessory dwelling unit in Crested Butte, Colorado. The town recently passed new energy-efficient building codes.

mental in pushing it, according to the *Washington Post*. And Idaho lawmakers are looking to ban city-level natural gas restrictions, in a move that would mirror the Arizona law.

The utilities’ opposition to electrification is unsurprising, since a significant portion of their income comes from the use of natural gas for cooking and heating water and homes. But these fights are especially urgent now, Konisky noted, given that natural gas prices are high and President Joe Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act has begun taking effect. The law’s hundreds of billions of dollars for climate and energy policies include tax credits and rebates for building electrification, residential solar and energy-efficient appliances.

“My sense is that the utilities see the writing on the wall,” Konisky said.

“The more utilities delay and keep the status quo,” he went on, “the better off they are financially in the short term.” ❁

Why electrify?

The push to evict natural gas appliances from buildings, explained.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH AGOSTA

5.1 million Approximate number of all-electric homes in the Western U.S. (including Alaska and Hawaii).

22.3 million Approximate number of Western U.S. homes that use natural gas or propane for a portion of heating or cooking.

13 Percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions that come from commercial and residential buildings, mostly from energy used for space and water heaters and cooking.

The vast web of infrastructure and pipelines needed to get natural gas from the underground to homes, businesses and power plants is riddled with leaks. It can also be ruptured, emitting gobs of methane, a potent greenhouse gas that can ignite or explode.

25,223,462 mcf

Amount of natural gas, or methane, released during U.S. pipeline incidents between 2010 and 2023. That's equivalent to annual emissions from 100 million cars.

374 Number of those incidents that led to explosions.

150 Number of people killed in natural gas pipeline incidents since 2010.

4,200 Average number of natural gas-caused home fires in the U.S. annually, causing a

yearly average of 40 deaths, 140 injuries and \$54 million in direct property damage.

16 Average annual carbon monoxide poisoning fatalities attributed to natural gas furnaces, water heaters and stoves.

FOR YEARS, A PR CONFLICT RAGED in this country, pitting electric appliances against natural gas stoves and heaters. The gas industry usually emerged victorious, successfully convincing the public that electric heaters are ineffective and will send your utility bills skyrocketing. Besides, according to the industry, a “real chef” never uses anything but gas for cooking — because it affords temperature control, keeps working during blackouts and, well, because “flame equals flavor,” or so the saying goes.

So it shouldn't have come as a surprise that right-wing politicians and pundits went

ballistic when scientists and regulators said it was time to ditch natural gas and go electric for the sake of human and climate health, and maybe even for cooking. It seemed like heresy, denying everything that Americans had been taught about the “clean-burning” fossil fuel.

But the move away from natural gas isn't just another

12.7 Percent of current childhood asthma cases in the U.S. that are attributable to gas stove use, according to a 2023 peer-reviewed study.

296 parts per billion

The estimated level of nitrogen oxide that roasting meat in a gas oven can emit — three times the Environmental Protection Agency standard for outdoor levels. Exposure to nitrogen oxide can cause learning deficits and respiratory problems, especially in children.

Cooks have long favored gas stoves because

they can control burner temperature precisely — which isn't possible with conventional coil electric stoves — and because there's just something appealing about cooking over a flame. But decades' worth of research shows that gas stoves are bad for people and the climate because they emit nasty pollutants like formaldehyde, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides — even when they're turned off.

30% - 42%

Avg. efficiency of natural gas burners.

Most Western U.S. households use natural gas for space and water heaters, in large part because natural gas tends to be cheaper than electricity. But the price of natural gas is also volatile, as many folks across the West found out this winter when their gas bills shot up significantly.

valley in our appliance wars. It's coming now because the reasons to abandon natural gas have become overwhelming, even as electric appliance technology evolves and the power grid gets cleaner.

Burning natural gas emits carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. Its main ingredient is methane, a far more potent climate-warming

Induction stoves rely on magnetic induction, not thermal heat, to generate heat directly in the pot, pan or kettle. They are far more efficient than natural gas, because almost all of the energy is transferred directly to the food. They also boil water at least twice as fast as a gas stove and temperature is fully controllable, a critical trait for chefs. They may require electrical upgrades and only work with ferromagnetic cookware, such as cast iron and stainless steel. Aluminum and copper won't do it.

550 million Tons of global carbon emissions that could be avoided by 2030 with a widespread shift to electric heat pumps.

75% - 78%
Avg. efficiency of induction burners.

Electric water heaters can be programmed to heat water during times of low electricity demand and shut off when grid-wide demand peaks.

gas that leaks from appliances, pipelines and the infrastructure used to extract and process the fuel. Heating and cooking with natural gas can also be dangerous: Researchers have found gas appliances emit unhealthy levels of air pollutants into homes and businesses; the fuel can explode if ignited; and a malfunctioning furnace can fill a house with carbon monoxide, killing everyone inside it.

It's enough to give an unpleasantly literal meaning to the meme politicians and pundits have been parroting online lately: "You'll have to pry this gas stove out of my cold, dead hands!" 🌪️

Utilities and automakers are working on bi-directional EV chargers, which allow the car's battery to be used as a backup power source for the home in the event of an outage.

Instead of generating heat by running electricity through a coil or combusting fossil fuels, a heat pump pulls the heat from outdoors and transfers it indoors (or the reverse, for air conditioning), making it up to five times more efficient. Newer models can keep a well-insulated house cozy even when it's below zero outside.

SOURCES: National Renewable Energy Laboratory, Lawrence Berkeley National Labs, U.S. EPA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, RMI, International Energy Agency, Electric Power Research Institute, Consumer Product Safety Commission, National Fire Protection Association, Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration. Talor Gruenwald, Brady A. Seals, Luke D. Knibbs, and H. Dean Hosgood, III. 2023. "Population Attributable Fraction of Gas Stoves and Childhood Asthma in the United States" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 1: 75. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010075>. Methane and NOx Emissions from Natural Gas Stoves, Cooktops, and Ovens in Residential Homes, 2022. Eric D. Lebel, Colin J. Finnegan, Zutao Ouyang, and Robert B. Jackson *Environmental Science & Technology* 2022 56 (4), 2529-2539 DOI: 10.1021/acs.est.1c04707

Analysts predict that widespread electrification of transportation, buildings and industry will double U.S. electricity consumption by 2050, but still result in an overall reduction in carbon emissions. Though the extra demand would further burden an already strained grid, modern electric appliances can be programmed to run during low power demand, reducing risk of outages.

41 Percent that widespread electrification could reduce overall carbon emissions — even if no new policies to decarbonize the electricity grid are put in place. With decarbonization policy, the reduction can be as much as 74%.

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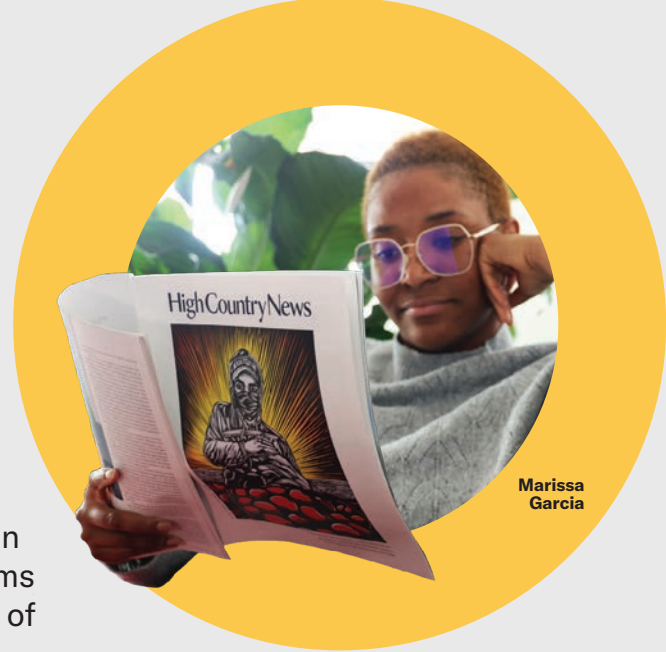


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DEAR FRIENDS

Tell us what you think about HCN's website



Marissa Garcia/HCN

The technology that supports HCN's work is a bit of a hodgepodge, to put it mildly. Our website, the software we use to manage subscriptions, process payments and send emails: It's all aging systems stitched together over decades and starting to come apart at the seams.

And we know the issues that causes for readers. We read your frustrated emails and try to work through the problems — which we sometimes find equally bizarre and confusing! — with you on the phone. We rush from emergency patches to makeshift repairs, trying to keep this little raft afloat.

The good news is that this will soon change. For the better part of a year now, the *High Country News* Product and Marketing team has been laying the groundwork for major changes to our digital infrastructure.

As we go about the rebuilding process, we'd like to know about your experience

with our current systems. What issues would you like to see addressed with the website or the way we manage your subscription, and what features would you like us to add?

