

SPECIAL OUTDOOR RECREATION ISSUE

High Country News

For people who care about the West

SHREDDED

Will a growing, technologically evolved
army of thrill seekers overrun
every corner of the West?



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On the cover Day seven of a hut-to-hut mountain biking trip from Telluride, Colorado, to Moab, Utah. SERGIO BALLIVIAN



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Nic Korte is a groundwater geochemist who has hiked and backpacked nearly 150 nights in the Grand Canyon. His blog "Birds and More," can be read at the Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel's* website, gjsentinel.com. This essay includes excerpts from a longer essay in *On Foot: Grand Canyon Backpacking Stories*, published by Vishnu Temple Press.



High Country News is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) independent media organization that covers the issues that define the American West. Its mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the region's diverse natural and human communities.

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Ken Foraker, despite having lost his right leg in a road bike accident 26 years ago, rides near Sedona, Arizona. BROOKE WARREN



SIBER

KORTE

HCN correspondent **Krista Langlois** writes from Alaska and Durango, Colorado.

Elizabeth Shogren is HCN's D.C. correspondent.

Kate Siber is a freelance writer and a correspondent for *Outside* magazine based in Durango, Colorado. She has never met a type of skiing she doesn't like, from skate skiing to alpine to telemark.

Marshall Swearingen writes from Bozeman, Montana.

Jonathan Thompson is a senior editor at HCN and runs the trails around his home in Durango, Colorado, recording every mile on Strava.

Sarah Tory is an editorial fellow at HCN and an injury-prone mountain biker. For this story, she broke one rib and sprained her wrist while riding Sedona's famous slickrock.

Editor's note

The trail less traveled

I decided to leave the trail and return by a different route — straight down a talus slope, on the cheap aluminum rubber-tipped crutches that I used full-time. I was young, and I wanted to avoid the herds of hikers pounding the pulverized granite trail into California's Desolation Wilderness. Besides, I could see my destination, the blue waters of Upper Echo Lake, where I'd left the rowboat a couple of hours ago. How hard could it be?



An hour and only a few hundred feet down later, I realized: really hard. What looked from a distance like a set of natural stairs was actually a hazardous geologic jumble. When the first rock shifted unexpectedly under me, I suddenly envisioned a crushed ankle, a broken crutch. What would I do? There was no one in sight, and only a bag of gorp and half-bottle of water to get me through a cold night outdoors. Going back was impossible, so I improvised, tossing my crutches ahead of me and then scrambling like a monkey over the rocks to retrieve them. In this manner, I slowly inched downward. A few nerve-racking, sweat-soaked hours later, I reached the trees and walked on blessedly soft duff to the lakeshore. At dusk, I reached my friends' cabin, exhausted, chastened — and utterly exhilarated.

That hike was three decades ago, and I can still feel its emotional and physical rush. It's the same feeling that has lured millions of people to the West's vast public wildlands for a century. But the ways we experience that landscape are changing, as this special issue explores. For one, there are simply more of us competing for limited space. So we no longer confine ourselves to the Yosemite and Yellowstone; we've discovered hundreds of new hotspots, such as the national forests outside Sedona, where HCN Fellow Sarah Tory reports on a mountain biking boom that has forced federal land managers and bikers to confront the uncomfortable fact that even quiet recreational pursuits can overrun the land.

And then there is technology. From flying squirrel suits and ever-burlier bikes and four-wheelers, to GoPro cameras and cellphones with apps that monitor every footstep, gadgets accompany us into the most remote places. Too often, we use them to buffer us from a direct encounter with the wild, even as we "share" every second with hordes of unseen strangers. As Senior Editor Jonathan Thompson observes, "We're not just rock climbers, backpackers and trail-runners; we're performers and entertainers."

It can be disturbing, but it's not destiny. In the stories here, people still experience the elemental West, whether it's Krista Langlois swirling down a frigid Alaskan river or Nic Korte confronting his own mortality in the Grand Canyon. For no matter how much fancy gear we carry, or how many people we meet, with just one step off the beaten path, we can enter a new and exhilarating world.

—Paul Larmer, executive director/publisher



Mule deer in decline

In the Piceance Basin of western Colorado, mule deer populations are in decline. In the first of a *High Country News* video series exploring wildlife science, we learn how researchers are capturing and tracking mule deer in hopes of learning how to better conserve their numbers.

DAKIN HENDERSON hcne.ws/netting-deer

7 million

gallons of crude oil spilled nationwide in the past five years

1,000

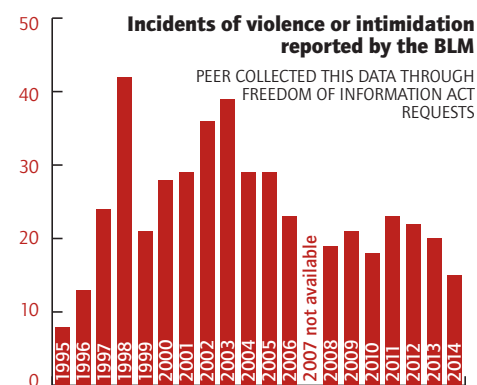
incidents of pipeline leaks and ruptures reported during that time

The May 19 oil spill from Plains All American near Santa Barbara, California, was not an isolated incident. That accident resulted in the spilling of more than 2,400 barrels of oil; tens of thousands of gallons flowed through storm drains into the Pacific Ocean. JONATHAN THOMPSON hcne.ws/map-oilspills

History of violence

Since 1995, the nonprofit watchdog Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility has compiled annual reports of violence or intimidation that involve BLM staffers. Their 2014 report, released in June, included 15 incidents, the lowest number since 1996, but didn't fully account for the Cliven Bundy standoff.

TAY WILES hcne.ws/fed-threats



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Living the dream, plus overtime

Why the outdoor industry opposes a federal minimum wage

BY ELIZABETH SHOGREN

Last summer, Jojo Buss worked as a guide in some of the country's most spectacular places, taking teenagers paddling, hiking and camping. Highlights included kayaking on Yellowstone Lake and whitewater rafting in Teton National Forest. "The way they all bonded, like, blew my mind," Buss says.

The 22-year-old earned only about \$1,800 that summer, despite very long hours under rough conditions. But the experience complemented her college major — youth development and camp management — so this summer, she signed on with the same outfitter, Wilderness Adventures, guiding tours in Alaska's Prince William Sound. "This is exactly what I want to be doing," she says. "It's a selfless job. We're doing it for the kids. Every kid should have the right and ability to get out in the outdoors and have somebody open their world up."

Today, when many workers are demanding a higher minimum wage, this seems counterintuitive. Of course, some guides want higher pay and have even filed class-action lawsuits. But Buss' willingness to re-up despite the low wages helps explain why companies have gotten away with paying people so little for what can be extremely demanding jobs.

Under a new federal rule, following an executive order by the Obama administra-

tion, companies with permits to operate on federal land will have to pay employees at least \$10.10 an hour, plus overtime. (The changes will phase in gradually, as companies get new permits.) The industry sees the increased wage as an existential threat, given the hours that outdoor work requires, and some congressional Republicans, headed by Rep. Chris Stewart of Utah, are seeking an exemption for federal contractors.

Low wages are so accepted in the industry that even college-educated adults like Buss can't imagine being paid as much as Obama's rule would require. Her workweek starts when she picks up campers at the airport and ends when she drops them off. "We'd be getting paid a ridiculous amount of money," she says. "More than I would feel comfortable accepting."

Buss' employer, Mike Cottingham, says he'd have to triple or quadruple wages — something that would either push him out of business after 43 years, or force him to raise fees, putting Wilderness Adventures out of reach of all but the wealthier families. In early June, he went to Washington to testify in favor of Stewart's bill, though the timing could not have been worse; his season was about to start, and his 80 young staffers were arriving for training in Salt Lake City.

Like many outfitters, Cottingham ar-

gues that the new wage requirement clashes with the administration's oft-stated goal of encouraging people, especially children, to enjoy the outdoors. "It's kind of contradictory, to tell you the truth," he says.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell's office declined to comment, but National Park Service spokesman Jeffrey Olson says that though there are challenges getting young people into the parks, "I don't believe this adds to the list."

Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., who chaired the June hearing, notes that the administration promotes tourism as a replacement for the extractive industries that have been "strangled by regulation." "So it's rather ironic that now the executive branch is working to regulate wilderness tourism out of business," Lummis said at the hearing.

But Michael Lazzeri, a Labor Department assistant administrator, believes that the added costs would be offset by benefits, including improved employee morale, reduced turnover and increased productivity. "We're rewarding a hard day's work," Lazzeri says.

Some outdoor industry leaders seem relatively unworried; the National Outdoor Leadership School, for example, plans to continue paying salaries to its hundreds of wilderness "instructors," since bona fide professionals are exempt from the wage

A Wilderness Adventure hike on Shadow Mountain in the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

COURTESY WILDERNESS ADVENTURES/DAVID J. SWIFT

requirement. "Some of them probably do and some probably don't get \$10.10 for every hour," says Linda Lindsey, NOLS' director of human resources and diversity. "We don't guide; we teach." Other employees will be covered by the new rule, including the wilderness horse-packers who transport food to the campers.

Still, many outfitters — especially those who take people hunting, fishing, rafting and climbing in national parks, forests and wildlife refuges — say they'll have to rethink their business models or shut down altogether.

Pat Tabor owns a company that offers horseback rides in Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall National Forest. Even though he's a former accountant, he says, he's avoided calculating the impact the rule will have on his business. "I'm almost afraid to run the math."

Like many outfitters, Tabor pays wranglers a salary for what can be round-the-clock work. "The new wage will make it extraordinarily difficult for us to survive," Tabor says. The most "egregious" part will be paying time-and-a-half for overtime, given that his 40 wranglers work about 72 hours a week, he says. He could hire extra workers to avoid the overtime but has no idea where they'd sleep. Or he could simply reduce his hours of operation. Whatever happens, he'll probably raise the fee for a two-hour ride from \$65 to between \$80 and \$100 — too pricey, he worries, for many families, and perhaps more than the National Park Service will allow him to charge. "It could be that it doesn't pencil out, that it doesn't make practical sense," to stay in business, he says.

The Forest Service recognizes that the extra paperwork — tracking hours, tips and other compensation, such as housing and food — will be difficult for outfitters, most of whom own small businesses. The agency estimates that 90 percent have revenues of less than \$100,000 a year.

Mark Davidson, 29, understands both sides. For seven years, since he graduated from college, he's worked as a ski instructor in the winter and a backcountry guide and teacher in the summer. He's rarely made \$10 an hour, and usually much less, considering all the hours he put in.

"You do it because you're passionate about sharing your interest and what the outdoors has taught you," Davidson says. "It's extremely fulfilling and it's very, very fun." But it's not a living, so this fall, he's returning to college to get a degree in biology.

Davidson's experience reveals a weakness of the New West's economy, which increasingly relies on recreation. Loggers and miners make good money; some even have pensions. Not so rec workers. "If you can't live off of it, what's the point of calling it a career?" Davidson says.

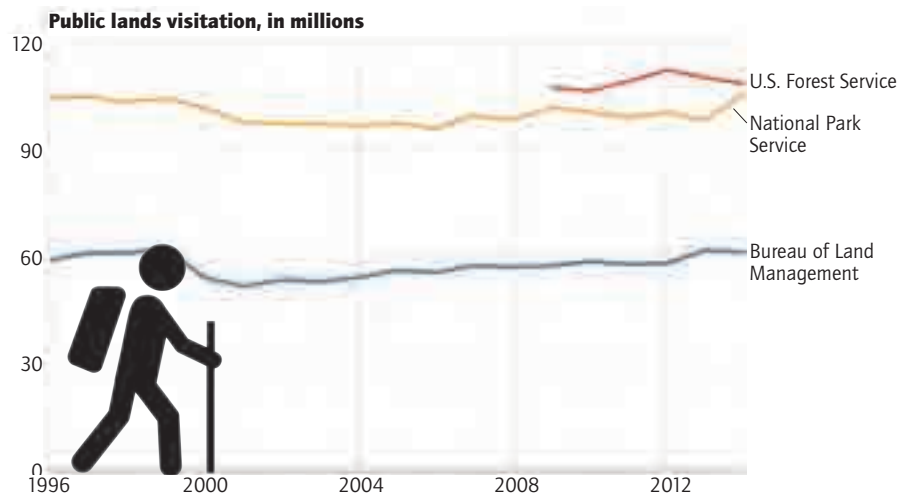
That's why he supports the new wage. "I think it's a great thing. I think it's needed for the industry." After all, the new rule offers something the current system doesn't: It gives people like Davidson a chance to build a future in the field, instead of forcing them to leave work they love. □

The madding crowd

Public-lands visitation and recreation in the West, by the numbers

BY MARSHALL SWEARINGEN

35 million The population of the West in 1970
72 million in 2010



FOREST SERVICE data is for Western regions. The agency began reliable visitor-use data monitoring in 2009.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE data includes all lands administered by the agency in the Pacific West, Intermountain and Alaska regions, not just national parks.

Where do Western parks fit in the nation's top 50?



Rank	Name	Recreation visitors in 2014
6	Lake Mead NRA	6,942,873
10	Grand Canyon NP	4,756,771
15	San Francisco Maritime NHP	4,256,888
19	Yosemite NP	3,882,642
22	Yellowstone NP	3,513,484
23	Rocky Mountain NP	3,434,751
25	Olympic NP	3,243,872
27	Zion NP	3,189,696
30	Grand Teton NP	2,791,392
35	Point Reyes NS	2,433,944
36	Glen Canyon NRA	2,368,452
37	Glacier NP	2,338,528
41	Mount Rushmore NM	2,144,808
49	Joshua Tree NP	1,589,904

5
Percent of total non-skiing visits to Western national forests from 2010-2013 that were to **designated wilderness** areas.

86
Percent of trips to national forests that were for **recreation** during 2008-2012.

43
Percent increase in participation in **backpacking** nationwide since 2006.

-20
Percent decrease in non-RV, non-backcountry **camping** nationwide since 2006.

-14
Percent decrease in **RV camping** nationwide since 2006.
SOURCES: U.S. FOREST SERVICE, OUTDOOR FOUNDATION

The Cheryl Strayed phenomenon

1,879 **2,655**

Number of permits for long-distance hiking (500+ miles) on Pacific Crest Trail in 2013.

Number in 2014, probably due in large part to Strayed's popular memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* — which describes her experience hiking the trail as a troubled young woman — and its 2014 film adaptation.

SOURCE: PACIFIC CREST TRAIL ASSOCIATION

1 in 25

Chances of getting a permit from the Forest Service to float the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho in 2010.

1 in 28

Chances in 2015.

SOURCE: SALMON-CHALLIS NATIONAL FOREST

Sasquatch Meadows, on the 600-acre Clear Creek Ranch in Northern California, sports its own swimming hole, below, and private waterfall. It was the first private-land campsite listed on the Hipcamp site. COURTESY HIPCAMP.COM/DANI NOMURA



Can I camp on your land?

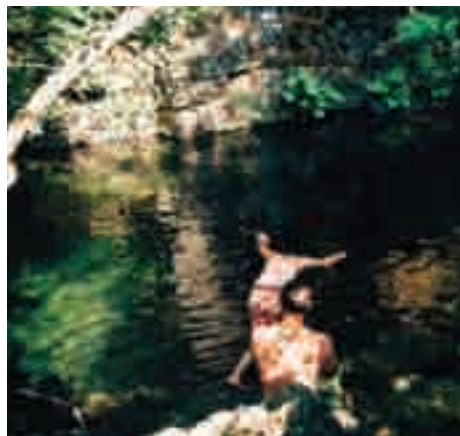
Private-land camping startups offer an alternative to crowded public lands

BY SARAH GILMAN

On a sticky June evening, I pull onto the narrow shoulder of U.S. 30, 12 miles northwest of Portland, Oregon. Cars speed past my little Tacoma camper as I stroll down a short hill singed yellow by the heat wave. Nearly hidden from view behind rambunctious apple trees is Carey Haider's two-story Quonset hut. Blackberry brambles creep along its edges, growing into a high thicket on the other side of the railroad tracks that run less than 20 paces from his back door. Beyond a towering power line, more mushroom clouds of greenery explode along the banks of the Multnomah Channel, blocking it from view.

Haider, who sports a beard and suspenders, leads me past an overturned toilet to piles of sledgehammered sheetrock and siding. There, he points out a flat spot where I can park and lay my head for the night. "It looks like a meth house right now," apologizes the 31-year-old graphic designer and photographer. He bought the property in December and is in the midst of overhauling it. "Whatever," I tell him. "It beats KOA."

I mean it, too, even though Haider's planned noise-blocking fence, camp trailers and wood-fired hot tub aren't yet in place. Finding a private, pleasant spot to sleep outdoors, especially near a city, can be tough. Try a pullout or parking lot, and you'll often find a police flashlight in your face at 2 a.m.



And state and national park and forest campgrounds overflow with generator-grinding RVs. Haider has signed up with a new Portland-based startup called Land Apart to provide campers with another way: Access to private land via an online service.

"We wanted to improve the camping experience" — especially for folks who aren't sure where to start, says CEO and cofounder Ven Gist. "A lot of them look on public lands, which are awesome, but also overused. And a lot of times, they don't go, because they think sites are unavailable or will be too crowded." Meanwhile, he says, the potential supply of private land is enormous, and campsites and event spaces can provide landowners with extra income and

incentive to keep it undeveloped.