That is the topic of our latest online reader survey, part of our efforts to seek more feedback from you. You can find the survey by visiting hcn.org/reader-survey or scanning the QR code to the right with your smartphone.



We welcome your thoughts even if you don't care two bytes about the website! The survey also has the usual questions about our most recent issues. Let us know which stories you've appreciated, which ones you didn't, and what you'd like to get out of your online experience with HCN.

Michael Schrantz,
marketing communications manager

Paul's on Bandcamp

HCN's former publisher and editor, **Paul Larmer**, has been spending his Paonia days recording original songs with another local musician, **David Snider**. "I'm having a blast, and discovering that writing songs is as complex as writing a cover story," says Larmer, who long delighted staffers with his tendency to break into song at work.

You can give his new work a listen at paulstanleylarmer.bandcamp.com.

You wasted no time finding our poem

HCN's editors and writers had a little impromptu fun recently while reflecting on some of their favorite lines from the March issue of the magazine. They went around the virtual room, pulling fragments from different stories, and pieced together a "found poem." The entire staff was delighted with the results, and we had just enough time to slip the poem into the email announcing the latest issue — with a challenge. The first folks who got back to us with the page number for each line took home some HCN-branded swag.

We got a kick out of all your responses. What'd you think of the poem? Should we do it again? What's your found poem for this issue? Let us know at dearfriends@hcn.org. And if you aren't getting emails from HCN, visit hcn.org/activate to claim your digital access and sign up for emails.



Michael Levston/HCN

The HCN staff's found poem from March

More than anything, I wanted to watch back
foxes gnawing at ribs and coyotes defecating in snow
gold in the hills, but not for us
as if the hem of her dress had been dragging around in
the dirt of some earthly, non-celestial place
a place where the Northern Rocky Mountains slice
through the dry brown summer landscape
like a saw blade
but to betray one's gender was five times as bad
the technical term for this is amazeballs, as the videos
clearly attest
a handful of coins, a half-drunk bottle of whiskey
a pair of stiff work gloves, the palms upturned and filled
with bullets
meanwhile, the copper kings made Butte their
playground
man, fuck this place and by place
I mean the land lords
this tree is occupied

I would never permit myself to
scream in the city
I would never consider
screaming at the beach
there is no future in oil
there never was



Roberto "Bear" Guerra / HCN

The lines in this poem can
found in the March issue, in the
order in which they appear, on pages 19, 20, 28-29,
36, 36, 45, 54, 39, 39, 32, 32, 9, 50, 50, 32, 32.

MUSHING ON



Fifteen teams take off at the start of the Bogus Creek 150 sled dog race in Bethel, Alaska. The race route runs roughly 75 miles up the Kuskokwim River to a checkpoint, where mushers take a mandatory four-hour rest before turning around and heading to the finish line.

THE KUSKOKWIM

A thriving community keeps sled-dog traditions alive
in Southwest Alaska.

Photos by Katie Basile | Text by Laureli Ivanoff





ON A JANUARY MORNING AT 7 A.M., it was still dark in Bethel, Alaska. Far down the trail of the Bogus Creek 150 sled-dog race, the light of a single headlamp shone like a beacon. Fans, family members and race volunteers stood near the finish line on the frozen Kuskokwim River, meandering, visiting and waiting in the 16-degree air. Some wore beaver hats, others parkas with ruffs made of wolf and wolverine fur that framed their faces. Inside trucks parked on the ice, drivers and passengers sat warm in their seats and listened to live radio updates. As the musher in first place drew close, his headlamp revealed the dogs running in front of him. The crowd started cheering.

"Here they come!" an announcer called. The crowd cheered louder.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that's Raymond Alexie, the 2023 Bogus Creek 150 Champion,"

the announcer said as Alexie's lead dogs, Apollo and Levi, crossed the finish line. "Congratulations, Raymond."

Alexie's name was spoken up and down the Kuskokwim that weekend and throughout the sled dog racing community across Alaska. The young musher — only 19 years old — from Kwethluk, a town of just under 900 people upriver from Bethel, was the pride of the Kusko.

His win was a symbol of the region's thriving dog-mushing culture. It's a lifestyle maintained by men and women who prefer canine companionship over gas-guzzling snowmachines, and who hitch up their teams for the races along the river. Who catch salmon for the dogs, cook it outdoors and still need to think about the next \$2,500 order for a month's supply of dog food. Who scoop poop every day because their fathers

did. Who listen for the rhythm of paws hitting snow and the slicing of sled runners beneath them, traveling the river that links their communities and provides connection and sustenance, the way rivers do.

For centuries, Yup'ik people called the Kuskokwim River *Kusquqvak*. Here and throughout Alaska, including my home at the mouth of the Unalakleet River, people mushed across the winter landscape to hunt, trap, travel, trade and deliver mail. Today, running sled dogs is also a sport, complete with professional mushers like Iditarod champions Brent Sass, Joar Leifseth Ulsom and Bethel's homegrown Pete Kaiser, all of whom have also competed in the prestigious Kuskokwim 300. It's the longest race in the region, a 300-mile trek that starts and ends in Bethel.

The Kusquqvak is also the venue for



Steven Alexie of Napaskiak mushes with his team in the Holiday Classic on Jan. 7 (*left*). The 50-mile race took place two weeks later than planned due to poor trail conditions and a lack of snow.

Lewis Pavila, a veteran musher from the village of Kwethluk, races to a seventh-place finish in the Holiday Classic (*below*).



shorter contests organized in Bethel and the surrounding communities, races with crowd- and musher-favored mass starts, simple rules with no age requirements and no entry fees, which attract competitors from the roughly 30 dog teams in the area. For the *Kusquvagmiu*, the people from the Kuskokwim, the river is home — the place where the mushing tradition of our ancestors remains stronger than anywhere else in Alaska.

A musher on the Kuskokwim has more chances to compete in sprint or mid-distance races than a musher anywhere else in the state. That means a real shot at bringing home a racing check in an expensive sport. “You not only can pay for your dog food, but you can pay for a light bill or something,” Beverly Hoffman, a longtime musher, told me. Prizes were as high as \$25,000 and totaled \$350,000 this season, thanks to fundraising efforts by

area racing associations.

Hoffman ran dogs for 40 years in Bethel, testing herself against Kuskokwim River trail conditions and immersing herself in the mushing community she helped build. She co-founded the Kuskokwim 300 Sled Dog Race organization and the Kuskokwim 300 in 1980. For more than 25 years, she and her husband operated a mushing cooperative that negotiated prices for quality dog food, a service now supplied by the Kuskokwim Racing Committee. Hoffman also made gang-lines for pulling sleds, sold harnesses, and provided local mushers with other equipment necessary to keep a dog kennel operating smoothly.

“My dad was a dog musher,” she said. “He had a team of half-wolves when he was a teenager and had a trap line ... so, of course, I grew up hearing some of those stories.”

Today, Hoffman is one of many volunteers who support mushing on the Kuskokwim, some of whom take on behind-the-scenes tasks like prepping boxes of food, coffee and other supplies for remote race checkpoints. Hoffman also visits classrooms to talk with kids about the region’s history, working to ensure the stories from the trail continue.

Thanks to that mushing community, the beacon on the Kusquvak continues to shine. At a 50-mile race in Bethel in the beginning of January, Coraline Williams, a musher’s 4-year-old daughter, waited at the finish line wearing a purple snowsuit and round cherry-red glasses. Hoffman and other folks gathered there, too, anticipating the arrival of the next musher. Coraline’s family pointed to her with proud smiles. “She just can’t wait to race,” one of them said. ☀

Race volunteers Greg Morgan and Valerie Bue hold Twyla Elhardt's team in the chute at the start of the Kuskokwim 300 *(right)*.

Supporters cheer for Raymond Alexie as he mushes to a first-place finish in the Akiak Dash, an approximately 60-mile race *(below)*.





Fans wait for Pete Kaiser to cross the Kuskokwim 300 finish line in first place (*above*).



Young spectators pet one of Mike Williams Jr.'s dogs after his second-place finish in the Akiak Dash (*left*).



The Rev. Alexander Larson, a Russian Orthodox priest and dog musher, prepares his dogs for a training run near his home in Napaskiak (*above*). “When you think about stuff (when you are) alone, not where the noise is, you think better. You do stuff the right way or the better way,” he said. “It gives you to yourself. ... And running dogs alone is something that — the church tells you the secret to living the spiritual life is being quiet all to yourself.”

Pete Kaiser feeds his dogs at his kennel in Bethel (*right*). “The traditional food source for sled dogs out here in any rural part of Alaska has always been salmon,” he said. But now, fish aren’t always available. “This year was a little difficult, not being able to fish for silver salmon and stuff, so people had to get creative. But some other places like the Yukon have been shut down completely for salmon, and I know mushers personally over there that are like, ‘We can’t afford to have a dog team if we can’t feed salmon.’”





Coraline Williams plays with puppies in her family's dog yard in Akiak (*above*). Her dad, Mike Williams Jr., comes from a long line of dog mushers. "If there's no wind and I'm going to do a short run, I have to bring her, because if I don't, she'll remember it," he said. "(She'll say) 'Today is warm and you didn't go far, so how come you didn't bring me?'" She's been that way ever since she could talk."



Musher Twyla Elhardt and her sled dog Bolt in their dog yard in Bethel (*left*). "One of my favorite things about mushing in the Kuskokwim region are the connections I've gotten through it. Getting to know other mushers, especially those who've grown up in this community and in this lifestyle, I feel like I'm learning so much from them. The community out here is really special, and not just among mushers, but also the community at large. Everyone's so supportive, and I just love getting to run on trails."



Pictured from left, top row:

Raymond Alexie of Kwethluk, the winner of this year's Bogus Creek 150. "I don't pay attention to the weather. I just go out even if the weather is ugly or too cold. I just go," Alexie said. "(I like) just being out. It clears the mind, it's soothing. It's the sound of the wind and the dogs."

Beverly Hoffman, the longtime race organizer and volunteer, near her home in Bethel. "(Dog mushing) was a key part of life here, you know, trapping and mail, before airplanes," she said. "We're carrying that history forward, so that it won't be lost."

Twyla Elhardt is originally from California and moved to Alaska to work as a nurse in 2015. She started mushing a few years later, and this winter, she competed in the Kuskokwim 300 for the first time. "I'm really excited; I'm also nervous, which I think is healthy when you're going to be dragged a hundred miles through the frozen tundra by a team of dogs," she said, before the race. "Most of the dogs that I'll be running have done the K300 before. So I'm the newbie; I'm really excited to get to stand on the runners behind them."



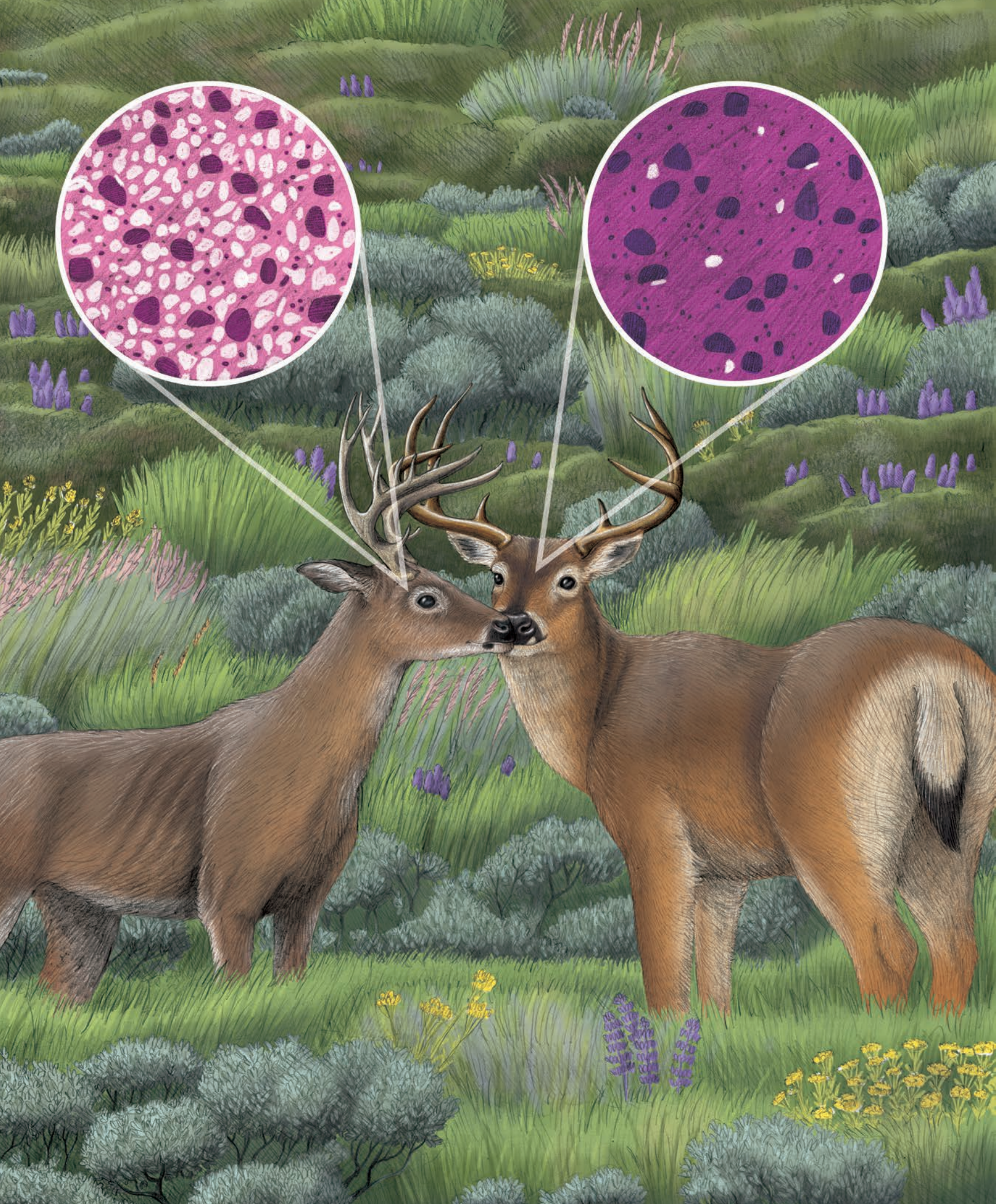
Pictured from left, bottom row:

John Snyder of Akiachak, covered in frost after finishing in 13th place in the Holiday Classic.

Father Alexander Larson remembers colder winters and more consistent snow when he was growing up. "Snow would build up a lot, a lot of snow. And then I think, from 2000 or so, it kind of rapidly changed," he said. "Elders, they used to say the weather will change. You know, the world will change. ... The weather will change, and our winter will be a different winter."

Richie Diehl (also pictured on the cover) on a training run near his home in Aniak. "You're constantly dealing with adversity," he said. "The lack of snow, the glare ice ... trying to get dog food, shipping stuff out. If dog food doesn't show up, you just kind of shrug your shoulders. You're always prepared for that next step because you've dealt with this before."





Chronic Mystery

In the Rockies, a deadly disease stalks deer and elk.
Do predators help or hurt?

By Christine Peterson | Illustrations by Alex Boersma

JUSTIN BINFET, A BIOLOGIST with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, strode down a sagebrush-covered hill in the Deer Creek Range of central Wyoming, his phone in his hand. The mid-June sun beat down as the wind picked up. Binfet hopped across a clear, rocky creek and climbed hundreds of feet up the opposite ridge. He stopped occasionally to course-correct after checking his phone, which showed dozens of dots on a map, indicating that a mountain lion had been hanging out near the area. A female lion usually sticks around for one of two reasons: She's made a den and has kittens, or she killed something big and is taking her time dining.

Binfet hoped for the latter. Wind and hot sun can make quick work of a carcass, so he didn't dawdle.

He and a few other biologists had fitted the wild cat with a GPS collar 18 months earlier so they could track her movements. Her collar collected her location every three hours, and the data was sent to a satellite daily. A complicated algorithm analyzed those pings and alerted the scientists if the lion had likely killed something.

Binfet reached the top of the ridge, where sagebrush flowed into a few robust junipers that abutted the limestone bluffs above him. His truck sat far below along the vague two-track we'd driven in on, the only sign of humans for miles.

"I'm looking for a kill in some pretty open stuff," Binfet said.

Minutes later, he found it: the remains of an elk calf, baking in the

sun a few feet away from a juniper as tall as a house. Binfet wanted to know whether a lion had killed this calf, and if so, whether the calf was infected with chronic wasting disease, or CWD, when it died.

Tufts of fur were buried in a bed of needles and duff beneath the tree — signs of a lion cache. The only way to tell if the calf had been infected was to examine its lymph nodes, which Binfet hoped hadn't yet decomposed into slime. He turned to the calf, stretched blue surgical gloves over his hands and set to work, using a scalpel to dissect the several-day-old carcass that was already melting into the earth.

Any information gleaned from it would provide one small piece of a much greater puzzle — the question of whether, and how, predators affect the spread of CWD, a disease that kills every animal it infects. Binfet's work was part of a study he's helping to lead, to figure out if lions select their prey from the sick and weak — as many people assume — or if they choose stronger and healthier individuals, just like human hunters do. In short, do mountain lions influence how the disease moves among other wildlife?

To find out, biologists have tracked, darted and collared 26 mountain lions, then used the information to find and sift through the freshly killed carcasses of their prey. Other researchers collared newborn fawns and are tracking their movements until adulthood. Now the scientists are trying to use all this data to better understand how chronic wasting disease operates across a vast landscape and multiple

species. It's not easy. Lions don't want to be darted and collared and often give biologists the slip. Collars stop working, complicated algorithms don't always spit out accurate kill locations, and sometimes those locations come with a lion and kittens unhappy to see human intruders. Even when scientists can locate the lions' prey, dead animals don't stay fresh enough for valid disease samples in the 90-degree heat for long. That day in the field, Binfet found maggot-filled mush instead of lymph nodes.