Like Haider's place, LandApart is under construction. The company, which is ironing out details with invite-only guests and 20 to 30 mostly Northwest-based hosts, aims to offer everything from backyards to ranches, and to open its website for general use by fall. Only a handful of sites offer similar services. Venture capital-funded San Francisco startup Hipcamp, already a clearinghouse for public-land camping info, launched its own private-land sharing initiative this summer. According to founder Alyssa Ravasio, the company is working with 50 to 60 hosts and had 56 California sites bookable at press time, with 50 more in the pipeline. And foreign-based Campr and Gamping (think garden camping) can set you up with landowners around the world, though Western U.S. offerings are sparse.

Generally, landowners set their own rules and prices, and the company facilitating the transaction takes a cut. LandApart sites, geared more toward primitive camping, now range from \$5 to \$60; Hipcamp's are pricier, from \$30 to \$300 for a group geodesic dome.

Nathanael Siemens anticipates being in the middle of Hipcamp's range. The drought hastened the sale of his family's almond orchard, and he's hoping the ocean-view group campsite he's listing will help support the new farm he's running on 120 acres outside Lompoc, California, where he and his wife grow and mill



What's crowded? Not necessarily the backcountry.

grain. With courses in cheese making and friends staying to help out, "it's become a learning farm," Siemens says. "I hope people come because they want to hang out with animals or learn to milk, instead of busting out coolers and beers and using our property as a launch pad."

That vision fits well with private-land camping's sharing-economy business model, which targets urban Millennials more interested in unique experiences than owning lots of stuff. But companies are thinking bigger, too. "We want to move more landowners into a protected space," says Ravasio — and eventually blur the line between public and private land to support recreation *and* preserve wilderness corridors. Campsites could financially bolster open space and even conservation easements — wherein landowners exchange development rights for tax benefits — and provide taxpayers more access to what they've paid for.

It's too early to tell if that will pan out, says Darla Guenzler, executive director of the California Council of Land Trusts. Still, "if people have more ways to enjoy and connect with the outdoors, their appreciation will grow. There are a lot of ways to protect lands other than having big iconic parks."

But building and sustaining a large inventory of campsites may prove difficult if financial rewards aren't high enough — especially since hosts would be liable for accidents and commercial insurance can be expensive. The first wave may be mostly larger landholders who have policies for existing operations, says LandApart's Hosted Lands Manager Dallas Hemphill, who is listing sites on his family's 500-plus-acre cattle ranch near Philomath, Oregon.

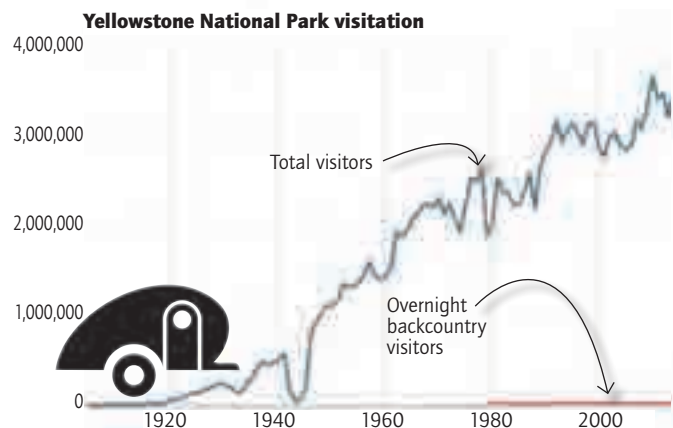
Haider is essentially offering his backyard, but it's zoned commercial/residential, so he has commercial insurance. And though the income will be nice, he's more excited about offering people a cheap but interesting haven off the beaten path. "That's kind of how I travel, too," he says. "It all just comes back to a good story."

After Haider leaves, I wonder what story I'll tell about this place. It won't include the trains that Haider says roll through slow as ghosts, because when I walk the tracks in the failing light, none come. And it won't involve being murdered by bloodthirsty hobos, because the human-like silhouettes I spot in the distance never move. If I didn't have to work tomorrow, I could visit the clothing-optional beach on neighboring Sauvie Island. Or jog in Forest Park, a public preserve just to the south. I lie in my sleeping bag and stare toward the Multnomah. The highway traffic trickles to silence and the forest creaks with frogs. As I drift off, I hear what I imagine to be the channel itself, whispering on its way into the arms of the Columbia. □

46,000

Number of visits in 2013 to wilderness areas within Bridger-Teton National Forest, adjacent to Yellowstone National Park (out of 1,623,000 total visits to the Forest)

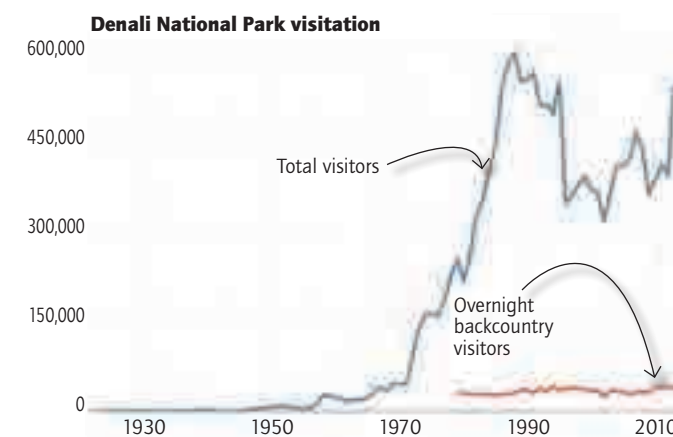
SOURCE: FOREST SERVICE



1,204

Number of summit attempts on Denali in 2014.

SOURCE: DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE



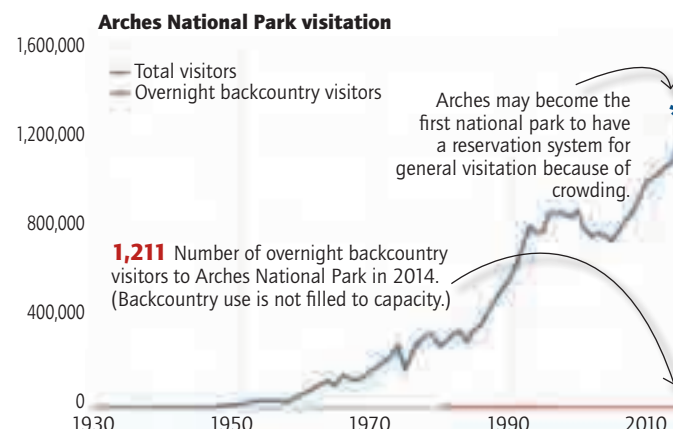
42

Percent increase in Memorial Day Weekend traffic on Highway 191 near Arches National Park between 2012 and 2015, likely caused in part by Utah's "Mighty 5" (national parks) marketing campaign. On the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend in 2015, traffic backed up so far near the turnoff to Arches the Utah Highway Patrol shut down and cleared the intersection for two hours.

WEB EXTRA
For more on congestion at Arches, go to hcn.ws/archescrowds



Vehicles line the road at the Devils Garden trailhead in Arches National Park. MARK HEDLUND



Some hotspots get all the attention

Case study: Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness and adjacent Scenic Area
Aspen, Colorado

With seven stunning fourteeners and trails climbing through passes full of wildflowers — all within a four-hour drive of Colorado's bustling Front Range — the area is a magnet for people.

123,128

Number of people who rode the Maroon Bells Scenic Area's fleet of five shuttle buses in 2014. The road is closed to other traffic from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day during high season.

189

Percent increase in overnight visitation in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness since 2006. (2006: 4,020; 2014: 11,615).

1,500

Number of complimentary "WAG bags" — specialized zip-lock bags, which hikers can use to pack out their scat — distributed at the trailhead to Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness's Conundrum Hot Springs, to reduce human waste around the popular overnight destination. Cost to Forest Service: \$2,250.

11

Number of backcountry campsites in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness closed last August due to problems with habituated black bears.

21

Number of rescues in 2014 involving ATVs or helicopters in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness.

SOURCE: WHITE RIVER NATIONAL FOREST



Misadventures in packrafting

A more expensive way for less experienced people to access rivers

BY KRISTA LANGLOIS

I'm not going to die. Or so I tell myself. I'm huddled on a rock ledge in the Alaskan bush, crumbly cliff above, whitewater below; I can't see my friends and I don't have bear spray or even a granola bar. And now, Lord help me, it's raining.

This is my introduction to packrafting, a sport that takes its name from durable boats small enough to fit into a backpack yet capable of navigating class V whitewater. In Alaska, where packrafting evolved, an adventurer with a two-pound raft and a break-down paddle can hike, bike or ski deep into a river's remote headwaters, then inflate her boat and paddle back to civilization. But

as rivers become increasingly crowded and permits more elusive, packrafting's popularity has expanded beyond Alaska's backcountry.

It's hard to gauge just how much the sport has grown; pioneering manufacturer Alpacka Raft won't release official numbers. But founder Sheri Tingey says that in 15 years, the company has grown from a single employee to 15. Meanwhile, the overall number of packraft manufacturers has jumped from one to nine. The National Outdoor Leadership School offers packraft-specific courses, and tourism companies rent packrafts to basically anyone.

Packrafts are easier to paddle than hardshell kayaks, and inherently cooler than bulky, old-fashioned inflatables. They "are to kayakers what snowboarding was to skiers two decades ago," says Brad Meiklejohn, president of the American Packrafting Association, which formed in 2009 and now has 1,900 members in 40 countries. At \$1,500 or so for a setup, though, they've also become a more expensive way for inexperienced people to get on the water. "Packrafts make it easy to get into trouble," Meiklejohn says frankly. "They're an idiot-friendly craft."

I'm an OK whitewater kayaker, so when my friends Jule and Steve invite me to try packrafting near Anchorage, I assume I'll swiftly master the more forgiving sport. I'm disappointed when I learn we won't be tackling some remote river we'd have to hike miles to reach, but figure that since I'm here to cover the sport's growing popularity in the Lower 48, paddling a road-access river in Alaska makes sense. Plus, how much trouble can I get into with a highway nearby?

On a sunny June morning, we load up Jule's Subaru and head into the vast boreal forest that rolls out beyond the city. I squeeze into my dry suit as suavely as one can squeeze their head through a rubber gasket, which is to say I appear as though I'm being birthed by a rhinoceros. Before long, we're paddling down class II rapids in brilliant sunshine. The

float ends without incident. We high-five. Then Jule asks if we feel confident enough to run the upper section of the creek, which is class III-plus. Gamely (stupidly, one might even say), we agree.

This time, as we push through the forest to the river, the roar of the whitewater is deeper. We climb into our boats, snap our spray skirts into place and bounce through a rocky, foaming drop, off boulders that could have easily tipped a hard-shell boat. "This is fun!" I holler.

We drop through a few more rapids. Clouds build overhead. Then I paddle into a hole and find myself upside down, popped out of my packraft and swimming. There's an eddy of calm water on the right; I swim for it, gulping air and water in equal measure. Distantly, I hear Jule yelling for me to swim left.

In the eddy, heart pounding, I stand up and realize why: I'm cliffed out. If I want to get downstream to where Jule (I hope) has rescued my boat, I'll have to cross the river. So I jump back in the frigid water, aim for an eddy on the opposite shore — and am immediately swept downstream. Just before I'm pulled into another ugly drop, I manage to haul myself onto a dinner table-sized ledge, where I sit for an unknown period of time contemplating the increasingly rain-sodden abyss of my own mortality.

Then Steve's head appears through the tangle of green bushes above. "Jule thinks you should swim," he says. "She's waiting for you below."

I eye the rapid. I envision myself hurtling down it with the force of 600 basketballs a second, ping-ponging off rocks. I envision myself *not* making the tiny eddy that Steve claims is down there. I vigorously shake my head.

So while Steve dashes off to get a rope, I MacGyver a climbing harness out of my PFD and a carabiner. When he returns, I tie in, take a breath, and toe onto a microscopic foothold. Then in what feels like the bravest act of my life, I swing out into the void, suspended for a split second over the whitewater. Steve grabs my hand and yanks me up into the bush.

"YOU'RE THE STRONGEST MAN IN THE WORLD!" I scream.

Afterward, drinking a beer at the take-out, I wonder if Meiklejohn was thinking of me when he called packrafts "idiot-friendly." But he'd also said that, despite their hardcore reputation, packrafts today are just as often used for casual floats in front-country lakes — something you can keep in your car and inflate whenever you feel like getting on the water. Next time, I'll stick with that. □



The author, ready for her big float.
COURTESY KRISTA LANGLOIS





Resting along the White Rim Road. SARAH TORY

Where there's a wheel, there's a way

Bikepacking can get you beyond the Western sightseeing hit list

BY SARAH TORY

One weekend in May, I bump down the swooping turns of a jeep track in Utah's Canyonlands National Park. My friend Cecilia and I are embarking on a three-day bike trip along the White Rim Road, which skirts the chiseled contours of the Colorado and Green rivers at the southern edge of the park's Island in the Sky district. Cecilia and I met in college and have since made many poor decisions for adventure's sake; tackling 100 miles of blazing-hot desert promises to be no different.

Aside from one spot two days in, where the road descends from the rims to touch the muddy Green River, for example, there is no water. This means you must carry nearly all you need — and fight the urge to guzzle it prematurely as the dry air sucks moisture from your body.

A friend had insisted we cache water along the route or enlist a support car — “so you can drink beers in your camping chairs at the end of the day.” (The Park Service “highly recommends” the same, for soberer reasons.)

“No way,” I replied. I wanted to carry everything in my bike's three small bags, following in the tracks of cyclists going back to the early 1900s. But where they mostly rode pavement on skinny tires, we journey over more rugged ground: The White Rim Road is high-clearance and so remote that a tow can cost drivers more than \$1,000. This makes it perfect for bikepacking — a cross between classic bike touring and backpacking that opens up vast networks of underused national forest roads, ATV tracks and singletrack, often far from more conventional destinations.

Bikepacking was popularized in the early 2000s by mountain bike racers, who pedaled hundreds of miles over many days with little gear. By 2010, non-racers had picked up the minimalist ethic, and manufacturers began designing bags that were lighter and less cumbersome

than traditional rack-and-pannier setups. New routes were pioneered and competitions created, including the unofficial 750-mile Arizona Trail Race and the 2,700-mile Tour Divide Race along the Continental Divide from Canada to New Mexico. In 2004, the Tour Divide's first year, less than 20 people entered. This year, there were 150.

Bikepacking's appeal is obvious to Cecilia and me. You can ride much farther than you can walk over the same timeframe, without heavy backpacks. And you see places in unexpected ways: The routes are often hybrids, linking singletrack with dirt roads and occasional stretches of pavement. Sometimes you have to drag your bike under a fence. The goal: Find those in-between places lying halfway between wilderness and civilization.

We pedal beneath crumbling red-rock towers, and stare into canyons that tumble away in sudden, stomach-turning drops, as if an angry god scooped out great chunks of earth. Spring moisture has carpeted rocky ledges with green; cactus flowers splash pink in a sea of reddish brown.

And we are alone, mostly; the park's permit system strictly limits backcountry campers. A few jeeps loaded with uncomfortable-looking passengers rattle by. There are some bikers, too, though all are on van-supported guided tours. “Need any water?” one driver asks, slightly incredulous when we shake our heads no.

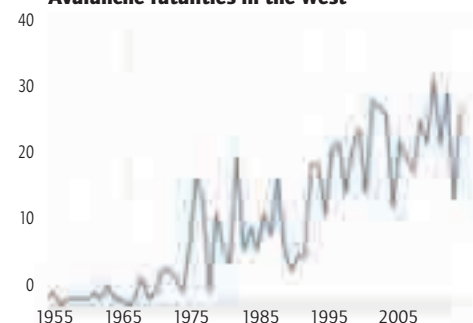
Luckily, recent storms left pools of water in the rocks where we spend our first night. Otherwise, our 15 liters might not have lasted. Unluckily, dark clouds roll in the next afternoon, bringing thunder, lightning, and more rain. “I guess we should have brought the tent,” says Cecilia; to save weight, I had left it behind. But just before the storm hits, we find a rock ledge to sleep beneath, sheltered from the rain. And what if we weren't so lucky? Well, I remind Ceci, at least we could get out of here faster on bikes than on foot. □



New rec has new impacts

- 15%** Decline in number of skiers and snowboarders using marked trails in ski resorts between the winters of 2008-2009 and 2013-2014.
- 49%** Increase in number of skiers and snowboarders visiting backcountry terrain (including terrain accessed from ski areas) over that same period.
- 144%** Increase in registered snowmobiles in Western states except New Mexico (1990: 110,829, 2015: 270,770).

Avalanche fatalities in the West



Fatalities in Western states, including Alaska, associated with backcountry touring, sidecountry skiing, climbing and snowmobiling.



- 3.6 million** Estimated number of four-wheeled ATVs in use nationwide in 1999.
- 10.2 million** Number in 2008. (183% increase)
- 130,000** Number of visitors to BLM's Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area in southeastern California on Thanksgiving weekend in 2014. The majority were there to ride ATVs in a 127,000-acre motorized use area.

SOURCES: SNOWSPORTS INDUSTRIES AMERICA, INTERNATIONAL SNOWMOBILE MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION, COLORADO AVALANCHE INFORMATION CENTER, GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, BLM.