And then there are humans. State regulations permit unlimited mountain lion hunting in parts of central Wyoming. One winter morning, Binfet loaded GPS locations for each of the study's collared lions onto his laptop before heading into the field. One collar — and the lion it belonged to — turned up east of Casper, off Interstate 25, in the parking lot of the Hat Six Travel Center. Likely in the back of a truck.

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING, chronic wasting disease is a form of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy. The condition results from microscopic misfolded proteins called prions, which cause other proteins to mutate into prions as well. This buildup of mutated proteins eventually kills cells and leaves holes in an animal's brain, making it look like Swiss cheese under a microscope. All infected individuals die. Most wither or waste away, though because the disease slows reaction time and movements, some are hit by cars or killed by predators first. No cure exists.

CWD isn't caused by a virus or bacteria, so it can't be combated by antivirals or antibiotics. There's no vaccine. The prions that cause it stick to metal, particularly stainless steel, and can only be destroyed by being doused in lye, soaked in bleach or heated to temperatures greater than 900 degrees Fahrenheit.

Researchers first recognized the symptoms of CWD in 1967, in captive Colorado mule deer. Years later, it appeared in wild herds in southeast Wyoming. No one knows how it started or where, exactly, it came from. Since then, the disease has crept from county to county, state to state, region to region. It has leapt to Pennsylvania and even South Korea through imported captive elk and deer. CWD has now been documented in 30 states from Texas to New York. In the West, it was most recently identified among wild deer in

*It's possible that
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Montana, in 2017, and Idaho in 2021.

CWD infects deer, elk and, occasionally, moose. Other species have their own variations: Mad cow disease, for example, affects cattle and made headlines after people ate infected meat and developed a deadly variant of the disease in the United Kingdom in the '90s. CWD has never been documented in humans, but scientists worry about the possibility of a similar transmission through eating meat from a sick animal. The most well-known prion disease that affects humans, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, is also incurable and fatal. As a precaution, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tells hunters not to eat animals that test positive for CWD. Most state wildlife agencies, including the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, offer free testing for animals killed by hunters, and some states and hunting areas either require or strongly encourage it. Right now, however, the main consequence of the disease is its devastating impact on wildlife herds.

Scientists largely agree that once CWD is established in a herd, it likely can't be eradicated. What researchers don't know is how to stop it.

The best way to control the disease may be to slow its spread, wrote biochemist Sandra Pritzkow in a 2022 review paper published in the journal *Viruses*. CWD moves in part through feces, urine and infected carcasses, which deposit mutated proteins in the soil, where the prions remain infectious for years. In addition, CWD prions bind to plants, and might even be transmitted by earthworms as they inch through dirt. Prions also shed through saliva and nose-to-nose contact, which is how gregarious deer and elk say hello.

It's unclear whether animal-to-animal contact or environmental contamination is the bigger problem. But little can be done about prions lurking in the soil. So, one of the most promising — and practical — ideas involves thinning wild herds to keep animals from commingling and spreading the disease. Wyoming and Montana have tried issuing more hunting licenses in order to decrease the density of deer in certain areas.

Another option is to allow more hunting by other predators, such as wolves, bears or lions. But humans have reduced predator numbers since pre-colonial times. It's possible that boosting or restoring predator populations — no matter how counterintuitive it may

seem — could help bolster deer numbers. A small-scale study in Colorado published in 2010 suggested that lions may prefer to prey on infected deer, but Binfet and others are diving deeper, tracking more lions and collaring deer and fawns in order to better understand whether predators can help or hinder CWD spread.

“What do you do when a disease gets to be endemic?” asked Rhiannon Jakopak, a research scientist with the University of Wyoming who is studying how CWD moves among mule deer. “Do you just watch the herd decline? Or do you try to tinker with it a little bit?”

JAKOPAK AND A TECHNICIAN named Erika Schwoyer stood on top of Chalk Mountain, a bluff in central Wyoming about 50 miles from Binfet’s elk carcass. They moved quietly, closing the doors of their truck with barely more than a click. Like Binfet, they had a signal to follow. Unlike Binfet, they hoped to find the animal or animals

associated with it alive.

The two researchers whispered to each other as they pulled an H-shaped radio receiver and binoculars out of their backpacks and jammed in sampling test kits — plastic bags full of syringes, vials and other gear. Then they picked their way over to a clump of pine trees near a pile of sandstone rocks. Schwoyer held the receiver in the air, hoping for a ping, but no sounds broke the stillness of the unusually windless day.

A deer had given birth in the area the night before, and in the process had dropped a small plastic and metal vaginal implant transmitter that biologists had inserted in the spring. When the transmitter hit the ground, it sent a signal that triggered a satellite, which sent an email to Jakopak. An ultrasound performed in the field had shown that the doe was pregnant with twins, and the researchers needed to find the fawns and collar them before the spindly-legged creatures ran away.

Newborn fawns’ best defense against

predators is to hide and stay absolutely still. But, if scared enough, they will flee; Jakopak once watched a less than half-a-day-old fawn race away across a swampy field.

Jakopak wanted to know if infected mothers pass CWD to their fawns at birth or shortly after, or whether some fawns escape the disease completely. If they aren’t infected, she wondered, why not?

We scrambled down the rocky hillside, pausing every few minutes to listen for pings from the dropped transmitter and scan the sagebrush-covered valley below. Jakopak has spent years searching Wyoming’s mountains and plains for baby animals. She knew the fawns would be impossible to see from a distance, so she watched for movement from the mother; the newborns would be nearby.

Midway down the hill, we heard the first ping. The tempo of the receiver’s “beep, beep, beep” began to speed up as we reached the valley below, indicating that the transmitter was close. Moments later, Schwoyer found it



in a patch of green grass.

Now the search became even trickier and more urgent. We hadn't spied the mother, which meant the fawns were either hiding or had taken off, likely never to be found. Then Jakopak waved to us and pointed to the ground a couple of yards away.

Curled up in an almost perfect circle was a tiny brown fawn marked with white spots. She lay motionless in a divot next to a knob of sagebrush — out in the open, yet completely camouflaged. She barely breathed; even her wide-open eyes stayed still.

Jakopak gently wrapped her hands around the fawn, its legs shooting out in all directions in a last-ditch attempt to escape. She carefully wrangled the spidery limbs, then placed the baby in a gray cloth grocery bag and hooked the bag's handles to the bottom of a scale.

"Eight pounds," she said to Schwoyer, who noted the weight on a clipboard. Jakopak scooped the fawn out of the bag and placed her back on the ground, keeping her hand gently on the newborn's chest so she couldn't run away.

Schwoyer wrote down the length of the deer's body and the bottom section of one of her back legs as Jakopak called out the measurements. Jakopak filled several vials with blood for potential CWD testing later. (A blood test for CWD is currently awaiting USDA approval.) Finally, she wriggled an elastic GPS collar around the fawn's neck. As the deer grows, thin pieces of thread constraining the collar will break, allowing it to expand so researchers can track the fawn to adulthood. A battery pack attached to the GPS unit may last for upwards of nine months. If either dies — the battery or the fawn — a satellite will email Jakopak, letting her know.

While Binfet and his team concentrate on lions, Jakopak focuses on deer. She isn't sure how much predators curb the spread of CWD, but she knows any reduction means more time to find a cure or a better management strategy. Even a small difference, she said, could be important — saving just one deer from this awful disease would be worth it.

"You can tell when they have died from CWD," she said, though she noted that a formal diagnosis requires lab testing. "It looks like they were standing and pushed over, but pushed over by nothing. Sometimes they get scavenged, and your heart sinks. You can see

"It looks like they were standing and pushed over, but pushed over by nothing. Sometimes they get scavenged, and your heart sinks. You can see their ribs sticking out, and hipbones. They look like they were skin and bones, and they toppled over."

their ribs sticking out, and hipbones. They look like they were skin and bones, and they toppled over."

Jakopak is especially interested in the fawns' teenage years. Males tend to wander off by nine months or so, while females might roam around a little before settling somewhere nearby. Ecologists rarely focus on this period — after the fawns have left their mom and before they settle — but it could be critical in understanding CWD contagion. During this time, young deer likely interact with other family units or even join different herds, exchanging saliva — and possibly CWD. That kind of contact, along with time in new environments, are prime opportunities for spreading disease. But researchers don't know exactly where teenage fawns go.

"That's one of the missing pieces," Jakopak said.

She's also tracking how and why the fawns or their moms die. They've collared 68 adult female deer so far and lost nearly a third of them. Of those that died and have been tested, 11 had confirmed CWD; eight died from it, while predators killed the other three. Still, CWD likely contributed to their deaths, Jakopak said. One was killed by a coyote, which rarely kill adult mule deer.

Once the fawn was collared, Jakopak returned her to the notch where she'd found her. The fawn pressed herself into the ground, then stilled.

"Science is so incremental," Jakopak said. "We're trying to control for as much as we can and explore one little piece of the puzzle. And, hopefully, after someone's entire career, we might have the bottom left corner."

IN MIDWINTER, Binfet, riding shotgun in a small white pickup, bumped down a winding dirt road in the central Wyoming's Deer Creek Range. Snow-covered red clay, sagebrush and junipers surrounded the truck, and a few deer bounded up a nearby hill. Binfet was looking for a collared mountain lion whose GPS signal kept fading in and out. The truck's driver, Ryan Rohrer, who owns a large ranch in the area, talked about his appreciation for lions — unlike most Wyoming ranchers, who generally loathe the large predators, partly because they occasionally kill livestock, mainly sheep.

"Mountain lions are one of the coolest creatures on the landscape, in my opinion," he said. "They're just so elusive, and it's a



150-pound athlete that makes a living off killing things four times its size, you know? And you never see them. They're just — they're just super cool."

Rohrer has never had issues with lions eating his cattle or horses. In early February, in fact, a collared female spent a few days behind his horse barn, near 300 weaned calves. Rohrer's horses were there, too, eating hay. The cat killed a deer and a skunk but left the livestock alone. Perhaps, he said, mountain lions don't need domestic animals in an area with such a rich supply of wild food.

So when Binfet called Rohrer a couple of years ago asking if he could study lions on his

land, Rohrer agreed. Much of the West — more than 600 million acres, including roughly half of Wyoming — is public, but everything else is private. That means researchers often need the cooperation of private landowners to get much done.

For most of Binfet's career, he managed deer herds with CWD. About a dozen years ago, he worked on a project testing deer from a herd just south of Douglas, Wyoming, for the disease. The head researcher, Melia DeVivo, later published a paper suggesting that the herd could decline by as much as 50%. One worst-case scenario predicted that CWD, if left unchecked, could wipe it out completely.

Today, the herd is relatively stable, but still just half the size that the Wyoming Game and Fish Department believes the landscape can support.

DeVivo also noted that 20 of the deer in the study with CWD were killed by mountain lions, making the big cats the primary source of mortality for CWD-positive deer. Binfet wondered if he could use the ponderosa- and juniper-covered rolling mountains of central Wyoming to measure the impact of predators on deer numbers in an area already saturated with the disease. Members of the public tended to call for killing predators whenever deer numbers waned,

but in the presence of CWD, that might only worsen the situation. Binfet also wanted to know if anecdotal stories about lions and coyotes avoiding the carcasses of deer killed by CWD were true, or just that — stories.

So he sat down with a Game and Fish large-carnivore biologist, Justin Clapp, to develop the current project: a plan to spend almost four years tracking dozens of mountain lions to see what's on their menu.

EARLY ONE MORNING, my phone buzzed with a message from Jakopak. We were supposed to meet for coffee to discuss how many fawns in the study had died, among other topics. But at the last minute, she emailed to say she had tested positive for COVID-19. Her housemates had been sick for the last 10 days. She'd quarantined with them, testing negative for the duration, then woken up sick. It didn't make sense. But the last three years of this pandemic have demonstrated how confounding diseases can be, and how much can remain unknown — even after years of global efforts.

The Wyoming study hopes to address some of CWD's unknowns. But even so, it's unclear what wildlife officials will do with the data. Would they be willing to impose lion-hunting quotas in an area where the culture is steeped in anti-predator ideologies?

Potentially, said Dan Thompson, the Game and Fish Department's large carnivore section supervisor, if the data is clear enough. "We're open to what we will learn from this study," he said. "I think it would only make sense if the results suggest there's something we can do from the lion perspective that would be beneficial for mule deer.

"A lot of people are using the predation standpoint for their agendas. Some groups say predation will fix everything and some say predators ruin everything, and until we have answers that are well quantified, we're playing the middle game."

Regardless, every sample or drop of blood taken by Jakopak, Binfet and others will add to the growing body of work on CWD from across the world.

It's also possible that modern wildlife managers have been looking at this in the wrong way from the beginning, said Jason Baldes, an Eastern Shoshone tribal member and executive director for the Wind River Tribal Buffalo Initiative. "In Western

*"In Western thought,
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thought, we silo everything and think it should be broken down in pieces," Baldes said. "But when you look at it whole, it's not siloed. It's one system together."

Imagine if the pieces of this particular puzzle had never been scattered by CWD. If the predators that keep herds healthy by weeding out the sick had never been removed, Baldes said, this terrible disease, with its unknown origins, might never have had the chance to spread.

That's partly why tribal nations like the Eastern Shoshone traditionally didn't allow predator hunting on the reservation — though there is currently a hunting season for lions — and why tribal leaders continue to oppose hunting grizzly bears and wolves. It's also why Baldes and others are working so hard to restore the buffalo. Only a complete ecological system can ensure that all species have a chance against threats like disease and even climate change.

"We can't continue to think we have an answer when we don't look at it holistically," Baldes said.

A PAIR OF BLUETICK HOUNDS ran across lion tracks in the snow as the sun cracked the horizon on a late January morning, north

of where Binfet sorted through the elk calf carcass. The dogs followed the big cat for miles over sandstone boulders, up hills and down ridgelines, across a road and a bridge and then yet more hills.

Their human handlers watched the dogs' progress on GPS trackers. The crew of Wyoming state biologists wanted to get a collar on the lion so they could add its movements — and its dining habits — to the study.

Barking and howling erupted in the distance. Minutes later, the handlers hiked up a ridge and found the source: The dogs had treed the lion on a thumb of rock about halfway down a 400-foot precipice, hanging above a frozen river.

The lion had careened down a narrow, steep couloir etched into the side of the cliff, then skirted an impossibly small ledge to reach a lone ponderosa growing from a crevice in the rock. The dogs followed. There all three remained for almost an hour. Then, in a flash of fur and claws, the lion bailed from the tree and streaked back along the ledge with the dogs in pursuit. One grabbed the lion's neck in its mouth. The lion spun around, planted her teeth in the hound's face, and the two began to roll.

The crew at the top of the cliff — now including a search and rescue team the biologists had called to help the dogs — gasped and watched, helpless.

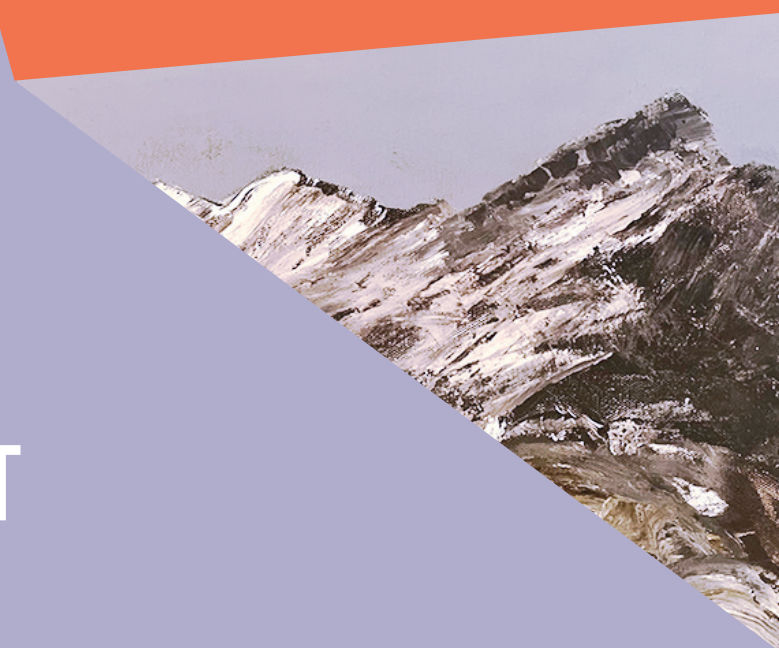
Somehow the animals separated and made it to the bottom of a gully, where the lion flew into another ponderosa and the dogs once again waited below.

The lion's clear blue eyes remained fixed on the humans at the top of the rim, unblinking.

It was late afternoon now, and the sun was sinking. The rescuers decided to rappel down the cliff, fit the dogs in cloth slings and winch them back up. The lion, the biologists decided, would not be sedated and collared after all; it was too close to dark. She would go free, untraceable.

Minutes later, the dogs safely back with their human companions, she fled.