An extreme pursuit

*Recent deaths
renew calls to
rescind
a national
park BASE
jumping ban*

BY CALLY CARSWELL

In October 1999, five people climbed El Capitan in Yosemite National Park to commit an act of civil disobedience: parachuting off the 3,000-foot-high granite cliff. They knew that park officials would dole out notices to appear in court afterward, fine them \$2,000, and confiscate their gear, because BASE jumping, or parachuting from stationary objects, is illegal in national parks. A 1965 law that predates the sport forbids “aerial delivery” of people or goods into parks.

The jumpers were protesting that law, which was unjustified, they said, and had contributed to the recent death of Frank Gambalie, who drowned fleeing rangers after a jump. Media, park officials, supporters and tourists gathered in a meadow to watch. “Jump to freedom!” someone hollered, while another howled, “Down with the Park Service!”

Jan Davis jumped fourth. She wore a black-and-white-striped jumpsuit, and anticipating confiscation, a borrowed parachute on her back. Ten seconds in, when her parachute still hadn’t released, a man filming from El Capitan tensed up. “Pull, woman,” he begged. “Dude, she’s got problems, man,” he said after a few more seconds passed. Then, he gasped: “Oh, my God.” Davis hit the base of the cliff, dying on impact.

“It was a horrible thing,” says Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman. The park’s willingness to consider legalizing BASE jumping ended that day.

Two high-profile deaths in Yosemite this May, however, provoked new calls from jumpers to end a ban that they consider discriminatory and an indirect cause of fatalities. “This is public land, these users are not impacting the resource, and they have every right to be there,” says Steph Davis, a Moab-based professional rock climber and BASE jumper.

In the U.S., BASE enthusiasts say that many of the best and safest features to leap from — very tall cliffs — are in national parks. The height and verticality of Yosemite’s sheer walls and the broad valley below make it, in particular, a jumper’s dreamscape. By comparison, the cliffs on Bureau of Land Management land near Moab, where jumping is legal, are much lower — and thus, more perilous — with sketchier landings.

“To a U.S. mountain flier,” explains Zak Tessier, a wingsuit pilot, an advanced form of BASE jumping, “the question would be, which would you rather put more at risk: Your life on a 20-second BLM flight, or

your freedom and wings on an exponentially safer one-and-a-half-minute national park flight?”

Dean Potter and Graham Hunt took the latter risk on May 16, when they launched off Yosemite’s Taft Point after 7 p.m. They wore wingsuits, with fabric between the legs and under the arms that allows humans to soar like flying squirrels, sometimes within feet of trees and rock. Both men perished when they failed to clear a shadowy notch on a nearby ridge.

Their deaths renewed outrage over the law. Avoiding “ranger danger” is always a major concern, says Tessier. “We feel a real need to be like ghosts,” and jumping in fading light is a common, but risky, strategy. “There’s a thing called the ‘doom factor,’ which is shadows,” explains Rick Harrison, a longtime BASE jumper. “As the sun sets, shadows move over the land very

rapidly. It can really play tricks on you.”

Harrison says the sport’s illegality has been a factor in “almost every fatality” he knows of in parks. “It causes jumpers to jump in low light, using old or used gear. It causes them to rush, instead of focus.” Davis believes the law played a part in the death of Sean Leary, a close friend, in an after-dusk jump in Zion last year.

But the jumpers’ own rule-breaking record is one of the reasons the ban persists. In 1980, soon after skydiver and BASE pioneer Carl Boenish filmed some of the earliest jumps from El Capitan, Yosemite officials agreed to a trial period, issuing up to 12 daily permits, similar to how they regulate hang gliding, which is legal one day per week from Glacier Point. When all the permits were claimed, however, some jumped without them, and a group known as the “flatbed 10” drove a truck up El Cap-





itan to avoid the hike. “The hang-gliding community has always been very compliant with the regulations,” says Gediman, “whereas the BASE jumpers have not.”

Gediman adds that jumping created a “circus-like atmosphere,” and Park Service policies specify that activities must not interfere with “the atmosphere of peace and tranquility.” Crowds gathered to watch during the trial period, and on its last day, Boenish and others jumped from a pogo stick, skateboard and stilts. “There were just too many free spirits, and we had to shut them down,” Bill Wendt, then chief ranger, says in *Sunshine Superman*, a new documentary about Boenish.

Jumpers today argue that BASE is a Leave No Trace sport, with as little environmental impact as hiking. Plus, says Davis, “(Yosemite) has an ice cream stand and a skating rink.” The idea that jump-

ers would taint the “natural” atmosphere of the RV-clogged park is, she says, “a little ridiculous.”

Ultimately, though, a proposed activity must not only do no harm, it must enhance a park’s “purpose,” “values” and “visitor experience,” subjective criteria that can make decisions seem somewhat random. Along with hang gliding, for instance, Yosemite allows highlining, a sport that Potter pioneered, where people walk a thin piece of webbing rigged across canyons or other chasms. Mountain biking is allowed in portions of some parks, but not most, and kayaking is illegal in parts of Yellowstone and Grand Teton.

A 2006 policy revision allowed individual parks to permit jumping at their discretion, but it’s still authorized at only one in West Virginia, only one day annually. Cindy Purcell, chief ranger at Zion,

says her park hasn’t formally considered legalized jumping. But if they did, they’d consider whether landings might impact sensitive plants or animals, what sort of demands might fall to search and rescue, and whether the activities of the few would impact the experience of the many. “We always have to ask that question: How does it relate to the purpose of the park?” she explains. “Is the spectacle in Zion the geology, or is the spectacle watching somebody fly from the cliffs?”

The BLM, on the other hand, takes a “come one, come all” approach. Beth Ransel, head of the Moab field office, says that BASE jumpers are light on the land and seldom provoke conflict with other user groups. There’s plenty of space, and their numbers remain small. “Thank God for the BLM,” says Davis. “It’s nice to have places where we’re just normal people.” □

Dean Potter BASE jumping in Yosemite National Park in 2007. DREW KELLY

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THE CROWN OF THE CONTINENT: THE WILDEST ROCKIES

Steven Gnam
193 pages, softcover: \$29.95
Mountaineers Books, 2014

The only place in North America where no plant or animal, including the grizzly bear, has gone extinct in the last century is a corridor of remote Rocky Mountain wilderness stretching from Montana into southern Canada. Photographer Steven Gnam has been exploring this region since he was a child. Those early forays — often carried out solo and inadequately prepared — inspired his first book, *The Crown of the Continent*. His goal, he writes, is to “take people into the far reaches of the Crown, up into the mountains, down under the clear waters, deep into its forests. I also wanted to share the views you could see on foot, the views you see with a little sweat and persistence.” The book features 150 full-color photos along with three essays exploring the region’s biodiversity and describing recent conservation efforts. Gnam’s photographs will be on display this October at the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana.



Catch-and-release fishing on the North Fork Flathead River, far left. Gnam en route for a weeklong trip to photograph wildlife and landscapes in midwinter, left.

STEVEN GNAM

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Spring board meeting, and profanity

In early June, just as Colorado’s miraculous May showers evaporated into dry summer heat, *High Country News’* board of directors convened in Paonia. After updates on editorial work, circulation and fundraising, the board spent Saturday working with staff on a new strategic plan. We discussed both internal trends — the continued strength of the print magazine and the rise in online readership — and external ones, such as the boom in online media startups and the struggle to find financial support beyond advertising. (*HCN* itself increasingly relies on philanthropic dollars.) Overall, we’re doing well: Our paid subscription base continues to grow — more than 7 percent over the past year — and we maintain a balanced mix of revenue sources. But board and staff agree that *HCN* needs to be more widely read and have a louder voice in national issues, including climate change, energy development and water. That, however, requires more dexterity in the digital realm, and — as always — more money.

We said a sad “so long” to board members **Wendy Pabich** of Hailey, Idaho, **Sean Benton** of Missoula, Montana, and **Lou Patterson** of Longmont, Colorado, thanking them for their service and dedication to *HCN*. And many thanks to two local businesses — **Ollie’s Ice Cream Shop** and **Revolution Brewing** — for donating ice cream and root beer to the ice cream social that followed “Tug of War,” our panel discussion on local control of federal land.

**PROFANITY POLICY**

It’s obviously been too long since our mothers threatened to wash our mouths out with soap, which explains why, as some readers have noted, a few recent stories have had a few too many four-letter words. We have since clarified our policy on profanity, and will include such words, in direct quotes, only when they are essential to a story’s meaning — as in last October’s “Defuse the West,” for example, where we quoted angry threats directed at federal employees.

CORRECTIONS

In our cover story, “Dust to Dust” (6/22/15), we inadvertently relocated Molycorp’s Mountain Pass Mine; it’s between Baker and the Nevada border rather than Baker and Barstow, California. The subtitle of *Spare Parts*, reviewed in the same issue, should have read *Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream*. In our profile of John Podesta, “Monument Man” (5/25/15), a photo caption misidentified the Washington Monument as the “National Monument.” No snub intended, George.

“It sounds like an Easterner has infiltrated your ranks,” alert reader **Jean-Pierre Cavigelli** wrote recently, responding to a May 25 *Heard* around the West item about goldfish and pelicans in Boulder, which claimed pelicans are “usually found at the seashore.” White pelicans live and breed in the Interior West, Cavigelli wrote, adding, “Who started this myth that pelicans live near the coast, and why oh why is *HCN* perpetuating it?”

Like the saying goes, “A little bird told us”; we just should have paid more attention to its T-shirt, which read “Greetings From Key West.”

—Cally Carswell,
for the staff

Circulation Associate
Kati Johnson and
Finance Manager
Beckie Avera dish out
treats at *HCN’s* ice
cream social.

BROOKE WARREN

End of the Trail Wars

On a rainy August day in 2012, Jeff Harris entered the scrubby Coconino National Forest near Sedona, Arizona. He carried loppers and pocket saws, but left behind his usual warning system — his dog, Mesa, who'd bark if anyone came near him.

Harris, a well-muscled 38-year-old with a thick Texas twang, was one of Sedona's most notorious mountain bike trail-builders. He had crafted many masterpieces — G-Spot, Bootylicious, Skidmark, Wall Ride, Wash Up, Lovey Dovey, Sloppy Biscuits — trails that total only about six miles, but weave through incredibly rugged country. Most of them are “very black diamond,” the landscaper and part-time professional biker, says proudly.

With a small cadre of two-wheeling diehards, Harris helped transform the quiet New Age mecca of Sedona into singletrack heaven, with over 200 miles of trails winding past towering red rocks and over slickrock in the piñon-and-juniper-covered high desert. There was just one problem: Most of his trails were illegal.

Though Harris had previously promised to stop building trails, he had recently moved to a different part of town and couldn't resist starting what he told himself was his final project: clearing 500 yards of juniper and shrubs to connect two of his favorite trails to a prominent hole in the rock called the Keyhole Cave.

That evening, two Forest Service law enforcement agents came to his house and questioned him. Did Harris know about any illegal trail building behind his house? No, he replied. Then they broke out the pictures: A series of grainy shots caught by a game camera that showed him lopping off tree branches and tossing them aside. In one, he holds a branch triumphantly overhead while downing a beer.

It was one of those “do-gooder” types, Harris says, speaking

of the person who tipped off the Forest Service after following him on one of his previous outings. “She really thought I was out there doing damage — harming trees and killing stuff.”

Harris considered his ad hoc landscaping a public service that prevented bikers from creating their own haphazard paths, but the Forest Service disagreed: It charged him with illegal trail building and destruction of federal property, slapping him with a \$2,500 fine and a year of restricted access to the Coconino Forest.

The bust was part of a larger effort to get a handle on Sedona's mountain-biking explosion, which over two decades has mushroomed from a low-key activity done by a few passionate locals, into a major sport attracting thousands of riders hungry to test their ever-burlier gear on ever-gnarlier terrain. Three years ago, after passively watching the revolution, the agency closed many of the most popular unsanctioned trails and started busting their builders.

The crackdown infuriated many longtime bikers. “I'm proud of what the mountain bikers have created here,” says John Finch, who was recently barred from entering Forest Service land and fined \$5,000 for illegal trail work. Like Harris, Finch spent hundreds of hours building trail, and at one point even created a spreadsheet showing that locals created the majority of the forest's popular trails. Still, he says, “we were considered renegades.”

Recently, however, both bikers and forest officials have begun to wonder: Just how much wear and tear can the forests take? And can bikers peacefully coexist with all the other forest users — motorized and non-motorized?

These questions are being asked on heavily used public lands across the West, but what's happening in Sedona hints at an uncomfortable possibility: Maybe there's just not enough room out here for everyone to do their own thing. Not anymore.

As a decades-long battle between a tribe of local mountain bikers and the Forest Service dies down, Sedona faces the end of its free-wheeling era

FEATURE BY SARAH TORY

JONATHAN "RAMAJON" COGAN moved to Sedona in 1987 from Cleveland Heights, Ohio, drawn to its crystals and natural foods. He soon grew disillusioned with the new-agey kitsch, but found a new spiritual path: Surrounded by wild forests and desert, and blessed with almost-perfect weather year-round, Sedona, he believed, was a mountain-biker's paradise. "It still felt like the Wild West," he remembers, and Cogan, who goes by Rama, wanted to be a modern cowboy.

The Forest Service managed most of that wildland in Sedona's backyard — some 550,000 acres, 18 percent of it federally protected wilderness that was off-limits to bikes. Still, there seemed to be plenty of room for a biking entrepreneur, and Rama asked the agency for a permit to lead commercial mountain biking tours. But he was rejected, he says, primarily due to the straight-laced agency's reluctance to accommodate long-haired rebels like himself.

Undeterred, Rama started a bike shop devoted exclusively to mountain biking. Mountain Bike Heaven became the unofficial center of Sedona's biking culture, which included then-13-year-old Jeff Harris.

Rama and crew began constructing a network of secret trails. They had no desire to build beyond what the wheels of their bicycles — old-school hardtails with no suspension — could create. "We did not cut a branch or move a rock; we rode everything in," says Rama. Sometimes they followed old cattle paths, but mostly they simply picked a starting point and an end point and wove their way through the shrubbery to get there. The final products were curvy and twisty and full of rocks, and encouraged exploration more than athleticism, says Rama. Riders would often take an hour or two to travel just a couple of miles, stopping to tell stories and smoke pot.

None of this (except the pot) was illegal; Forest Service policy allowed "cross-country travel," meaning you could walk or ride

A photograph of a mountain biker, Jason Firstly, riding a steep, reddish-orange rock face. The biker is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, black shorts, a yellow helmet, and a yellow backpack. The bike is a blue hardtail. The background shows a clear blue sky and distant mountain peaks.

Jason Firstly rides high above Sedona, Arizona, on an exposed rock slab in the Coconino National Forest known as Submarine Rock, a legal trail for mountain bikers.

COLIN MEAGHER



wherever you wanted, so long as you didn't deliberately do anything to alter the landscape.

As the network of unofficial trails grew, though, so did Sedona's reputation in the biking world. By the late 1990s, growing numbers of enthusiasts were descending on the Red Rock District, which abuts the town. New bike shops opened, and, in the years before the recession, Sedona experienced a housing boom. For 15 years, its real estate market was in the top five nationwide, as more and more people, including bikers, bought second homes.

"That was the lifeblood of the town," says Rama. "They'd come in and buy a new house and then come to the bike shop and buy a couple of bikes for their friends; then they'd come back and say, 'I need a couple more.' Literally every week, people would come in like that. It was incredible — phenomenal. And all the construction workers were bikers, too."

Meanwhile, Rama and his crew had become the bad boys of biking. In 1998, during a budget-related government shutdown, Rama and four others tried to ride the Grand Canyon from rim to rim, which was strictly off-limits to bikes. They were arrested at Phantom Ranch and helicoptered out, high on mushrooms. Their exploits earned them the title "the Sedona Five," and in the mountain-biking community, a celebrated place in history.

But the sport was changing. By 2001, there were more than 40 million bikers, and manufacturers began building tougher bikes with forgiving suspensions that allowed riders to test themselves

on harder terrain. Different trails were needed to accommodate the new gear, and a new breed of trail-builders emerged to meet that demand. Using pickaxes and shovels to smooth out paths or build massive jumps, they built new trails that had a bigger impact on the landscape than the pioneer trails. Though several builders, including Jeff Harris, added drainage ditches and special rock placements to prevent erosion, others did not. Some trails careened straight down steep fall-lines or through Native American ruins, which abound around Sedona.

These new trails were illegal, but the Forest Service had limited success in stopping them, says Jennifer Burns, the recreation director for the Red Rock District. The old Coconino forest plan dealt primarily with "traditional uses," she says, mostly grazing and land swaps. It was revised in 1998 to address rising tourism and recreation, but did not consider the rapid growth of trail use. At the time, she says, "the district was focusing on other things." Soon, the agency's laissez-faire approach would be turned on its head.

THE PARKING LOT IS ALMOST FULL when, on a Friday afternoon in late March, I meet Burns at the Yavapai Vista Trailhead, just west of downtown Sedona. Tall and red-haired, wearing turquoise earrings beneath her Forest Service ball cap, Burns has a no-nonsense vibe. She leaves a bright blue expensive-looking mountain bike on the back of her car, as we head onto the trail.

"Most people just want to walk 10



From top left: Jonathan “Ramajon” Cogan, far left, talks with fellow illegal trail-builder John Finch, who is now banned from Forest Service trails, on the streets of Sedona. Forrest Saville points out a trail to a visitor in the Coconino National Forest near Sedona. Below, Jennifer Burns, recreation director for the Red Rock District, with a map of legal forest trails. Facing page, bottom: Lars Romig, president of the Verde Valley Cycling Coalition, has worked with IMBA and the Forest Service to help reduce the number of illegal trails. BROOKE WARREN



minutes, take a picture and leave, so parking just gets crazy,” Burns says, gesturing to the hikers and a few bikers heading into the forest. Over 2 million yearly visitors — more than many national parks receive — arrive on this thin strip of national forest along the highway between Sedona and its smaller offshoot to the west, Oak Creek Village. Today, the road is jammed with cars full of tourists heading into town. “It’s a zoo,” she says.

When Burns started her new job with the Forest Service in 2009, the agency had been fighting a losing battle against the unruly trail system, sending teams out to place rocks, logs and other barriers across the illegal trails causing the most obvious damage. Mountain bikers resented the work, and it quickly turned into a game of cat-and-mouse: As fast as the agency could dismantle a trail, bikers would rebuild it. The local newspaper helped foment the fury when it ran a front-page story on the agency’s destruction of High on the Hog, a prized local trail. “People were at each other’s throats and really disappointed in the Forest Service,” Burns recalls.

Burns believed the agency needed to do more than dismantle the worst trails; it had to start actually providing trails. That meant formally “adopting” some of the illegal trails by doing the necessary archaeological and environmental assessments to make sure they didn’t run through Native American sites or cause erosion. It also meant building some new trails. All of this took money and manpower, though, and with a recreation

budget of just over \$100,000 a year, and a trail crew consisting of one temporary employee and a seasonal crew of two, Burns couldn’t move very fast.

“We are totally budget-strapped,” she says, noting that the regional office simply says, “If you can’t sustain it, don’t build it.”

So Burns turned to the biking community, reaching out to local clubs and to the International Mountain Bike Association, or IMBA, the country’s largest mountain bike advocacy group. Together they organized volunteer trail-work days and an “adopt-a-trail” program in which a rider could take charge of maintaining a particular trail. As part of those efforts, in 2009, the Forest Service announced it would start bringing some of the illegally built trails into its system, including the legendary Hangover — famous for its hold-your-breath-and-pray cliffside traverses. The relationship between Sedona’s mountain bikers and land managers began to improve.

But some thought the agency wasn’t moving fast enough. “I know the bureaucracy,” says Jeff Harris, which “takes forever.” With his own volunteers, Harris could accomplish in a few weeks what would take the Forest Service a whole season — plus, he’d do it for free. Illegal construction continued at a torrid pace: A 2013 Forest Service summary of the activity found brand-new bridges and walls and numerous illegal trails under construction; of the 46 miles of illegal trails it documented, 84 percent were built for mountain bikers. And Burns did not

appreciate the help. “We were blown away by the scale of construction,” she says. “It was just out of control.”

A few months later, in March 2013, the Forest Service clamped down, issuing a two-year order prohibiting mountain bikers from traveling off designated routes in five areas around Sedona. Suddenly, a number of prized trails were illegal, and lawbreakers risked a fine of up to \$5,000 or six months’ jail time.

This drove a wedge into Sedona’s bike community: On one side were those who saw the order — which did not apply to hikers or equestrians — as proof that the Forest Service was biased against mountain bikers. Others were tired of fighting and ready to move on.

The Sedona Mountain Bike Club, many of whose members came from Rama’s old Mountain Bike Heaven crew, fell into the first camp. The club drafted a petition against the closure and posted it on Moveon.org. The Verde Valley Cycling Coalition, on the other hand, was willing to cooperate. The rift widened after IMBA learned of the petition and booted the Sedona Mountain Bike Club from its chapter program — the only time the organization has ever done that.

Patrick Kell, IMBA’s Southwest regional director, declined to discuss the issue, but in a memo that was later posted on a popular mountain-bike forum, he stated that IMBA and some members of the Sedona Mountain Bike Club had “divergent” approaches to mountain-bike advocacy and that IMBA “cannot align with the style of advocacy that some

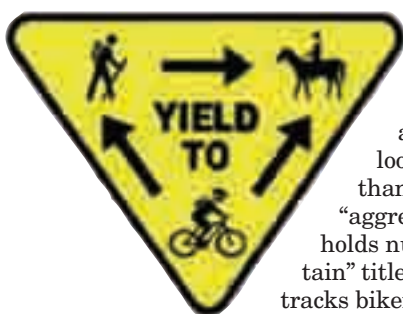
“We were blown away by the scale of construction. It was just out of control.”

—Jennifer Burns, recreation director for the Red Rock District, on the 46 miles of illegal trails documented in a 2013 survey of the Coconino National Forest



Horses and bikes share Bell Rock Pathway in Sedona, Arizona. BROOKE WARREN

A sign found in the Coconino National Forest meant to keep the peace among different user groups.



SMBC Board members are putting forth.”

“(IMBA’s) philosophy is that they need to work with the Forest Service,” Rama says. “As a lobby group, that’s really ass-backwards. Lobby groups are supposed to lobby for what they want on behalf of their constituents.”

But Lars Romig, president of the Verde Valley Cycling Coalition, thinks the Forest Service decision reflected a larger reality. The illegal trail building “wasn’t sustainable,” says Romig, a firefighter and mountain-rescue worker. He’s tanned and fit, and like many locals, looks about a decade younger than his 40 years. He’s also an “aggressive” rider, like Harris, and holds numerous “King of the Mountain” titles on Strava, an app that tracks bikers’ time on various routes. Romig acknowledges that years of illegal trail building have helped bikers. “But at a certain point, you can’t rob banks forever,” he says. “There’s a line in the sand somewhere. Eventually, you get caught, and it’s public land — it’s all of our land.”

Jeff Harris is also tired of fighting. The closure order and his own subsequent bust have changed his outlook. “One,” he says, “the fine sucked. Also, the threat of being caught again, which would mean jail time. I wasn’t down with that. More importantly, though, (the Forest Service) started working with us — and besides, butting heads wasn’t getting us anywhere.”

Now Harris is trying to help raise money to boost the Forest Service’s mea-

ger trail-building budget. Along with a few others, he’s started placing donation boxes at bike shops and hotels around Sedona, an initiative they’ve called the Red Rock Trail Fund. One hotel owner has even started asking guests to pitch in through an additional charge on their room. In one year they’ve raised \$26,000. Burns and her team increasingly rely on such volunteer initiatives to build and maintain trails. “It’s catch as catch can,” she says.

Other money has come from grants to the Verde Valley Cyclists Coalition, which the Forest Service has allowed to upgrade some trails, and last year the city of Sedona chipped in \$110,000 to build a bike-skills park (and a further \$10,000 annually for maintenance). All told, Red Rock County now has 222 miles of mountain-bike trails, and the business community is marketing Sedona as a biking destination, says Jennifer Wesselhof, president of the Sedona Chamber of Commerce. The sport, she adds, has matured: “We felt the mountain bikers and the Forest Service were coming together.”

BEFORE WE LEAVE the parking lot, Burns stops to chat with a couple of mountain bikers just back from a ride. They’re from British Columbia, part of the annual early-spring influx of Canadians. They love it here and wonder when one of the recently closed trails — a favorite — will re-open. Burns assures them that the Forest Service is working on it.

But no one knows Sedona’s carrying capacity, and that troubles Burns. On the slickrock overlook above the Yavapai Vista Trailhead, hikers and bikers flow

over the top. Above us, the *thwack-thwack* of a helicopter punctures the air and far below, pink specks move along the highway — the now-ubiquitous “pink jeep” tours that take tourists on off-road excursions through the desert.

“Everyone wants to have a good trail system,” she says, “but what is sustainable recreation? It’s not just about having more and more of it; we have to make sure it’s compatible with the land.”

Burns hopes the agency will ultimately implement a ban on cross-country travel on all forest land around Sedona. This would put Sedona in line with other recreation-intensive Western meccas, such as, such as Moab, Utah, where bikers have a great trail system but are limited to official routes.

In May, the Forest Service extended the closure order for another two years, effectively banning all cross-country travel for mountain bikers on unauthorized trails. Though some riders — chiefly those involved with the original petition — remain disgruntled, the general reaction has been more subdued. Most of the illegal trail building has stopped, something Burns attributes to the slew of successful convictions against unauthorized trail builders, along with the agency’s progress in building and adopting new trails that offer riders a variety of riding challenges and terrain. And perhaps mountain bikers are beginning to realize that the land itself has limits.

Burns believes the agency’s closure order is in line with its goal of offering citizens a contemplative experience in the wild. On the way back to the parking lot, she tells me that ultimately biking on public lands is “not really about sport.”

That’s a sentiment even Rama might agree with; he admits, on my last ride before leaving town, that “we are loving Sedona to death.” But the rules and regulations designed to protect places from people still raise his hackles. And he worries that Forest Service and BLM closures will continue, despite the recent collaboration.

One afternoon, we head out onto Anaconda, one of the original trails Rama and his crew “rode in” decades ago. He’s wearing aviator sunglasses and a faded Hawaiian shirt, his hair in a long graying braid — looking more like an easy-going aging hippie than a mountain-biking warrior in full-body armor. Instead of a \$5,000 carbon-fiber bike, he still rides an old hardtail. “People say watching me ride is kinda like watching water flow uphill,” he says, as we roll over chunky Sedona dirt through a tangled cactus-studded forest.

“We’re outspoken people,” he says, when I ask why he won’t accept the closure order. “We’re not just going to sit down and say, ‘Yes,’ because we’re not yes men.”

We reach an intersection where a big Forest Service alert sign warns us that the trail is closed except to pedestrian traffic. Rama stops and looks around briefly. “Well,” he says, a mischievous glint in his eyes, “I can’t resist.” □

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

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Land of rock colonies

LOCATION: SOUTHEAST WYOMING

BY MANASSEH FRANKLIN

A friend once said that living in such close proximity to Vedauwoo is like living in a national park. Most days, I quietly disagree. The wind in southeast Wyoming is intolerable at best, crazy-making at worst. The landscape is mostly rolling, mellow, void of high summits and the knife-ridge summits I moved to the West to explore.

But there is something oddly enticing about these rolling high plains, something about the hardness of the wind-scoured lands, particularly in and around Vedauwoo. Here the landscape is punctuated by towering rock colonies that seem to have been deposited at random. Some days, these granite figures do feel like mountains — commanding, humbling, erratic and enticing. But they feel like something more, too — mysterious, operating on their own accord.

This didn't hit me, I didn't get it, until

I took a trail run one day. Now, I can't stay away.

It was spring, warm. Birdcalls filled still air. Green shoots

burst from the edges of a trail that wound among piles of boulders, some as the size of one-story houses, others as tall as city skyscrapers. There were fins of rock, striations extending from the far edges of the trail, rock layers embedded in layers of prairie hill, sagebrush. My legs charged up, my legs braced down. In some spots, aspen groves spilled out between rocks. The white bark popped against the sandy-colored granite. A muted breeze touched my face, bare arms, neighboring sage leaves.

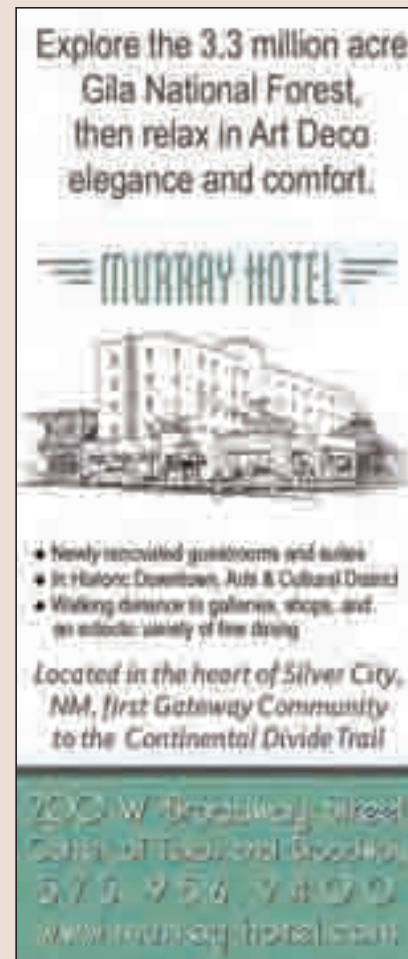
In between hard, fast breaths, I filled my lungs. I filled my eyes. This place is incredible. I laughed. And I ran, and I ran, until my breath — but not the space, never the space — finally came up short. □



Climbers scale granite cracks in Vedauwoo.
COULTER SUNDERMAN/CC FLICKR

Readers' favorite recreation locations

We asked readers to tell us stories about their favorite adventures on the West's public land. Here are some off-the-beaten-path places to recreate.



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The wild unknown

LOCATION: THE WEST

BY AARON ANDERSON

The best place to recreate in the West? It's the unexpected place, the impulsive detour into the unknown.

I once drove the West with a good friend, on a trip that took three weeks. The hours behind the wheel were sometimes intolerable. Every day, we stopped to run, to stretch our legs and keep ourselves sane. (It reduced any sibling-style road-trip bickering.) Armed with only a *Rand McNally Road Atlas*, we would pick a patch of green on the map and hope for a trail.

These unplanned detours were the highlights of our trip. A quick exit off I-80 revealed Turtle Rock jutting out of the Wyoming plains, sunset illuminating the pine-ringed rock. We spent a joyful afternoon on the Skyline-to-Sea Trail, washed in the scent of eucalyptus and golden meadow on the California coast.

A hot night run in the Mojave showered us with meteors, framed by sparkling stars and the craggy silhouettes of Joshua trees.

We spent one night in a roadside ditch in a national forest in Utah, stringing up our "emergency tube tent" just below the road. When the first dump truck roared overhead at 5 in the morning, our groggy annoyance was tempered by a view of golden peaks reflecting the soft sunrise.

This is not to disparage the Big Surs and Grand Canyons of the West — there's a reason people visit those places. (Heck, we certainly did.) Go explore the national parks, the mountains, the canyons, the coastlines! But whenever the opportunity strikes, on a trip or at home, take a moment and detour to someplace unknown. □



Folks bask in the sunset at the Hidden Valley campground in Joshua Tree National Park. ARTHUR/CC FLICKR

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A natural arid beauty

LOCATION: EAST OF WENATCHEE, WASHINGTON

BY CAROLYN HOLTHOFF

Steep canyons and coulees formed from 17 million-year-old basalt surround you as you wander through the sagebrush and bitterroot. This delicate shrub-steppe environment, a patchwork of public lands east of Wenatchee, Washington, has no official name. Just a fragile, vanishing landscape carved during the ice age floods, complete with caves and mesas, trails and endangered plants — beautiful and wild and open to all.

I've hiked those trails, winding along dry streambeds, surprising chukars and partridges and sidestepping rattlers. I've stumbled across old forgotten homesteads, where all that remains are the small, brittle details of a hardscrabble life. I've outrun lightning storms from high atop mesas and inhaled the sage-filled air. You can feel small and alone here, but not lonely.

Few people know about this place; most travelers simply drive past the towering basalt cliffs on their way to somewhere else, in search of a landscape more dramatic or famous or simply more welcoming. They never realize that they are missing something remarkable.

Nameless and fragile, yet alluring and impressive, this area represents our open public lands at their best, offering solitude, adventure and peace of mind. □

Dusty Lake, one of the ancient lakes in a region east of Wenatchee, top. Six separate lava flows are visible in columnar basalt formations, bottom.

PETER PREHN/CC FLICKR



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Frozen silence

LOCATION: GREAT BASIN NATIONAL PARK, NEVADA

BY HOWARD WATTS III

I've found my piece of our public land. "Home means Nevada," as my state song says, and Great Basin is the only national park in this rugged, expansive and downright weird Western state.

The park is just hard enough to reach, at four to five hours' drive from major cities, that you can spend an extended week-end there without seeing crowds of tourists. It gets 100,000 visitors a year, nothing compared to nearby Zion's 3.2 million. A trek across seemingly endless desert valleys and mountain passes, then an easy-to-miss turn at the sleepy gateway town, and suddenly you're in the heart of the mountains. There are pines here that sprouted before the pyramids, sprawling limestone caverns, glassy alpine lakes and the clearest night skies I've ever seen. This little, remote, almost-unknown park has a way of enveloping you.

Once, two companions and I set out along the Baker Creek loop for a quick autumn jaunt. Seeing a sign for Baker Lake at the halfway point, we charged forward on a whim instead of heading back. For the next five miles, we followed the creek on a path of glittering, frosted aspen leaves, flanked by turning trees. As the altitude increased, we trudged through deepening snow, following a lone set of footprints and telling ourselves at every bend that our destination lay just ahead. Finally, we made it to the half-fro-

zen lake and sat silent, tired and content in the pews of the surrounding mountain cathedral. Then we walked back, never seeing another soul. That night, with the creek's babble as our lullaby and the Milky Way our blanket, a satisfied exhaustion gave way to sleep, with the promise of wild turkey gobbles to wake us. □

Great Basin National Park has some of the darkest night skies in the park system.