In late March, small latches in the remaining lion collars unclicked, and the collars dropped to the ground. The lions will once again fade into shadows and tracks, rarely seen by humans — another piece in the very large puzzle of a disease that won't stop moving. ✨



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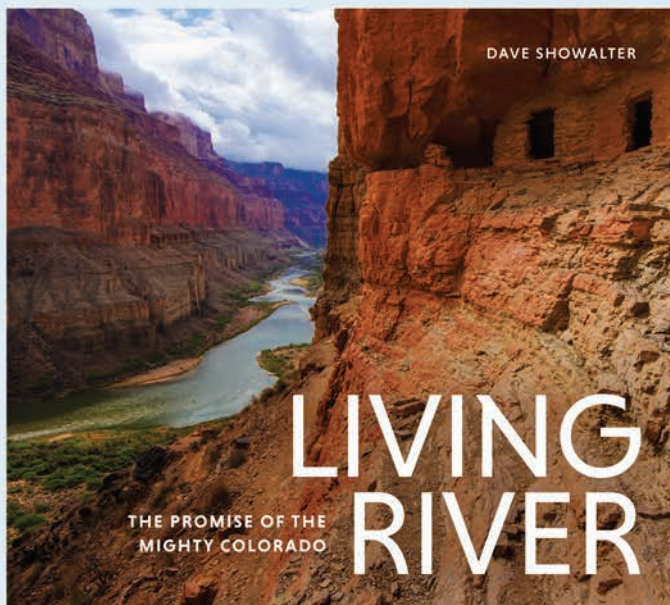
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Last of Wyoming

Jackson as a place of respite during the Apocalypse.

BY TAYLAR DAWN STAGNER

IN THE POST-APOCALYPSE HBO drama *The Last of Us*, Wyoming is a refuge from a deadly fungal plague. For those who want to survive the end of the world, Wyoming seems like a natural haven: Its wide-open spaces jut out in all directions, making it easy to see threats from a distance, and there's lots of running room. If you had to be in a zombie apocalypse, I can't think of a better place to be. Wyoming doesn't have big cities or a lot of people, never has and maybe never will. Here, the "Infected" — the Runners, Clickers and Bloaters — could search for prey for years without success.

The Last of Us continues a long tradition of casting The West™ as a place of hope. From the Westerns of old Hollywood to the current smash-hit series *Yellowstone*, the West symbolizes a new start, a respite for those tired of city life, and a safe harbor for anyone on the run from authority.

In *The Last of Us*, Wyoming is a refuge not only from fungal assailants but also from fascism. FEDRA, the military authority that filled the national power vacuum after the plague broke out in 2003, kills innocent people and violently suppresses opposition. Those disillusioned by FEDRA join the Fireflies, a group of freedom-fighting anarchists headquartered near Jackson. Scientists with the Fireflies want to study Ellie, a tenacious 14-year-old girl in the Boston quarantine zone, because they believe her immunity to the fungus is key to humanity's future. Ellie is played by Bella Ramsey, who embodies the sticky space between childhood and the hardened adulthood required in the world of *The Last of Us*. Ellie's traveling companion, Joel, played by Pedro Pascal, is mourning the loss of his daughter and the loss of his

own humanity in the years since. Together, Ellie and Joel must make it to Wyoming.

When they finally reach the state, Ellie and Joel, desperate for shelter, break into an Indigenous couple's cabin. Marlon and Florence, played by Graham Greene and Elaine Miles, make soup for the interlopers even as Joel holds them at gunpoint, cracking jokes and remaining amiable despite the dire situation. They've been living in the cabin since well before the outbreak, and they don't care to know about the outside world — or the Fireflies. They warn Ellie and Joel of the dangers to the West, toward Jackson.

Ellie and Joel, ignoring the couple's warning, eventually arrive at a fort inhabited by post-apocalyptic cowboys. The Jackson of *The Last of Us* is an oasis of communal living, whose 300 residents share the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning and maintaining the town. They enjoy electricity, a movie theater and a saloon, and they even celebrate Christmas, a bygone holiday for most, in relative safety and comfort. The Jackson community has figured out what they need to survive their world's fungal-themed zombie apocalypse: each other.

This Jackson is a comforting fantasy, not only in contrast with the nightmarish landscape of *The Last of Us* but also compared to the cruel realities of today. The real Jackson is one of the most economically stratified places in the country. It is the largest town in Teton County, where in 2021 the average income sits around \$300,000. In real-life Jackson, only the exorbitantly wealthy can find a safe haven.

Other Wyoming residents see Jackson as a place apart from the rest of the state.



They jeer at its expensive representation of The West™, at the billionaires who play cowboy while working-class people have to commute to Idaho to find affordable housing. The idyllic Jackson of *The Last of Us* is exclusive, too: The residents obey strict rules of secrecy, reasoning that if word of their safety and prosperity ever spreads, Jackson would be overrun with refugees. While the townspeople are generous to one another, they choose to sequester themselves from the danger and violence around them.

Throughout *The Last of Us*, characters struggle with the consequences of their choices. When Joel kills others to protect Ellie, what happens is not brushed away; we hear pieces of dialogue that humanize his victims and lead us to consider the grief of their families and loved ones. The fictional



Jackson offers respite to those lucky enough to get in, but neither we nor they are allowed to forget that outside its walls, the human world is being consumed by fungus.

Present-day Jackson is slowly banishing those who can't afford to be there, revealing something dark in the bellies and minds of those who settle the land. Its surrounding mountains, those huge rock pillars that cause the heart to slow and the lungs to swell, make it an excellent place to hide — to escape from danger, or to hide from consequences.

We all make choices; sometimes they bring about the end of a world. ☼

The idyllic Jackson, Wyoming, of *The Last of Us* (top). Joel (Pedro Pascal) and Ellie (Bella Ramsey) take refuge in the communal fort (right). **HBO**



Lezley Saar's 'Diorama Drama' and me

Sculpture that captures the colors of grief.

BY CHARLOTTE WATSON SHERMAN

SEPTEMBER 2017. I didn't know where I was going to live.

I'd been surviving rent-free as a "granny nanny" in Orange County, California, for three years, living on \$600 under-the-table per month. The agreed-upon term was over, and I was beginning to hope for a future sans caregiving.

With the help of paper-and-book artist Jill Littlewood, I was building an anti-lynching website to call attention to historical and modern-day racist terrorism. I planned to use Paypal Credit for a long-overdue trip to visit my 80-something mother in Seattle. I had been reading about a 70-something-year-old Black woman, an unhoused former actress and Post Office employee, who was sleeping in an Orange County parking lot when a much younger man attempted to rape her. As she fought him off, her head hit the concrete, killing her. And that was when my brother called to tell me our mother had just died from a heart attack and/or a stroke. The vascular dementia had not killed her, but our pesky blood vessels had certainly played a role in her demise.

"Come to Santa Barbara," Jill said, shortly after I got the news. She'd just lost her own father, and she suggested a writing residency in her attic, an ancient cocoon that had sheltered Afghan women fleeing abuse. And

then the largest wildfire in California history to date, the Thomas Fire, forced Jill and her husband to flee their 120-year-old home with whatever belongings they could fit into their Subaru. The fire burned for six months. But once Jill returned home, I set out for the Central Coast to accept her invitation.

Before I moved into that attic-cocoon, I stopped for a week at a Montecito Airbnb, courtesy of a lifelong friend. I wanted to extend my stay, but the casita was booked, so I ended up in a Santa Barbara hotel.

The next morning, mudflows roared down the Santa Ynez Mountains into Montecito, burying 23 people.

Jill, who once worked as a scientific illustrator for the LA Museum of Natural History, has always loved dioramas. She describes them as "one part mystery of miniature, one part natural history museum (with all the problems that raises), one part toy box, treasure chest, jewelry box with ballerina dancing when you open it ... the enchantment of the ordinary." For a short while, I lived inside Jill's diorama, a home overflowing with objects and artifacts and specimens, a hive mind, a safe harbor.

And so, five years later, when Jill sent notice of Lezley Saar's "Diorama Drama" exhibit at Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles, I knew I had to see it. According to art



critic Nancy Kay Turner, "Saar here creates fantastically invented narratives of soothsayers and seers who use amulets, bones and tinctures to fix what is broken, find what is lost, or cure all manner of maladies." In these surreal days of pandemic death, so much of it ignored or forgotten, I thought, maybe Saar's art could help fix what is broken inside me.

The day before an atmospheric river was to drop on California, I made the trek from my new Orange County apartment in my decade-old EV.

Like Jill, Saar is fascinated by dioramas. Her father, ceramicist Richard Saar, was a conservator at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and she spent many hours exploring its exhibits as a child. She grew up in a family of creatives; her mother, Betye, and sister, Alison, are noted artists, and her sister, Tracye, is a writer.

The exhibit's altered books and transformation of themes from literary works into visual narratives appealed to the writer in me. But two mixed media totem sculptures in a piece called *Fever Dreams* stopped me in my tracks. The first — *Reuel is a shaman and spiritual healer....a living personification of the head-on collision of Catholic and African religions* — was a towering figure, crowned with a mass of ebony woolly fiber

atop a faceless, limbless, genderless frame. It was swathed in ceremonial garb, complete with feathered shoulder epaulets, ornamental bits of nature and a mojo bag, plus an oversized, evocative antique keyring. At *Reuel's* base, the diorama was ringed with objects of spiritual power often found in traditional African diasporic traditions, including Vodun, Santeria or hoodoo — dolls, an African mask, a beaded bottle, an eight-key musical instrument. A giant compass-like object rested at the base. In this direction healing lies. ...