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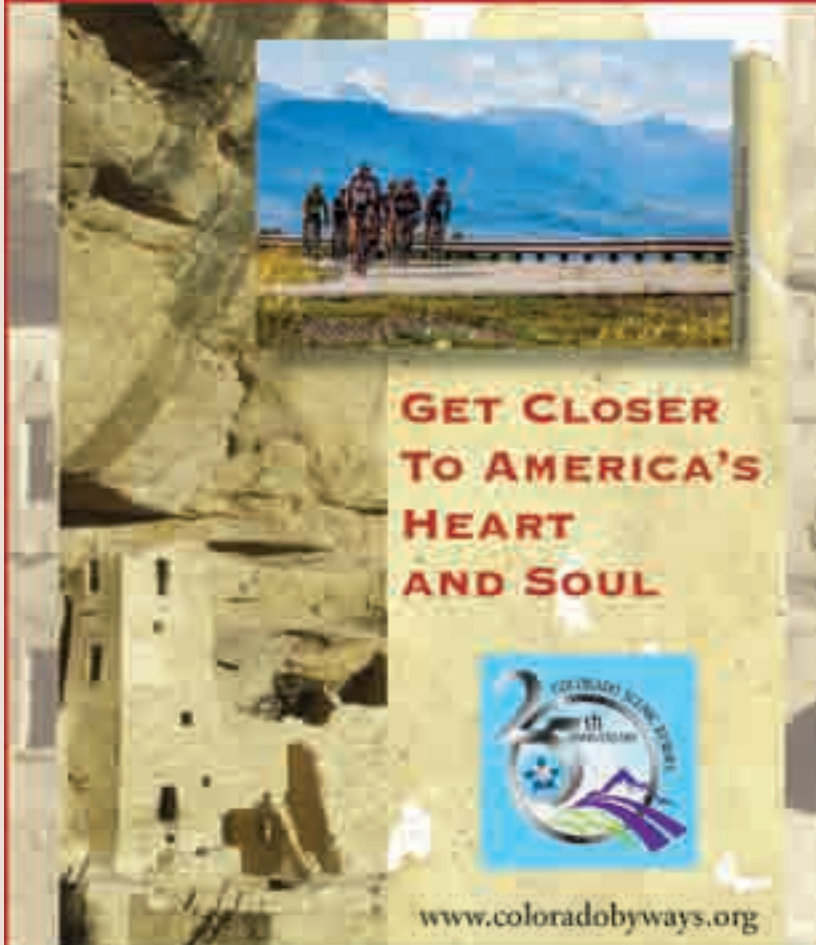
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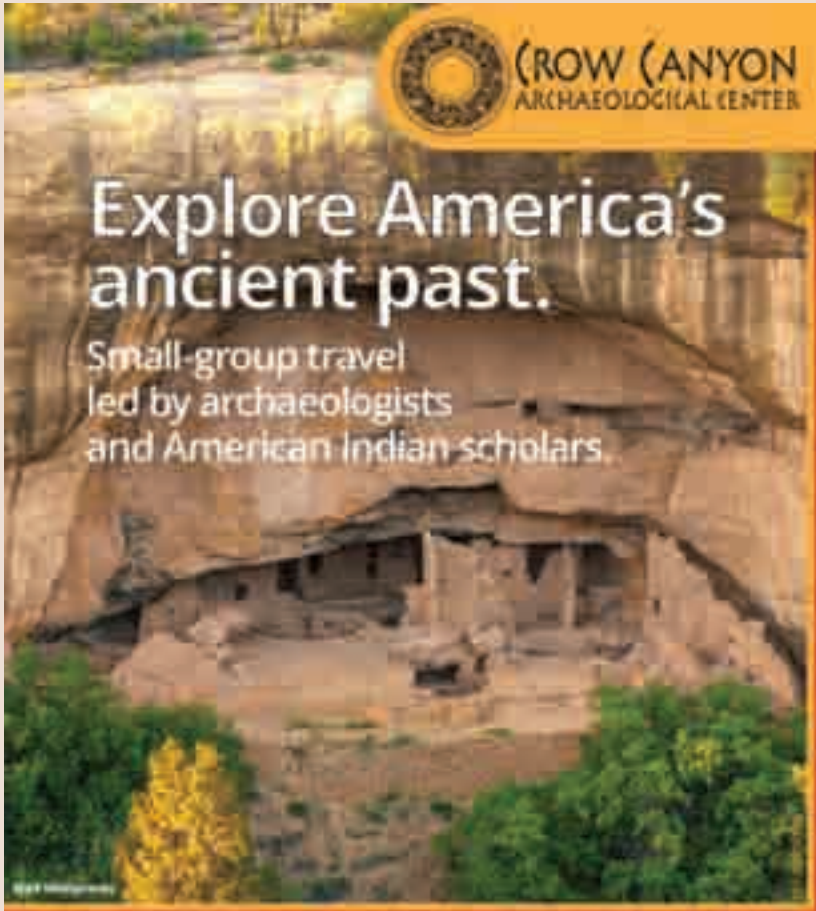
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JOSÉ MANDOJANA

Memories from the gear shed



ESSAY BY
MARY EMERICK

I could put it off no longer. The gear shed had long been an object of contention in my marriage. “You don’t use half this stuff,” my husband observed, more than once. “You need to go through it and make more room.” Defiantly, he rolled his fat-tired bike into the living room and left it there.

He met my gaze. “Why is that bike in here? That bike is in here because there’s no room in the shed! Because the shed is full of your stuff!”

I surrendered. “OK, I’m going in,” I said, and steeled myself for the task ahead.

For decades, I was a gypsy; everything I owned fit in the back of a Chevette. A seasonal park ranger, I followed summer, ranging from Washington to Idaho to California, making a long loop through Florida and New Mexico, fighting fires and leading interpretive talks. More recently, I moved from Oregon to Alaska and back again, stripping down to the basics. I pared down everything —

except for my outdoor gear.

I kept it all because I suspected that it would be hard to let anything go. And I was right. This was like an archaeological dig: I was finding my way down through the layers of the person I used to be.

Each item I added to the to-go pile felt like letting go of a memory. Here were the water-bottle packs from my pre-knee surgery days, when I could still run 26 miles in four hours and change. Sorting through them, I remembered my intrepid running partner, Ken, just outside of Sitka, Alaska, the two of us dodging salmon guts freshly dragged by brown bears onto a fish-hatchery road. I could hear us singing, “*I’ve lost that lo-o-ving fee-ee-ling*,” bellowing soulfully at the top of our lungs to scare away the bears.

That Coleman backpacking stove, the first one I bought with my own money, was a behemoth by today’s standards. The upgrade, the finicky MSR Whisper-

lite, had a bad habit of exploding in a ball of flame in the Idaho backcountry as a result of over-priming. I remembered nights at high lakes camped with long-gone companions encased in down jackets, the darkness giving us the courage to talk about our dreams.

A dozen backpacks lay piled on a shelf. They reminded me of old boyfriends: The good-looking ones that were too good to be true, the ones that worked until the relationship became uncomfortable, the ones that turned out to be unexpectedly fragile. A few of them — the backpacks, not boyfriends — ended up getting chewed by marmots.

In one corner lurked the Xtra Tuf rubber boots and kayak paddle from my Southeast Alaska days: In this land-locked, sun-drenched corner of northeast Oregon, would I ever need them again? Would I ever fix fence again with these leather gloves, feel the full-body shudder of a rock bar hitting immovable earth, or hold one end of a misery whip, slicing through a downed tree that blocked a trail? I had once had the latest in fire-fighting gear: high-heeled logger boots that slid like butter onto my feet, a fancy lumbar pack that hung just right around my hips. Now that was old school; there was newer, better gear.

By the end of the day, I had accumulated a large pile to bring to my town’s gear swap — sleeping bags I’d forgotten I owned, a kayak cart, tents that could house a small family. Piling everything in the truck, I felt both relief and sorrow. Why was it so hard to let go of the past? I had a great life now, no longer subject to the whims of the weather, no longer beaten down by a \$5-an-hour wage and the hefting of a heavy chainsaw in the freezing bitter rain. Those were the times it was easy to forget when reminiscing.

The truth, I knew, was this: It’s hard getting older when you’re still in love with the outdoors. As much as you fight aging tooth and nail, as much as you work to keep up the pace, you will never be 20 again, scrambling fearlessly up a talus slope, knowing everything will turn out all right because it always has so far.

But how many more years, months, days did I have? When would 20-mile days become 15, 10, five, zero? I knew I was luckier than others who had succumbed to random falls, lightning strikes, illness. It was unfair to complain. But I did. I wanted it all — the freedom to follow the seasons, plus the security of steady work, the sense of being footloose yet firmly anchored — a thousand more sunsets and mountains, and a life with no end in sight. □

WEB EXTRA

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Writers on the Range is a syndicated service of High Country News, providing three opinion columns each week to more than 70 newspapers around the West. For more information, contact Betsy Marston, betsym@hcn.org, 970-527-4898.

THE HUMAN FACTOR

We're better than ever at understanding the dangers of avalanches.

So why aren't we better at avoiding them?

"We human beings are not very good at logic. Our brains are hard-wired for social interactions and pattern recognition."

—Bruce Tremper,
director of the Utah
Avalanche Center

ALL MORNING, I'D HEARD THE ROAR of sloughs rocketing down cliffs as I skied up a mountain in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Now, standing at the summit with my six friends and our two guides, I gazed over treeless sheets of white plunging to the inky ocean. A virgin slope beckoned to us. I felt uneasy — the snow was clearly unstable — but said nothing.

I was there as a travel writer and photographer, so the group agreed that I would go first to set up my camera, accompanied by Dan, the lead guide. I shook off my nervousness and skied off, arcing turns down a mellow powder field and stopping before a knoll. Dan whizzed past me and disappeared over the bump, flanked by steeper slopes. Suddenly, a line tore across the snow, releasing a massive avalanche that crashed 700 feet down the slope, engulfing Dan in car-sized panes of broken snow that settled, slowly, into a terrifying stillness.

With the help of his inflatable airbags, Dan kept afloat and survived, unhurt. He took a few moments to collect himself, and then put his skins back on. I stood there in awe and terror, my heart racing, glad to be alive.

I don't know whether some misjudgment or breach of professional protocol contributed to this accident. It's exceedingly rare for a slope shy of 30 degrees to slide so dramatically. But for years, I have relived the incident, questioning my own assumptions about safety in avalanche terrain. Was it a wild fluke, a simple miscalculation, or a serious mistake made possible by complicated psychological factors? In other words, how dumb were we?

Over the last 10 years, skiers and snowboarders have swarmed the backcountry, thanks to rapidly improving equipment, new gates that allow access to untracked slopes beyond resort boundaries, and, perhaps, a culture that glorifies dangerous routes while minimizing risks. There are more avalanche-prevention classes and resources than ever before — in 20 years, the handful of schools has grown to more than 100 — yet the fatality rate has steadily risen since the early 1990s. On average, approximately 30 people die in avalanches in the United States annually. (Last season, fortunately, there were only 11.) About a third are novices, but two-thirds have some level of avalanche training. Why are capable people making such deadly decisions? And what can those of us who emerge unharmed learn from our close calls?

"I ONCE THOUGHT if you just give people the critical information, they'll automatically make the right decisions," says Bruce Tremper, director of the Forest Service Utah Avalanche Center and author of *Avalanche Essentials* and *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain*. "But I found out — just like economists and stock traders — it doesn't work that way. We human beings are not very good at logic. Our brains are hard-wired for social interactions and pattern recognition."

For decades, we have understood the basic science behind avalanches. But unfortunately, we don't make decisions based solely on observations. There are other forces at play — the emotions, biases, beliefs and mental shortcuts that some call the human factor. Relatively little empirical research has explored this, but a sweeping new study, led by two Montana State University researchers, may soon help us understand how skiers, snowboarders and others make decisions in avalanche terrain. This could change how avalanche prevention is taught, and also shed light on our relationship to risk in

other hazardous endeavors, such as hiking in grizzly country or fighting wildfires.

The project, initiated during the winter of 2013-2014, asks recreational skiers and snowboarders to record their backcountry routes using an app, Ski Tracks, and then complete a post-trip survey. Over the past two seasons, more than 400 people from the U.S., Canada and Europe contributed more than 1,000 tracks. Researchers hope to gather thousands more over the next two years, but already trends are emerging. For example, experts ski similarly steep slopes regardless of whether the local avalanche forecast predicts a moderate, considerable or high hazard. (With a higher forecasted hazard, they do modify their plans slightly — avoiding, say, northeasterly slopes that could be more slide-prone.) And all-male groups typically ski steeper slopes than all-female groups on days with the same avalanche hazard, although the data on all-female groups is still small.

Jordy Hendriks, a tall, energetic earth sciences professor, is leading the study with Jerry Johnson, a political scientist. Hendriks has studied avalanche science on four continents for years, but after several friends and acquaintances died in slides, he became intrigued by the human factor.

"It's been almost an awakening for me," Hendriks said. "I realized I could spend the next 10 years researching how a particular snow crystal grows, and I'd help maybe two people make a better decision. Or I could spend the next 10 years really looking at how people interact with the landscape and how they make decisions, and I could make a much bigger impact."

I'd learned about the study this winter, when I saw a request for participants on the Colorado Avalanche Information Center's website. One Saturday this March, I enrolled, downloading the Ski Tracks app on my iPhone and filling out a questionnaire about my background — gender (female), level of education (college), years skiing (25), marital status (married), number of kids (zero). At the Deer Creek trailhead near Coal Bank Pass in Colorado, I clicked on the app's tracker. The forecast warned of a considerable avalanche hazard near and above treeline — it had snowed recently and warmed quickly — but I felt safe with my husband, Andrew, my friend Rachel, and her boyfriend, Chris, all of whom are more experienced than I am.

We skinned up a south-facing slope, in air so warm we stripped to T-shirts. Little puffs of powder fell from spruce branches and, lit by sunbeams, turned to glitter. I live to ski powder — that fleeting sensation of near weightlessness — and to experience the grounding silence of a forest muffled in snow. But always, there is an undercurrent of fear. Always I am listening for *whoomphs* or scanning the terrain for dangerous features.

At the top of the slope, we looked out over a forested valley and an exposed white ridge, joking, snacking, drinking water and tearing the gluey skins from our skis. And then, one by one, we skied down, gleefully slicing through buttery snow and launching off buried logs. But even on this mellow slope of north-facing trees, which I had always thought of as a safe zone, I noticed the crown lines of small avalanches that had pulled away from convexities. At the bottom, a three-foot crown gaped at us — no skier tracks in sight. This small slide, about 40 feet across and 120 feet long, had slid within the last two days, without the weight of a skier.



A skier sets off a pocket slab on the Shuksan Arm at Mount Baker, Washington. He outran this slide and no one was harmed.

GARRETT GROVE

Avalanche professionals have developed simple decision-making aids to help backcountry travelers evaluate the objective hazard and the risk of human factors. The only problem? Getting people to use them. Here are two easy mnemonics for your back pocket.

The ALP TRUTH test

Have you seen three or more of these danger signs on your tour? If so, pay extra-close attention. In the average accident, about five of these clues are present.

- A** = Avalanches in the last 48 hours
- L** = Loading by new snow or wind in last 48 hours
- P** = obvious avalanche Path
- T** = terrain Trap, such as a gully in which slide debris could collect
- R** = a Rating of considerable or higher in the avalanche forecast
- U** = Unstable signs like collapsing, cracking, or tough trail-breaking conditions
- Th** = Thawing or rapid warming

The FACETS test

Evaluate your near misses for the following human factors so you can become more aware of your own susceptibilities.

- F** = Familiarity with the terrain
- A** = social Acceptance or the need to impress others
- C** = Commitment to a goal
- E** = Expert halo
- T** = competing for first Tracks
- S** = Social proof, or the myth of safety in numbers



Above, backcountry skiers reach the apex of their ascent near Alta, Utah. One of the human factors that can lead people to enter avalanche terrain is skiing in big groups. Right, Bruce Tremper, director of the Utah Avalanche Center, investigates snow crystals from a large avalanche.
BRUCE TREMPER

"This is definitely weird," said Andrew. "I haven't seen that before in Deer Creek." We traversed over the top of the crown line, into a bank of trees. The next gully looked exactly like the last, but it hadn't slid. The snow sparkled in a pristine state. Andrew prepared to set off across it, and I felt a seed of unease sprout within me.

That evening, I pondered the survey questions. Did we accurately convey our observations to each other? Did we share observations freely? I thought about how, even as I realized that Andrew was approaching a potentially sketchy slope, I didn't say anything. Andrew has skied a lot more than me, and I never question his expertise. Avalanche experts call this the expert halo — a blind faith in perceived masters — and it is one of the human factors that contributes to avalanche fatalities. It is my kryptonite.

AVALANCHE EXPERTS HAVE LONG KNOWN about the importance of psychological factors in decision making. But the Montana State University study builds on the work of one of the few researchers to analyze empirical data for evidence of the human factor.

Ian McCammon, a former National Outdoor Leadership School instructor with a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, knew from contemporary research that human beings synthesize patterns and devise simple rules of thumb, also known as mental shortcuts or heuristics, in order to make numerous decisions quickly. This ability allows us to do routine things remarkably efficiently, like driving and shopping. But when we use heuristic thinking instead of analytical evaluation in unpredictable, high-risk environments, it can prove deadly. And avalanche terrain is the perfect trap. It's what researchers call a poor-feedback environment. Unstable, snowy slopes remain intact about 95 percent of the time, so terrible decisions are often rewarded with great skiing and a beer at the end of the day. This gives us confidence in our own ability, until somebody dies.

In the early 2000s, McCammon analyzed 715 recreational avalanche fatalities in the United States between 1972 and 2003, identifying six common heuristic traps. He observed that bigger groups and mixed-gender groups appeared to take more risks. People tend to find safety in numbers, and wish to impress friends or potential mates. He also noticed that skiers seemed to take more risks when they're familiar with the terrain, highly committed to a goal, competing for first tracks, or following a perceived expert.



His findings, which confirmed what the backcountry ski community had suspected for years, are now commonly taught and discussed in avalanche classes. But simply knowing about the influence of human factors on accidents doesn't appear to prevent them.

"We believe that we're rational, and we think that's the ideal largely because of the way our civilization is formed," McCammon said. "Look at all the successes that analytical thinking has brought us — electricity, cars, planes. The evidence of its power is all around us, but there's so much more to how we make decisions. We have some extremely powerful tools that we're just beginning to understand from a scientific standpoint, in terms of pattern recognition and intuition." Those tools enabled our ancestors to survive for millennia. They just aren't so good in the backcountry. The key, McCammon said, is figuring out when to rely on heuristics and when to employ analytical systems.

Since that avalanche in Alaska, I have enjoyed backcountry skiing less. Even on extremely mellow slopes, I am occasionally seized by irrational fear. On some level, I believe that avalanches are wildly unpredictable and could strike at any moment. That, of course, is not true. The science behind avalanches may be complicated, but it is not magical.

SO FAR, THE HUMAN-FACTOR RESEARCH has focused on fatalities, but most backcountry skiers survive. Johnson and Hendriks hope that observing real-time decisions in successful outings will reveal how people make good decisions as well as bad ones.

"How do you teach people in avalanche courses to do the right thing?" asks Jerry Johnson. "Do you teach them by studying failure, or do you teach them by studying success? I would like to see this whole discussion shift away from accidents to positive behaviors."

On Deer Creek, I watched my husband hesitate as he contemplated crossing a virgin slope. I felt uneasy but didn't speak up for fear of seeming paranoid. Tremper had specifically told me how vital good communication is to backcountry avalanche safety, yet I still didn't speak up.

Luckily, I didn't have to. Turns out, this is a story about positive behavior.

"Maybe we shouldn't go that way," Rachel said, nonchalantly. Andrew hesitated, pensive amid the sparkling snow. In a pocket somewhere, the Ski Tracks app on my phone was marking the moment.

"Yeah," said Chris, taking off his pack. "I'm cool with that." □

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Alaska tourism and the white man's native



So, How Long Have You Been Native? Life as an Alaska Native Tour Guide
Alexis C. Bunten
272 pages,
softcover: \$26.95.
University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

Alexis C. Bunten understands what it's like to be an outsider. A mix of Alaska Native, Swedish "and something else, French Canadian, I think," the writer spent her childhood moving across the country, from Hawaii to South Dakota to Alaska and Washington state. She may have faced less outright discrimination than her mother and grandmother, but prejudice was still a fact of life. "Starting with the kindergarten role of 'Thanksgiving Indian,'" she writes, "I was always inexplicably assigned the villain parts in grade school plays."

That outsidership forms the backdrop for her first book, a first-hand account of the cultural tourism industry in Sitka, Alaska. *So, How Long Have You Been Native?* was inspired by the two summers Bunten spent working as a Native guide for Tribal Tours, a company owned and operated by the Sitka Tribe. The book deconstructs how tourism — "sorely

undervalued as a suitable anthropological field" — influences modern Native identity. "The (Native) culture on display," she writes, "plays a bit part in a larger performance reflecting the dominant culture of the tourists themselves." One local wryly calls the guides "Stepford Natives," noting their perpetual cheer and willingness to go along with their customers' cherished fantasies of a whitewashed past. Not to mention their idealized notions of the present: "Alcoholism, neglect, jealousy and violence (don't) exist in the world of the Stepford Natives," Bunten observes. "The veteran guides carved out larger than life personas. ... It protected them from having to deal with never being able to live up to guests' expectations of what it means to be Native."

With journalistic precision, Bunten explores topics as varied as the influence of cruise lines on the Alaskan economy,

the history of the Tlingit people and the ongoing effects of colonization on tribes. Despite occasionally awkward attempts at softening the narrative with light-hearted banter or extraneous personal asides, she succeeds in creating a sharply focused picture of cultural tourism today, especially in villages like Sitka, where between 10 and 20 percent of the local jobs are tourism-related. By fusing economic data with the personal experiences of Native guides — including her own — Bunten exposes the side effects of turning one's culture into a valued commodity.

"Our clients longed for us to be further removed from modernity than themselves," she writes. "And we complied by talking about nature, subsistence, ceremonies, and demonstrating other signs of 'primitivism' — but we did so on our own terms."

BY CARSON VAUGHAN



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Climbing over the edge

Snowblind, the first collection of short stories by veteran travel writer and alpinist Daniel Arnold, explores mountaineering and the power it holds over the people who pursue it. Arnold's characters are drawn irrevocably to the mountains they climb, and their obsession works strangely on their minds, pushing them into sometimes-terrifying realms of thought and behavior. The locations range from cabins at the base of Mount Hood, in Oregon, to brutal mountains at the edge of human settlement in Alaska. The stories' protagonists tangle intimately with death in all its many faces, from storm-caused disasters to fatal falls and even suspected murder — as well as the lingering ache of mourning.

Even when death is not imminent, the threat of it hovers at the edges of the stories. In one story, after a dangerous climb, the mountaineers demolish a centuries-old cabin in a fury of pent-up emotion. In another, a climber's accidental death drives those waiting at the bottom to drinking and then to blows.

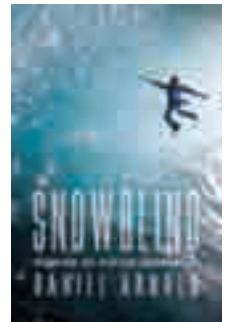
Both alpinists and those who find their

outdoor enjoyment in less perilous pursuits will recognize the emotional landscape inhabited by Arnold's characters. The wildness of grief, an encounter with an old flame, the underlying fear of loss — these are experiences common to all.

Still, it's the otherworldliness of climbing and the jagged beauty of the mountains that most grip the reader. In the collection's finest story, "Ozdon," Dane, a climber from Boulder, Colorado, and a native of the Wasatch, heads to Alaska to find a lost friend. The mountain where his friend vanished seems "torn from the earth, a bone from below dripping with ice and crusted with jags of black rock." It ensnares Dane physically and emotionally, drawing him in, as it has other climbers, "like flies to meat."

But Arnold avoids the traditional narrative arc of nobility and courage in the face of danger. The story of the climb remains unsettling and dark. It raises but never answers the question: What is the reward for all this risk and suffering? And, more important, what is its human cost?

BY KATE SCHIMEL



Snowblind: Stories of Alpine Obsession

Daniel Arnold
273 pages,
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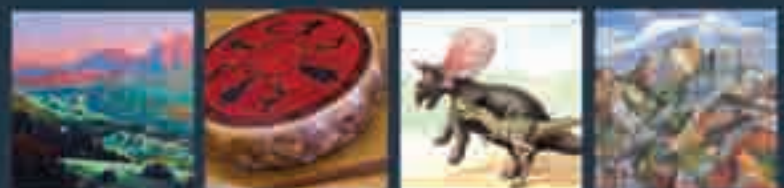
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Knowing the Grand Canyon in your bones

When I was 9, I watched a TV show called *Four Winds to Adventure*. In one particularly vivid episode, a raging, muddy Colorado River tossed wooden boats around like toys. I yearned to see that river in person, but back then the Grand Canyon seemed about as far away as the moon.

Yet, when I finally got my first glimpse of it, in 1973, it was like “coming home to a place I’d never been before,” as John Denver sang on the radio that Memorial Day weekend, while two friends and I drove through the night toward the park.

We slept for a few hours in a U.S. Forest Service campground in Williams, Arizona, and then drove in early to obtain a permit for the Grandview Trail. And suddenly there, behind the gift shop, was the canyon, overwhelming all my senses. I felt as astonished and eager as the young cat whose first encounter with catnip was described by writer Joseph Wood Krutch: “Can such things be? Indubitably they can. He flung himself down and he wallowed.”

For the past three decades, I have wallowed in the Grand Canyon. My bookshelves sag with the weight of more than 40 volumes on its history, geology, biology and trails; my children’s heads are filled with the bedtime stories I told (and embellished) of John Wesley Powell’s epic first trip down the Colorado River; and my own brain is stuffed with the memories of dozens of trips made with family and friends.

What ignited my obsession with the canyon? I used to think it was the sense of freedom it gave me. I grew up in a small Illinois town, where my mom knew before Saturday morning which girl I’d sat with at the Friday night football game. I was trapped by a conservative religious upbringing, complete with eyes drawn on the blackboard when the nun left the room: “He is watching you!” The first time I hiked to Hermit Rapids as a young man, I came upon a mixed-gender group of skinny-dippers. Can such things be? When I was a kid, an angry farmer once pointed a gun at me for straying over his property line in pursuit of rabbits. But Grand Canyon National Park encompasses nearly 2,000 square miles, and I could explore every square inch. Here was freedom on an unimaginable scale.

With it came the opportunity to confront and overcome my fears. That first trip, I bought Harvey Butchart’s book, *Grand Canyon Treks*. It came with an official warning in stern capital letters: THE SUPERINTENDENT OF GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK HAS DETERMINED THAT HIKING IN MANY PARTS OF THE GRAND CANYON CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH. There’s a thrill in navigating a dangerous landscape, enduring hardship yet coming out on top.

But Butchart’s message struck home that winter when an acquaintance of mine, an extremely fit and strong hiker, died in a snowstorm on the Tanner Trail. Much later, my daughter and I ascended Tanner Trail in the same kind of whiteout conditions that killed my acquaintance. I had told her the story the night before. We decided to wait until the fog lifted enough for us to see at least 10 feet ahead, and to camp at 75-Mile Saddle, which we could reach even without a trail — as long as we didn’t climb the butte on the right, or fall in the canyon on the left. By the time we made 75-Mile Saddle, the fog had lifted enough for us to climb out.

On another hike, in the boiling heat of the summer, my son badly sprained his ankle at Sapphire Canyon, nearly 20 miles from either the South Bass or Hermit’s Rest trailheads, at a place one guidebook author called “no man’s land.” Looking

into his anxious and pain-filled eyes, I recalled the words of the driver who’d taken us to the trailhead the day before: “I don’t go down there this time of year.” A trickle of water in Sapphire Canyon meant we wouldn’t die of thirst, but I faced a difficult choice: Should I hike to the river and flag down a raft, something I could probably do in a half day, with some climbing and route-finding, or just hike out to Hermit’s Rest, which would take more than a day? We found a third way: We rigged two walking sticks, and I carried my son’s gear while he hobbled to the end of the trail. It was an oddly empowering experience.

But a few years ago, everything changed. I wanted to visit Deer Creek and Thunder River with my daughter and son-in-law. It was my fourth time there, so I thought I’d spice up the itinerary with a visit to Tapeats Cave and Spring — a major source of water to Tapeats Creek — and then make a cross-country exit at Crazy Jug Point.

Ryan and Ann were both experienced climbers, and I had done my due diligence, gathering trip reports, studying maps and talking to people who had hiked the area. Ryan brought gear for the little rappel (no longer permitted) into the Deer Creek narrows. We slid around in the chutes and pools and had a blast. Two days later, we hiked over to Thunder River and then up Tapeats Creek. It required some wading and pack-hoisting; there were places where you could fall and break an ankle, or an arm. But we were careful and took our time.

Near Tapeats Cave, we dropped our packs and headed for the nearby spring, taking only our water bottles and some lunch. Ann asked Ryan to help retrieve a granola bar from her daypack, so I said, “I’ll go ahead and take a look.”

I followed a faint path to the head of the canyon and reached a cliff. We couldn’t continue west. I walked down the slope to a lesser cliff, maybe 15 or 20 feet high. This wasn’t the way either. I yelled, “We are too high.” Ryan nodded, pointing downward toward some trees as a better route. I hurried to meet them, returning to the narrow, rock-filled ravine I had crossed just moments before. It was only about three steps across, I thought. I tentatively tested a big block of redwall limestone. It seemed solid — until I put all my weight on it. And then, suddenly, unbelievably, it wasn’t. “No, no, no, no!” I yelled as the slope about 10 feet above me collapsed.

Only shards of memories of what followed remain. But I clearly recall waking up in the intensive care unit of the Flagstaff Hospital — five days later. “This isn’t a nightmare, is it?” I asked the nurse.

I later learned that Ryan sprinted 10 miles to the river to get help, while Ann, a rehabilitation specialist, used all of her medical training to hold my fading body and spirit together. She wrote in her diary:

As the hours passed, I became more and more terrified. I was worried that Ryan might have gotten hurt rushing out for help or that he just wasn’t able to find anyone. My dad was becoming so cold that I climbed under the vegetation with him and tried to lie over his chest. He just kept shivering and his vital signs were weakening. At 6:30 p.m. I thought I heard a helicopter and I jolted up. I grabbed my headlamp and turned on the flashing mode and ran to the highest rock I could find nearby. The paramedic later said they only spotted us on the first pass because of the flashing light. I still don’t know what made me think to do that when it wasn’t even dark.

I almost died. My pelvis was separated and had multiple

I tentatively
tested a
big block
of redwall
limestone. It
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on it.



fractures. I had multiple broken and dislocated ribs, a fractured sacrum, a collapsed lung and a badly shattered wrist and femur. (Somehow, my femoral artery wasn't severed.) I also damaged my left knee. All this was on my left side; I didn't learn until later that my right humerus had sheared off soft tissue in my shoulder socket. Miraculously, my internal organs were spared. Two surgeons worked on me for three long days. I spent a month in the hospital. Over the next two years, I had shoulder and knee surgery and six wrist surgeries.

And I still deal with the aftermath. My metal femur, pinned hip and chained pelvis have ended my running days. My surgeons warn me that their "fixes" are only temporary. Several times a month, I go to physical and muscle therapists. My personal exercise routine is down to about 17 hours per week — half of what it was the first two years after the accident. But I keep at it to maintain flexibility and control the ever-present aches and pains.

Falling always seems to occur slowly. *Thud!* — face down on the trail. A few inches to my right, and I would have cracked my head on a ragged piece of rock. I lie there for a moment, unhook my backpack, roll away and sit up. What happened?

Three years after my accident, I am once again on the Tanner Trail, near where it meets the Bright Angel shale. It is a moderately steep section that I have hiked several times without a second thought. This time, I stubbed my right toe on a protruding rock. It spun me around, so my right arm and pole were behind me. I instinctively tucked my left arm to my side to protect my multi-surgeried, inflexible left wrist.

I fall more often these days, taking tumbles while hiking and skiing. My reflexes haven't adjusted to the loss of agility in my new left hip. Sometimes, my brain tells me everything feels right when it isn't right at all.

I finish backpacking trips with a sense of relief, rather than exhilaration. I am way more careful, knowing how vulnerable my body is. This sometimes surprises, even disappoints, those who knew me before the accident. People like to say, "You're all healed now!" They want reassurance that when bad things

happen, they can be erased. My recovery has been remarkable, yes, but the scars of the accident are permanent, both physical and mental.

I always liked Stephen Crane's famous poem:

*A Man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist."
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."*

But now I know it in my very bones.

I used to go to the Grand Canyon believing that, every time I went, I could possess it a little more. But the Grand Canyon cannot be possessed. We fool ourselves if we think inanimate objects care about us. The Grand Canyon is neither my friend nor my nemesis. Yet I learned important lessons there. Embedded in its strata is immutable evidence that life changes — sometimes slowly, over eons; often dramatically, in an instant. □

Hiking Tanner Trail in the Grand Canyon.

KATHY SHARP



On a backpacking trip below Horseshoe Mesa, Nic Korte stops to bury the pins and metal rods that had held his arm together for two years.

COURTESY NIC KORTE

#OutdoorRec and #Tech

I run up a trail that climbs a steep ridge, through sage and piñon, ponderosas and aspen. About two miles in, the forested slope gives way to a small meadow, where thigh-high grass is sprinkled with lupine, penstemon and flax. I should stop and take an Instagram photo to share on Facebook and Twitter, just to make my friends and computer-bound colleagues jealous.

But I won't, because the Strava app on my phone is recording my location, my speed and, perhaps most importantly, my performance compared to that of others who use this social network for athletes. Stopping will sabotage my effort. If I only had a GoPro camera strapped to my chest, I could capture the image of the wildflowers and keep the data flowing to the app.

At the top, I look at the little screen on my phone: My fastest time yet! I celebrate by taking a sweaty selfie and sharing it. I also check the phone's altimeter and compass to orient myself, then pull up Google Earth to find an alternate route back. A chirpy ringtone violates the silence: My boss calling. Too out-of-breath to answer, I let it ring. That's when I notice I'm not alone: There's a guy sitting quietly under a piñon tree, wearing old hiking boots, cotton shorts and a T-shirt, giving me the stinkiest stink eye I've ever seen.

I don't blame him. Not only have I broken his solitude, I've brought the rest of civilization along with me. I'm one of the cyborgs — part human, part gadget, part app — who have invaded the outdoors with our devices and metastasizing cellular networks, snapping photos wherever we go and sharing them with the world. I consider explaining how this all makes us safer, and actually enriches the outdoor experience. But the man's look keeps me silent. I turn and run home, Strava monitoring my every step.

Back in 1921, Aldo Leopold wrote that wilderness should be "a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state ... big enough to absorb a two weeks' pack trip, and kept devoid of ... works of man." Leopold wasn't trying to save the wild from

roads, he was trying to defend the wilderness experience from the technological fad of the time, the automobile. To experience wilderness from behind the windshield or from a scenic pullout was hardly an experience at all. You need the bite of the wind, the sting of the sun, perhaps a little bit of risk.