Equally hypnotic is *Mourna is the mother of the deceased, whom she keeps in the dark depths of the earth. She protects all their secrets and memories, swaying to faint music, making the ground slippery with her tears.* This mixed media figure, with an ebon woolly, faceless head shaped like an elaborate hat, wore a tapestried shawl and Victorian-style black velvet dress festooned with dangling black or near-black objects: a purse, hand mirror, cross, huge skeleton key (again) and a book of prayers. Black feathers and candles and ceremonial vessels sat at *Mourna's* feet.

Though the figurine is mostly black, *Mourna* reminds me of the other colors of grief: my mother breathless on her bathroom floor, California's parched earth, its disappearing waters, orange flames racing down a hillside, mud sliding. Saar created both totems in 2019, the year I left Santa Barbara County after evacuating from the Cave Fire.

Today, in these surreal days of a million-plus hushed pandemic deaths, of drought and wildfires and bomb cyclones, I see *Reuel* and *Mourna* as curers of maladies, as death doulas — as conjuring go-betweens I gaze upon for solace. The visionary work of Lezley Saar, modern-day shaman-artist, conjurer of spirits who transforms cast-off materials and found objects and bits of nature into towers of ritualistic magic, helps us survive an uncertain future on this broken Earth. ✨

*I see Reuel and Mourna as curers of maladies,
as death doulas — as conjuring go-betweens
I gaze upon for solace.*



Mourna (opposite) and Clottile (right).
Courtesy of Walter Maciel Gallery

From GRIGRI to gris-gris

What a piece of climbing equipment teaches us about creating community outdoors.

BY KAILY HEITZ

ILLUSTRATION BY NEU TOKYO

MY CLIMBING PARTNER moves doggedly up the inclined face of “Steel Monkey,” a difficult climb up a granite face that arcs over a clearing in the woods near Lake Tahoe, California. After the brittle heat, we appreciate the cooler air in the evergreens’ dense shade — as do the mosquitoes. I stand in rapt attention, belaying and watching my partner’s every dancing step across scarcely visible chips on the rockface. She reaches behind her to pull at the rope tethering her weight to mine, ready to clip it through the carabiner “quick draw” dangling before her. That’s my cue to further slacken the rope so she can pull it and secure herself to the draw. This route is just beyond our comfort level, difficult enough to make it both an enticing challenge and slightly nerve-racking. I’m not the only one watching; two white men are also working on the same route. I am acutely aware of my own discomfort under their gaze, my desire to prove that we, two women of color, are wholly competent climbers.

Just as my partner is about to clip the rope into the carabiner, two things happen: Her foot slips, and a mosquito pricks the soft skin beside my ear. Instinctively, I yank on the rope in my right hand to take out some of the extra slack now snaking through the other quickdraws before slamming my fist downwards into a “brake position.” This is a trained response designed to “catch” a falling climber with any belay device. My instinctive swat at the mosquito with my other hand

was a potentially dangerous distraction. However, a second later, the mosquito is dead, and my partner dangles, disappointed but unharmed.

That day, I was using a belay device known as an ATC, which uses friction to arrest a falling climber. The climbing pair beside us had made pointed comments about it, favoring Petzl’s ubiquitous assisted braking belay device, the GRIGRI. Had I been using a GRIGRI, the mosquito would not have posed a threat. If I had let go of the rope with my right “brake hand,” it would have braked in response to the sudden jerk of my partner’s fall. But, similar to the Voodoo practitioners from whom the device gets its name, I had been trained not to trust my life solely to a mechanical device or lucky charm.

A *gris-gris* — both the spiritual item and the piece of climbing equipment — provides protection. The *gris-gris* talisman is a small leather pouch, usually worn around the neck, believed to have originated in Ghana, with connections to Islam and West African Ifá. Enslaved Africans who brought their beliefs with them incorporated it into their practice of Voodoo in Haiti and Hoodoo along the Gulf Coast of the United States. In the context of enslavement, a *gris-gris* offered more than just good luck. It symbolized agency, the spirit of rebellion and the desire for freedom.

According to Petzl, the GRIGRI was “named after the Voodoo amulet ... believed to protect the wearer from evil or bring luck.”

The device got its name after product developer Michel Suhubiette asked at a meeting, “So, have you gotten anywhere with your *gris-gris*?” Suhubiette’s comparison of the device to what he described as an “African good luck charm” caught the attention of Paul Petzl, perhaps because “GRIGRI” is just strange enough to Western vocabulary to be “exotic,” and just familiar enough to tap into the fear that pervades this sport.

Climbing gear brands often reference alpine landmarks. The exceptions tend to tokenize poorly understood spiritual icons: Evolv’s “Shaman” climbing shoes, “Totem” cams for traditional climbing, and Five Ten’s long line of “Anasazi” moccasin-style climbing shoes. Unless the knowledge-keepers of those traditions are consulted and heeded, such commodification further obscures the cultural significance of the names.

The GRIGRI’s origin story — and the term “*gris-gris*” itself — are relatively unknown in much of the United States. It wasn’t until a recent Halloween party in Texas that a witch-costumed La’Kayla Williams told me more about the *gris-gris*. Similarly to the way the GRIGRI is fed rope, the hand that “feeds” a *gris-gris* bag determines whether positive or negative work is being done. The talisman transcends its physical form, too, having become a part of the vernacular of the Gulf. Summer Winston, co-founder of The Brown Ascenders, a Bay Area climbing affinity group, says that “*gris-gris*” can be a jocular reference to someone’s bewitching allure or wrathful vengeance.

Black, Indigenous and POC activism in the climbing world is another kind of *gris-gris*. The spaces of refuge, connection and empowerment that people like Winston create through meet-up groups are talismans that ward off exploitation. In most climbing spaces, instances of appropriation are unsurprising, and climbing routes are still saddled with offensive names. “We live in a world where (BIPOC) lives and existences are treated like jokes ... like something that doesn’t have value,” says Winston. Instead of pushing white-dominated industries to take action on these issues — an exhausting and often futile mission — Winston encourages mutual support within POC climbing communities. Focusing on one another’s safety conjures a kind of magic that isn’t for public consumption; it is, they say, “for us.”

Similarly, Erynne Gilpin, co-founder of Indigenous Women Climb, understands climbing as an opportunity for relationship-building. Her climbing practice includes connecting with local Indigenous communities and inquiring about the kind of protocol needed to enter the space respectfully. Climbing activism by non-Native groups like the Access Fund have historically fought to protect open spaces for both recreational interests and environmental conservation. Since the Access Fund and other climbing groups joined a lawsuit to defend Bears Ears National Monument against restrictions proposed by President Donald Trump in 2017, however, climbing advocacy has shifted its focus from rights to relationships and encouraged climbers to respect Indigenous customs and cultural sites. Gilpin urges climbers to critically reflect on their relationship to the land and its stewards, asking what one ought to give before receiving the pleasure of outdoor recreation. Changing our literal and figurative approach to climbing in community is an embodied experience of making space and forming connections, one that Gilpin says is “very much at the kitchen-table level. ... That’s really where the monumental change happens.”

In his novel, *Flight to Canada*, Ishmael Reed says, “A (person’s) story is (their) gris-gris. Taking (it) is like taking their gris-gris.” Likewise, taking a community’s gris-gris through a branded word or image means taking and profiting from that community’s stories and lives.

Like learning to belay on an ATC, protecting others is a learned, embodied and habituated response to the need to care for one another, rather than relying on what Audre Lorde famously called “the master’s tools.” Instead of using a GRIGRI, participate in gris-gris by cultivating safety, protection and well-being for those who have been exploited. Instead of settling for representation, demand or provide reparation: Ask what it would look like to not only acknowledge Indigenous stewards, but redistribute the resources that companies like Petzl have accrued while appropriating the unacknowledged icons of Black and Indigenous peoples. And, in so doing, conjure a reality that catches everyone who has fallen through the cracks. ✨