We've come to accept that cars don't belong in the wilderness. Yet most of us don't hesitate to tote along other types of trendy, and often useful, technology: the kind of lightweight synthetic sleeping bags, Gore-Tex clothing, campstoves, water filters and guidebooks that Leopold and his contemporaries lacked. As a young backpacker, I eschewed such luxuries, too: It wasn't a real wilderness experience unless you got buried under half a foot of snow in the desert in a crappy sleeping bag, contracted giardia after slurping directly from a stream, devoured your oatmeal raw because the wood was too wet for a campfire, or wandered lost and scared for hours through Leopold's "blank spots on the map."

Today, those blank spots are cluttered with blog posts, websites, apps, compasses and digital maps, and your traveling instructions are delivered in Siri's eerie voice. One app guides screen-gazers through Utah's canyons; others, using names like PeakHunter, meticulously chart routes up peaks. Google Earth allows us to "fly" into places and plan a route in advance, and even to "hike" backcountry trails or "raft" the Grand Canyon.

Just as I once scorned guidebooks because they robbed the unknown of its mystery, a part of me resents the new tech for relieving me of the freedom to get lost. For it is only then, when we are disoriented and confused, terrified and blissed out, that we really see where we are. Another part of me, though, the same part that relishes the information my weather and streamflow apps impart, can linger over Google Earth for hours, finding new places to explore and even "climbing" El Capitan in Yosemite.

Gadgets save lives, too. Last year, personal locator beacons, which use satellites to send 911 calls from areas beyond the



@recreator "Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?"
— Aldo Leopold
#wilderness



BROOKE WARREN

@recreator "A venturesome minority will always be eager to set off on their own, and no obstacles should be placed in their path; let them take risks, for godsake, let them get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, buried alive under avalanches - that is the right and privilege of any free American."
— Edward Abbey #lostoutwest

Tom Capra

July 10 at 6:04pm
Another day riding in the rain! Mud can't stop me.



STRAVA



How do our electronic gadgets, social media platforms and constant connectedness affect the wilderness experience?

ESSAY BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

cellular network, initiated 113 backcountry rescues nationwide. Many of those people might have died without their PLBs. But PLBs, not to mention satellite and cellular phones, are also a pain in the neck for rescuers. Consider the “lost” couple who were helicoptered out of the woods even though they were within sight of the highway, or the two men and their sons who used their PLBs to launch three separate rescue efforts over two days, first because they couldn’t find water, and then because the water they found was too salty.

“If you have cellphone (or satellite or PLB) coverage, you’re more likely to use it as a crutch, do more risky behavior,” says Brian White, recreation and wilderness programs manager for the San Juan National Forest. Indeed, the leader of the salty-water group said he never would have attempted that hike without his SPOT. The most popular personal locator beacon, it’s become known as “Yuppie 911.”

Search YouTube for “Moab Base Jump,” and it will spit back nearly 12,000 videos of folks free-falling, squirrel-suiting or otherwise cheating death among the sandstone spires and walls. Perhaps the most harrowing simply shows a guy on a ledge, high above the ground, talking calmly to his camera. “I probably lost my leg,” he says. “Yep. Not cool.” He crashed while BASE jumping, and his shattered tibia protrudes raggedly from the flesh just above his ankle. The video has been viewed more than 1 million times.

Not so long ago, that kind of experience would have been a solitary one. Any sharing would have been delayed for days, until you had time to recover and write a letter, develop your photos or tell the story to buddies over a campfire or a beer. And the backcountry storyteller’s ethic demanded that certain details — the exact location, for example — be discreetly withheld, even while others were embellished.

In the age of connectedness, however, the solitude, the ethics and even the storytelling have been tossed off the cliff without a parachute. We backpack for miles to some secluded spot “and we feel so alone and we want to tell someone. We want to hear

a voice,” writes Jim Stiles in a 2012 essay in his *Canyon Country Zephyr*. “But we can’t. Because this is The West — the big, hard, breathtaking, heartbreaking, unrelenting, unforgiving American West. Or at least, it was. ...

Now, you can bring the world to your favorite ‘lonely spot,’” via cellphone, Facebook and Twitter.

This past winter, when Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson free-climbed the Dawn Wall on El Capitan in Yosemite, the rest of the world was invited along, sharing a once-lonely experience through the climbers’ constant Tweets and Instagrams. “Sketchy” Andy Lewis, one of the world’s top slackliners and an avid BASE jumper, not only “performs” his risky feats for thousands of YouTube viewers, he has flung himself into live performance art, slackline-boogying alongside Madonna at the 2012

Super Bowl halftime show. If George Mallory climbed Mount Everest simply because “it’s there,” perhaps today’s extreme athletes hurl themselves off cliffs simply in order to “share.”

We’re not just rock climbers, backpackers and trail-runners; we’re performers and entertainers. Instead of storytellers, we’re broadcasters of a limitless stream of images. Or, in the case of Strava, data.

My 20-year-old self, the one who escaped a rainstorm by jamming himself and his stinky sleeping bag underneath an overhang crawling with black widows, is disgusted. My middle-aged, techno-friendly self tells him to calm down and look at the bigger picture. Our growing desire to “perform” outdoors to impress our friends and social media voyeurs is pushing us deeper into the wilderness and exposing once-hidden places to millions of strangers. But that increased visibility has the potential to build a new constituency that cares about those places. “Just think if they had all this technology back before Glen Canyon Dam,” says David Eckenrode, an avid outdoorsman and longtime commercial raft guide. “All these people could see what that place looked like. They could go BASE jumping, canyoneering, paddling there. The masses would say, ‘You can’t inundate this thing.’”

Maybe so. Yet I can’t help thinking that the experience of the hypothetically un-dammed Glen Canyon, flooded by digital signals, devices and extreme recreationists rather than water, would not fit Leopold’s vision of wilderness. It would still be spectacular, but no longer remote. Armed with devices to guide us, film us, even rescue us if needed, we have become insulated from the natural world’s harsh reality. We no longer feel its beauty as directly, even though our Instagrams look great. Our urge to capture and share every moment of our trip has reduced the singularly sweet experience of cool water pouring off a desert cliff into mere spectacle, its pixels repeated ad infinitum across digital platforms.

“The whole idea of wilderness is to get away from the trappings of modern life,” says White. “If you’re taking that into the wilderness with you, it detracts from the experience. When I’m on the job, I take that stuff. When I’m alone, I don’t: I want the risk.”

Until recently, this seemed like a good compromise. After all, if my younger self and the guy who glared at me from under the piñon don’t like technology, they can leave it at home, the Luddites.

But then I take off on another run, up a different hill, this time less worried about beating my time. After I dance around two women with tiny dogs, I hear a loud yell coming from the trail ahead. A mountain biker, GoPro camera on his helmet, on a bike that cost far more than my car, tears down the trail toward me. I’ve got the right of way and stand my ground, but trail etiquette is lost on him and it’s pretty clear that either I’ve got to give way, or end up as the guy’s handlebar ornament. I jump aside, wondering what could possibly motivate someone to act like such a jerk. Then he bellows again, giving me the answer: “Stravaaaaa ... !” □

“The whole idea of wilderness is to get away from the trappings of modern life. If you’re taking that into the wilderness with you, it detracts from the experience.”

—Brian White, recreation and wilderness programs manager for the San Juan National Forest



6.4 m
DISTANCE

01:24:36
MOVING TIME



HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

WYOMING

What animal is the size of a car and notorious for tossing cowboys through the air? A 2,000-pound Brahma bull, of course, though at a recent Cody, Wyoming, rodeo, the only way Mongo startled anybody was by sucking on a lollypop. Mongo is just “a big puppy” who doesn’t even know he’s a bull, reports the *Cody Enterprise*. That makes him unfit to buck and twirl in a rodeo for eight seconds but ideal for standing motionless while as many as three large people sit on his back and pose for a \$10 photo. Mongo’s predecessor, Hollywood, was fired as a photo-op prop last year because his temperament was — to put it mildly — unsuitable: “He hooked a lot of people,” said handler Justin Josey. Mongo never minds posing, as long as he gets to tongue up some treats along with his daily six-gallon dinner of grain. His favorites? Skittles and Tootsie Roll Pops. Some might see Mongo’s job as boring: “He eats, he sleeps, he stands for an hour, he eats and he sleeps,” said handler Nikki Tate. On the other hand: “His life is not hard.”

CALIFORNIA

Freelance reporter Rob Kuznia came up with a devilish story idea for the *Washington Post*: He’d ask the residents of Southern California’s super-wealthy Rancho Santa Fe what they thought about the state’s awful drought and the need to conserve water. Righteous indignation seems the primary response, because in its 92-year history, the community has never — ever — faced water rationing. As Steve Yuhas put it, “We’re not all equal when it comes to water. We pay significant property taxes based on where we live.” And Gay Butler, an interior decorator whose water bill averages about \$800 a month, demanded: “What are we supposed to do, just have dirt around our house on four acres?” Rancho Santa Fe is nothing if not a bastion of privilege: The median income is \$189,000, houses resemble mansions, and it’s said that PGA legend Phil Mickelson once requested a separate water meter for his



ALASKA Just in case you missed it. ... CAROLYN ROSNER

chipping greens. In fact, after Gov. Jerry Brown called on *all* Californians to reduce water consumption by 25 percent — water use “in Rancho Santa Fe went *up* by 9 percent.” But if residents resist this time, the enclave’s water supplier “reserves the right to install flow restrictors,” one of the toughest sanctions available. The crackdown has already caused hardships for homeowners who invested in exotic and thirsty plantings. As one man complained, he’s seen the value of his nine-acre plot “plummet from \$30 million to \$22 million.”

COLORADO

When you wake up suddenly in the middle of the night to find your truck blowing its horn, its headlights flashing and the vehicle rocking and rolling, you *know* something is inside that really wants to get out. Sure enough, said Dave Masters of Evergreen, Colorado, an approximately 200-pound bear was unhappily trapped in the front seat and ripping up everything from the dashboard to the wiring, reports KTVQ.com. Masters thought starting the truck by remote might help, “but it seemed to get (the bear) even more pissed off.” The sheriff’s office had a better idea: Deputies carefully opened the truck door and the bear scrambled out, free at last.

ALASKA

Alaska Gov. Bill Walker took pity on a sow and four cubs that were destined for extermination for misbehaving in Anchorage, so he asked the state game and fish commissioner to spare the family. A reprieve was granted, reports the *Alaska Dispatch News*, with the lucky bears taken to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for a second chance. Alas, they proved incorrigible, moving into the small town of Hope, where they scavenged on backyard chickens and chased moose through an RV park. Asked about the bears’ “alleged poultry consumption,” the chastened governor joked, “Last I’d heard they were eating dandelions

in Hope. ... Someone said they were perhaps strumming guitars. Fish and Game will handle this in their own professional way, and I am no longer involved in helping them do their job.”

MONTANA

On June 11, Glacier National Park celebrated its 100 millionth visitor. Tourists might want to visit the glorious park soon, says *Montana Magazine*. Out of 150 glaciers counted at the turn of the last century, only 25 remain, and by 2030, not a single one is expected to survive.

COLORADO

Diane Sylvain of Paonia, Colorado, tells us she took Amtrak from Grand Junction to Denver recently, only to be delayed for hours by rockslides and torrential rains. But one elderly woman seemed to be more worried about the dead lodgepole pines in the mountains. “What killed all the trees?” she asked her daughter, repeatedly. “Pine beetles,” the daughter explained. “Pine *beagles*? I never heard of such a thing. If dogs are killing the trees, they oughta just keep ‘em out of the forest!” We couldn’t agree more.

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

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org.

“Pointless cairns are simply pointless reminders of the human ego. ... Fight the urge to stack rocks and make your mark.”

Robyn Martin, in her essay, “Ego cairns have got to go,” from *Writers on the Range*, hcn.org/wotr



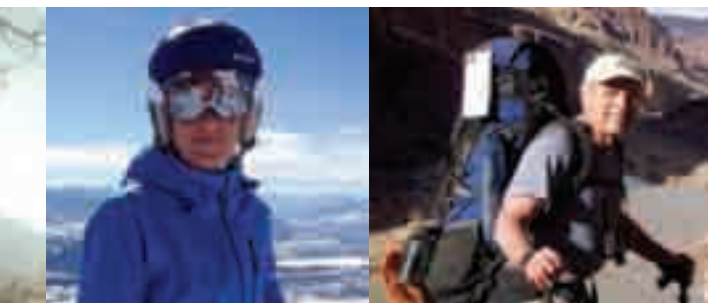
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Ken Foraker, despite having lost his right leg in a road bike accident 26 years ago, rides near Sedona, Arizona. BROOKE WARREN



SIBER

KORTE

HCN correspondent **Krista Langlois** writes from Alaska and Durango, Colorado.

Elizabeth Shogren is HCN's D.C. correspondent.

Kate Siber is a freelance writer and a correspondent for *Outside* magazine based in Durango, Colorado. She has never met a type of skiing she doesn't like, from skate skiing to alpine to telemark.

Marshall Swearingen writes from Bozeman, Montana.

Jonathan Thompson is a senior editor at HCN and runs the trails around his home in Durango, Colorado, recording every mile on Strava.

Sarah Tory is an editorial fellow at HCN and an injury-prone mountain biker. For this story, she broke one rib and sprained her wrist while riding Sedona's famous slickrock.

Editor's note

The trail less traveled

I decided to leave the trail and return by a different route — straight down a talus slope, on the cheap aluminum rubber-tipped crutches that I used full-time. I was young, and I wanted to avoid the herds of hikers pounding the pulverized granite trail into California's Desolation Wilderness. Besides, I could see my destination, the blue waters of Upper Echo Lake, where I'd left the rowboat a couple of hours ago. How hard could it be?



An hour and only a few hundred feet down later, I realized: really hard. What looked from a distance like a set of natural stairs was actually a hazardous geologic jumble. When the first rock shifted unexpectedly under me, I suddenly envisioned a crushed ankle, a broken crutch. What would I do? There was no one in sight, and only a bag of gorp and half-bottle of water to get me through a cold night outdoors. Going back was impossible, so I improvised, tossing my crutches ahead of me and then scrambling like a monkey over the rocks to retrieve them. In this manner, I slowly inched downward. A few nerve-racking, sweat-soaked hours later, I reached the trees and walked on blessedly soft duff to the lakeshore. At dusk, I reached my friends' cabin, exhausted, chastened — and utterly exhilarated.

That hike was three decades ago, and I can still feel its emotional and physical rush. It's the same feeling that has lured millions of people to the West's vast public wildlands for a century. But the ways we experience that landscape are changing, as this special issue explores. For one, there are simply more of us competing for limited space. So we no longer confine ourselves to the Yosemite and Yellowstone; we've discovered hundreds of new hotspots, such as the national forests outside Sedona, where HCN Fellow Sarah Tory reports on a mountain biking boom that has forced federal land managers and bikers to confront the uncomfortable fact that even quiet recreational pursuits can overrun the land.

And then there is technology. From flying squirrel suits and ever-burlier bikes and four-wheelers, to GoPro cameras and cellphones with apps that monitor every footstep, gadgets accompany us into the most remote places. Too often, we use them to buffer us from a direct encounter with the wild, even as we "share" every second with hordes of unseen strangers. As Senior Editor Jonathan Thompson observes, "We're not just rock climbers, backpackers and trail-runners; we're performers and entertainers."

It can be disturbing, but it's not destiny. In the stories here, people still experience the elemental West, whether it's Krista Langlois swirling down a frigid Alaskan river or Nic Korte confronting his own mortality in the Grand Canyon. For no matter how much fancy gear we carry, or how many people we meet, with just one step off the beaten path, we can enter a new and exhilarating world.

—Paul Larmer, executive director/publisher



Mule deer in decline

In the Piceance Basin of western Colorado, mule deer populations are in decline. In the first of a *High Country News* video series exploring wildlife science, we learn how researchers are capturing and tracking mule deer in hopes of learning how to better conserve their numbers.

DAKIN HENDERSON hcne.ws/netting-deer

7 million

gallons of crude oil spilled nationwide in the past five years

1,000

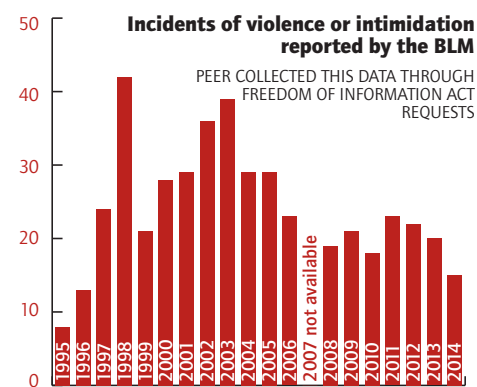
incidents of pipeline leaks and ruptures reported during that time

The May 19 oil spill from Plains All American near Santa Barbara, California, was not an isolated incident. That accident resulted in the spilling of more than 2,400 barrels of oil; tens of thousands of gallons flowed through storm drains into the Pacific Ocean. JONATHAN THOMPSON hcne.ws/map-oilspills

History of violence

Since 1995, the nonprofit watchdog Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility has compiled annual reports of violence or intimidation that involve BLM staffers. Their 2014 report, released in June, included 15 incidents, the lowest number since 1996, but didn't fully account for the Cliven Bundy standoff.

TAY WILES hcne.ws/fed-threats



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Living the dream, plus overtime

Why the outdoor industry opposes a federal minimum wage

BY ELIZABETH SHOGREN

Last summer, Jojo Buss worked as a guide in some of the country's most spectacular places, taking teenagers paddling, hiking and camping. Highlights included kayaking on Yellowstone Lake and whitewater rafting in Teton National Forest. "The way they all bonded, like, blew my mind," Buss says.