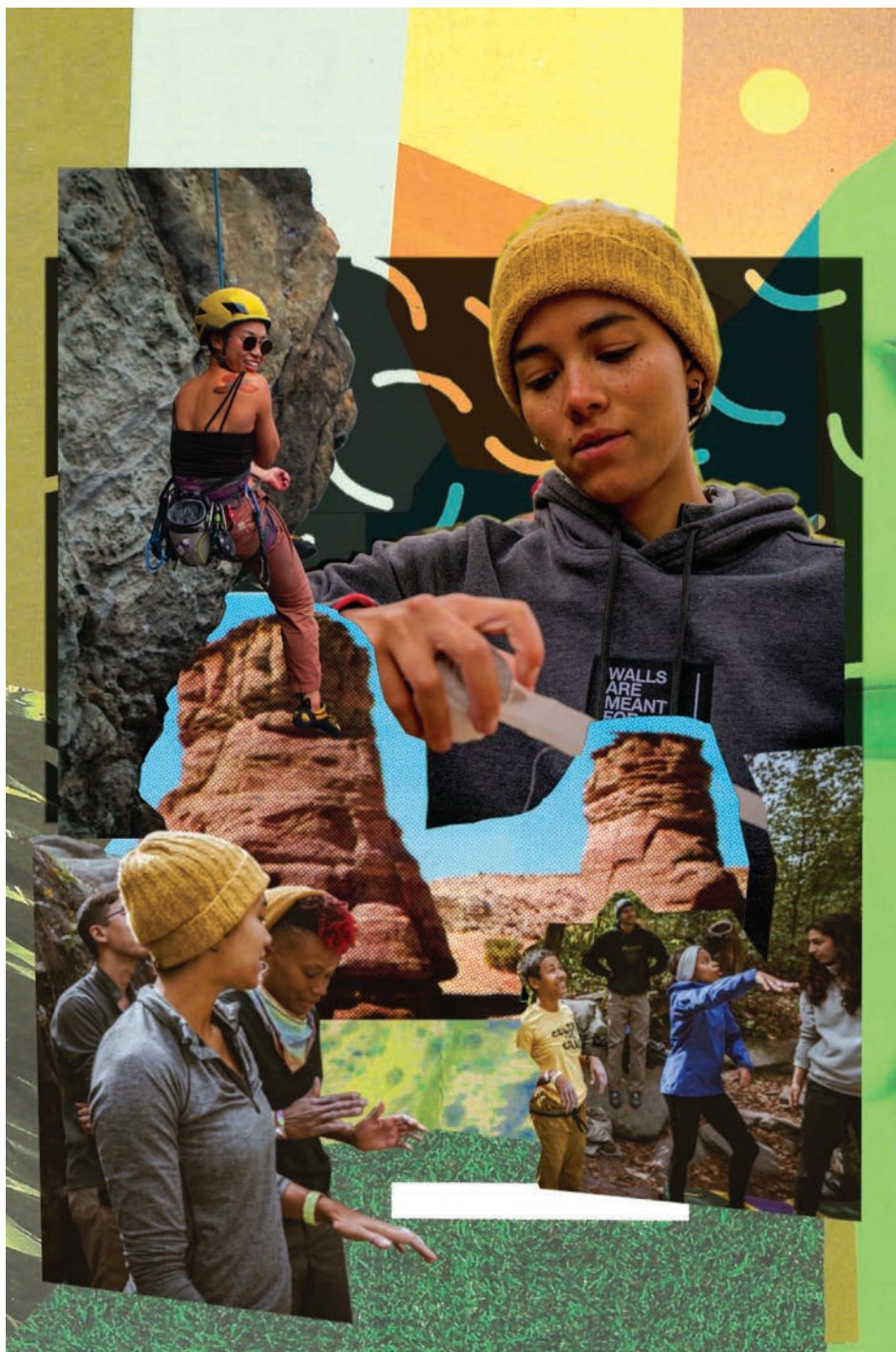


Photo credits: Katie Sugarman (top left); L. Renee Blount (top right & bottom)

Focusing on one another’s safety conjures a kind of magic that isn’t for public consumption; it is, they say, “for us.”

CALIFORNIA

When a pesky pest problem is percolating in your home, who ya gonna call? One worried homeowner in Glen Ellen, California, asked Nick's Extreme Pest Control to have a look-see after, um, finding "maggots and mealworms emerging from the wall." *Yikes*. When Nick Castro, the pest control technician, took the call, he thought it was just an average, everyday pest problem, maybe your average dead rodent rotting inside your everyday wall. Instead, he found something completely unexpected, something "he'd never seen in more than 20 years in the business," according to the *Washington Post*. What could possibly be more surprising than maggots and mealworms? Well, when Castro cut a hole in the wall of the second-floor bedroom, a fantabulous flood of acorns spilled out like a slot machine's jackpot of nickels. An extremely obsessive woodpecker had cached some "tens of thousands of acorns," weighing "roughly 700 pounds," a unit of measurement technically known as a "sh*t-ton." The pest control company posted photos of the mountain of acorns on Facebook, where it racked up hundreds of views. Castro said "the pile stood about 20 feet high" and "filled eight garbage bags." And this, boys and girls, illustrates what we mean by bird-brained behavior.

OREGON

The Coast Guard deployed a helicopter and swimmer to rescue a British Columbia fugitive after the yacht he'd stolen capsized in choppy water near the aptly named Cape Disappointment, the *Astorian* reported. Jericho Labonte was taken to an Astoria hospital and released a few hours later. The police arrested him that evening for "theft in the first

NEVADA

The Oscar Mayer Wienermobile, one of six hotdog-shaped vehicles touring America, fell victim to catalytic converter bandits during a publicity stopover in Las Vegas. 8newsnow reported that Corn Dog Clara and "Chad"dar Cheese, the Wienermobile's road crew, knew something was amiss when the 27-foot motorized frankfurter refused to start before

degree, endangering another person, criminal mischief in the second degree and unauthorized use of a vehicle." Labonte, who clearly needs a new hobby, was also identified as the guy who, earlier that week, left a dead fish on the porch of the notorious house where *The Goonies* was filmed.

a promotional event. It was towed to a Penske Truck Rental, where mechanics got it running by installing a "temporary" catalytic converter. Joseph Rodriguez, the shop's parts administrator — who had never seen a giant sausage truck before, let alone in the middle of a repair bay — said the permanent part may take a couple of months to get. Catalytic converter thefts are a problem, and not just for Wienermobiles. The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department said that "more than 2,600 catalytic converters thefts were reported to Metro in 2022, up from 1,894 the previous year, a 72% increase." We mustard up the energy to ketchup with this story, even though we think it's a lot of baloney.



Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write heard@hcn.org.

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY ARMANDO VEVE

WASHINGTON

Humans aren't the only beings prone to terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days; Pacific elephant seals apparently have their share. The *Whidbey News-Times* reported that a 2,000-pound elephant seal seemed a bit "cranky" after it killed a harbor seal and dragged the body to shore for its supper. Jan Skewes — the photographer who snapped amazing images of the predator and its prey — said that the elephant seal "threw his head back and roared triumphantly, exposing his formidable teeth." Well, we all get hangry sometimes. Let's hope his mood improved after supper.

IDAHO

Some children's books take place in epic imaginary worlds like Narnia or Hogwarts. Others inspire young minds with heroic adventures and acts of courage. But books like "*Why Everyone Needs an AR-15: A Guide for Kids*" and "*Why is Feminism So Silly: A Guide for Kids*" — really? Can they possibly be intended for ... actual kids? Indeed they can, at least according to the man behind the pen, Idaho state Sen. Brian Lenney of Nampa. Sen. Lenney, who is serving his first term, is a self-described "political refugee" from California who moved to Idaho in 2010. Both his books were self-published in 2018. What will you learn from what the author calls his "super fun" volume, "*Why Everyone Needs an AR-15*"? We're glad you asked, because the *Idaho Press* has thoughtfully shared Lenney's blurb: "We'll walk you through how awesome the AR-15 is, how it can be used for good, and why the Gun Grabbing Lefties should focus on something more productive." Lenney clearly loves his AR-15: "It's like a LEGO toy for adults!" ☼

VICTORY FOR CHACO

Together with Native and community partners, we defeated 199 oil and gas drilling permits in the sacred Greater Chaco region in northwestern New Mexico.

This marks an important victory for the health of frontline Diné communities and a step toward environmental justice.

Our victory creates new legal precedent, requiring the federal government to consider public health and climate effects of oil and gas drilling.

Despite promoting an “Honoring Chaco” initiative, the Biden administration defended these Trump-era fracking permits in a region already 90% leased for drilling. Greater Chaco’s living communities have endured far too many ills from intensive oil and gas drilling.

There is much more we must do to build on this victory for Chaco’s frontline communities, for environmental justice, and for the climate. Together, we will.

We are a nonprofit organization that uses the power of the law to safeguard the public lands, wildlife, and communities of the western U.S. in the face of a changing climate.

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#IAM THE WEST

EVELYNN ESCOBAR

**Creator, changemaker and founder
of the intersectional women's
hiking club Hike Clerb
Los Angeles, California**

One of my first experiences outdoors was at Zion National Park. (It) truly blew the lid off of my own healing journey. I was like: *Everyone needs to be out here experiencing this!* But I remember going on one of the most popular trails and everyone looking at me like an "other." My ancestors are just a few miles south. It didn't make sense to me. In the world I see for my daughter, we are all living in community instead of just in relation to each other. The Indigenous people of these lands are governing and overseeing these spaces, and Black and brown people feel empowered to get out there and to take up space. I would call Hike Clerb, an intersectional women's hiking club, a place for healing.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
Let us know on social.



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