The 22-year-old earned only about \$1,800 that summer, despite very long hours under rough conditions. But the experience complemented her college major — youth development and camp management — so this summer, she signed on with the same outfitter, Wilderness Adventures, guiding tours in Alaska's Prince William Sound. "This is exactly what I want to be doing," she says. "It's a selfless job. We're doing it for the kids. Every kid should have the right and ability to get out in the outdoors and have somebody open their world up."

Today, when many workers are demanding a higher minimum wage, this seems counterintuitive. Of course, some guides want higher pay and have even filed class-action lawsuits. But Buss' willingness to re-up despite the low wages helps explain why companies have gotten away with paying people so little for what can be extremely demanding jobs.

Under a new federal rule, following an executive order by the Obama administra-

tion, companies with permits to operate on federal land will have to pay employees at least \$10.10 an hour, plus overtime. (The changes will phase in gradually, as companies get new permits.) The industry sees the increased wage as an existential threat, given the hours that outdoor work requires, and some congressional Republicans, headed by Rep. Chris Stewart of Utah, are seeking an exemption for federal contractors.

Low wages are so accepted in the industry that even college-educated adults like Buss can't imagine being paid as much as Obama's rule would require. Her workweek starts when she picks up campers at the airport and ends when she drops them off. "We'd be getting paid a ridiculous amount of money," she says. "More than I would feel comfortable accepting."

Buss' employer, Mike Cottingham, says he'd have to triple or quadruple wages — something that would either push him out of business after 43 years, or force him to raise fees, putting Wilderness Adventures out of reach of all but the wealthier families. In early June, he went to Washington to testify in favor of Stewart's bill, though the timing could not have been worse; his season was about to start, and his 80 young staffers were arriving for training in Salt Lake City.

Like many outfitters, Cottingham ar-

gues that the new wage requirement clashes with the administration's oft-stated goal of encouraging people, especially children, to enjoy the outdoors. "It's kind of contradictory, to tell you the truth," he says.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell's office declined to comment, but National Park Service spokesman Jeffrey Olson says that though there are challenges getting young people into the parks, "I don't believe this adds to the list."

Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., who chaired the June hearing, notes that the administration promotes tourism as a replacement for the extractive industries that have been "strangled by regulation." "So it's rather ironic that now the executive branch is working to regulate wilderness tourism out of business," Lummis said at the hearing.

But Michael Lazzeri, a Labor Department assistant administrator, believes that the added costs would be offset by benefits, including improved employee morale, reduced turnover and increased productivity. "We're rewarding a hard day's work," Lazzeri says.

Some outdoor industry leaders seem relatively unworried; the National Outdoor Leadership School, for example, plans to continue paying salaries to its hundreds of wilderness "instructors," since bona fide professionals are exempt from the wage

A Wilderness Adventure hike on Shadow Mountain in the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

COURTESY WILDERNESS ADVENTURES/DAVID J. SWIFT

requirement. "Some of them probably do and some probably don't get \$10.10 for every hour," says Linda Lindsey, NOLS' director of human resources and diversity. "We don't guide; we teach." Other employees will be covered by the new rule, including the wilderness horse-packers who transport food to the campers.

Still, many outfitters — especially those who take people hunting, fishing, rafting and climbing in national parks, forests and wildlife refuges — say they'll have to rethink their business models or shut down altogether.

Pat Tabor owns a company that offers horseback rides in Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall National Forest. Even though he's a former accountant, he says, he's avoided calculating the impact the rule will have on his business. "I'm almost afraid to run the math."

Like many outfitters, Tabor pays wranglers a salary for what can be round-the-clock work. "The new wage will make it extraordinarily difficult for us to survive," Tabor says. The most "egregious" part will be paying time-and-a-half for overtime, given that his 40 wranglers work about 72 hours a week, he says. He could hire extra workers to avoid the overtime but has no idea where they'd sleep. Or he could simply reduce his hours of operation. Whatever happens, he'll probably raise the fee for a two-hour ride from \$65 to between \$80 and \$100 — too pricey, he worries, for many families, and perhaps more than the National Park Service will allow him to charge. "It could be that it doesn't pencil out, that it doesn't make practical sense," to stay in business, he says.

The Forest Service recognizes that the extra paperwork — tracking hours, tips and other compensation, such as housing and food — will be difficult for outfitters, most of whom own small businesses. The agency estimates that 90 percent have revenues of less than \$100,000 a year.

Mark Davidson, 29, understands both sides. For seven years, since he graduated from college, he's worked as a ski instructor in the winter and a backcountry guide and teacher in the summer. He's rarely made \$10 an hour, and usually much less, considering all the hours he put in.

"You do it because you're passionate about sharing your interest and what the outdoors has taught you," Davidson says. "It's extremely fulfilling and it's very, very fun." But it's not a living, so this fall, he's returning to college to get a degree in biology.

Davidson's experience reveals a weakness of the New West's economy, which increasingly relies on recreation. Loggers and miners make good money; some even have pensions. Not so rec workers. "If you can't live off of it, what's the point of calling it a career?" Davidson says.

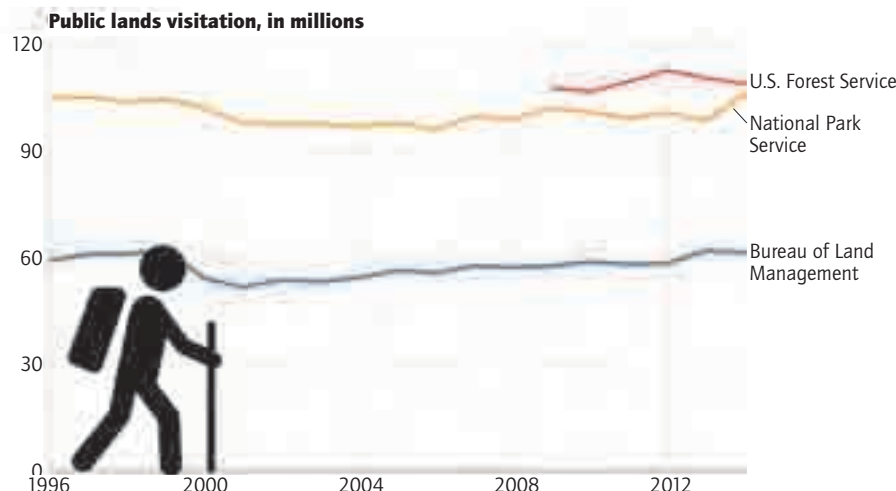
That's why he supports the new wage. "I think it's a great thing. I think it's needed for the industry." After all, the new rule offers something the current system doesn't: It gives people like Davidson a chance to build a future in the field, instead of forcing them to leave work they love. □

The madding crowd

Public-lands visitation and recreation in the West, by the numbers

BY MARSHALL SWEARINGEN

35 million The population of the West in 1970
72 million in 2010



FOREST SERVICE data is for Western regions. The agency began reliable visitor-use data monitoring in 2009.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE data includes all lands administered by the agency in the Pacific West, Intermountain and Alaska regions, not just national parks.

Where do Western parks fit in the nation's top 50?



Rank	Name	Recreation visitors in 2014
6	Lake Mead NRA	6,942,873
10	Grand Canyon NP	4,756,771
15	San Francisco Maritime NHP	4,256,888
19	Yosemite NP	3,882,642
22	Yellowstone NP	3,513,484
23	Rocky Mountain NP	3,434,751
25	Olympic NP	3,243,872
27	Zion NP	3,189,696
30	Grand Teton NP	2,791,392
35	Point Reyes NS	2,433,944
36	Glen Canyon NRA	2,368,452
37	Glacier NP	2,338,528
41	Mount Rushmore NM	2,144,808
49	Joshua Tree NP	1,589,904

5
Percent of total non-skiing visits to Western national forests from 2010-2013 that were to **designated wilderness** areas.

86
Percent of trips to national forests that were for **recreation** during 2008-2012.

43
Percent increase in participation in **backpacking** nationwide since 2006.

-20
Percent decrease in non-RV, non-backcountry **camping** nationwide since 2006.

-14
Percent decrease in **RV camping** nationwide since 2006.
SOURCES: U.S. FOREST SERVICE, OUTDOOR FOUNDATION

The Cheryl Strayed phenomenon

1,879

Number of permits for long-distance hiking (500+ miles) on Pacific Crest Trail in 2013.

2,655

SOURCE: PACIFIC CREST TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Number in 2014, probably due in large part to Strayed's popular memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* — which describes her experience hiking the trail as a troubled young woman — and its 2014 film adaptation.

1 in 25

Chances of getting a permit from the Forest Service to float the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho in 2010.

1 in 28

Chances in 2015.

SOURCE: SALMON-CHALLIS NATIONAL FOREST

Sasquatch Meadows, on the 600-acre Clear Creek Ranch in Northern California, sports its own swimming hole, below, and private waterfall. It was the first private-land campsite listed on the Hipcamp site. COURTESY HIPCAMP.COM/DANI NOMURA



Can I camp on your land?

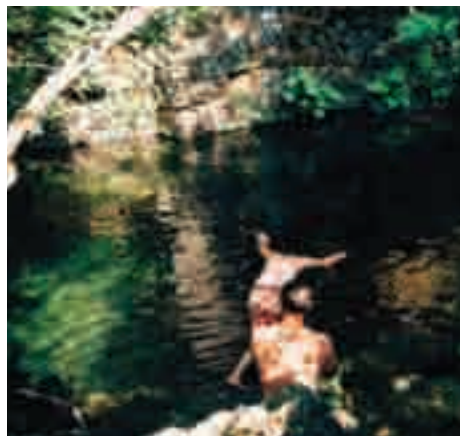
Private-land camping startups offer an alternative to crowded public lands

BY SARAH GILMAN

On a sticky June evening, I pull onto the narrow shoulder of U.S. 30, 12 miles northwest of Portland, Oregon. Cars speed past my little Tacoma camper as I stroll down a short hill singed yellow by the heat wave. Nearly hidden from view behind rambunctious apple trees is Carey Haider's two-story Quonset hut. Blackberry brambles creep along its edges, growing into a high thicket on the other side of the railroad tracks that run less than 20 paces from his back door. Beyond a towering power line, more mushroom clouds of greenery explode along the banks of the Multnomah Channel, blocking it from view.

Haider, who sports a beard and suspenders, leads me past an overturned toilet to piles of sledgehammered sheetrock and siding. There, he points out a flat spot where I can park and lay my head for the night. "It looks like a meth house right now," apologizes the 31-year-old graphic designer and photographer. He bought the property in December and is in the midst of overhauling it. "Whatever," I tell him. "It beats KOA."

I mean it, too, even though Haider's planned noise-blocking fence, camp trailers and wood-fired hot tub aren't yet in place. Finding a private, pleasant spot to sleep outdoors, especially near a city, can be tough. Try a pullout or parking lot, and you'll often find a police flashlight in your face at 2 a.m.



And state and national park and forest campgrounds overflow with generator-grinding RVs. Haider has signed up with a new Portland-based startup called Land Apart to provide campers with another way: Access to private land via an online service.

"We wanted to improve the camping experience" — especially for folks who aren't sure where to start, says CEO and cofounder Ven Gist. "A lot of them look on public lands, which are awesome, but also overused. And a lot of times, they don't go, because they think sites are unavailable or will be too crowded." Meanwhile, he says, the potential supply of private land is enormous, and campsites and event spaces can provide landowners with extra income and

incentive to keep it undeveloped.

Like Haider's place, LandApart is under construction. The company, which is ironing out details with invite-only guests and 20 to 30 mostly Northwest-based hosts, aims to offer everything from backyards to ranches, and to open its website for general use by fall. Only a handful of sites offer similar services. Venture capital-funded San Francisco startup Hipcamp, already a clearinghouse for public-land camping info, launched its own private-land sharing initiative this summer. According to founder Alyssa Ravasio, the company is working with 50 to 60 hosts and had 56 California sites bookable at press time, with 50 more in the pipeline. And foreign-based Campr and Gamping (think garden camping) can set you up with landowners around the world, though Western U.S. offerings are sparse.

Generally, landowners set their own rules and prices, and the company facilitating the transaction takes a cut. LandApart sites, geared more toward primitive camping, now range from \$5 to \$60; Hipcamp's are pricier, from \$30 to \$300 for a group geodesic dome.

Nathanael Siemens anticipates being in the middle of Hipcamp's range. The drought hastened the sale of his family's almond orchard, and he's hoping the ocean-view group campsite he's listing will help support the new farm he's running on 120 acres outside Lompoc, California, where he and his wife grow and mill



What's crowded? Not necessarily the backcountry.

grain. With courses in cheese making and friends staying to help out, "it's become a learning farm," Siemens says. "I hope people come because they want to hang out with animals or learn to milk, instead of busting out coolers and beers and using our property as a launch pad."

That vision fits well with private-land camping's sharing-economy business model, which targets urban Millennials more interested in unique experiences than owning lots of stuff. But companies are thinking bigger, too. "We want to move more landowners into a protected space," says Ravasio — and eventually blur the line between public and private land to support recreation *and* preserve wilderness corridors. Campsites could financially bolster open space and even conservation easements — wherein landowners exchange development rights for tax benefits — and provide taxpayers more access to what they've paid for.

It's too early to tell if that will pan out, says Darla Guenzler, executive director of the California Council of Land Trusts. Still, "if people have more ways to enjoy and connect with the outdoors, their appreciation will grow. There are a lot of ways to protect lands other than having big iconic parks."

But building and sustaining a large inventory of campsites may prove difficult if financial rewards aren't high enough — especially since hosts would be liable for accidents and commercial insurance can be expensive. The first wave may be mostly larger landholders who have policies for existing operations, says LandApart's Hosted Lands Manager Dallas Hemphill, who is listing sites on his family's 500-plus-acre cattle ranch near Philomath, Oregon.

Haider is essentially offering his backyard, but it's zoned commercial/residential, so he has commercial insurance. And though the income will be nice, he's more excited about offering people a cheap but interesting haven off the beaten path. "That's kind of how I travel, too," he says. "It all just comes back to a good story."

After Haider leaves, I wonder what story I'll tell about this place. It won't include the trains that Haider says roll through slow as ghosts, because when I walk the tracks in the failing light, none come. And it won't involve being murdered by bloodthirsty hobos, because the human-like silhouettes I spot in the distance never move. If I didn't have to work tomorrow, I could visit the clothing-optional beach on neighboring Sauvie Island. Or jog in Forest Park, a public preserve just to the south. I lie in my sleeping bag and stare toward the Multnomah. The highway traffic trickles to silence and the forest creaks with frogs. As I drift off, I hear what I imagine to be the channel itself, whispering on its way into the arms of the Columbia. □

46,000

Number of visits in 2013 to wilderness areas within Bridger-Teton National Forest, adjacent to Yellowstone National Park (out of 1,623,000 total visits to the Forest)

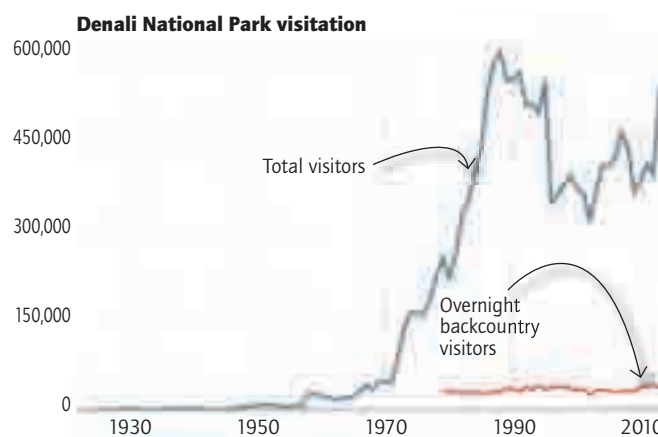
SOURCE: FOREST SERVICE



1,204

Number of summit attempts on Denali in 2014.

SOURCE: DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE



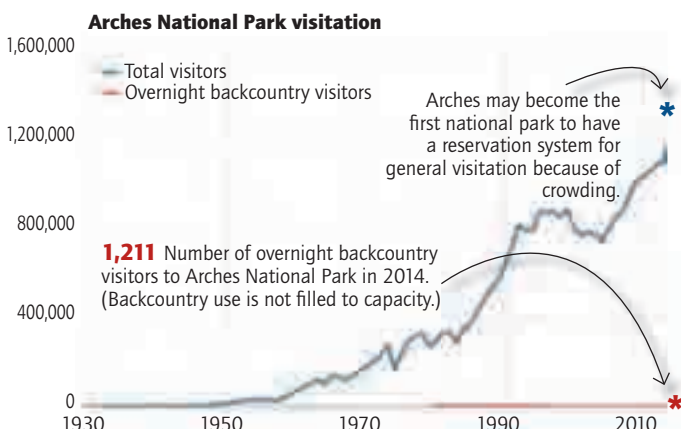
42

Percent increase in Memorial Day Weekend traffic on Highway 191 near Arches National Park between 2012 and 2015, likely caused in part by Utah's "Mighty 5" (national parks) marketing campaign. On the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend in 2015, traffic backed up so far near the turnoff to Arches the Utah Highway Patrol shut down and cleared the intersection for two hours.

WEB EXTRA
For more on congestion at Arches, go to hcn.ws/archescrowds



Vehicles line the road at the Devils Garden trailhead in Arches National Park. MARK HEDLUND



Some hotspots get all the attention

Case study: Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness and adjacent Scenic Area
Aspen, Colorado

With seven stunning fourteeners and trails climbing through passes full of wildflowers — all within a four-hour drive of Colorado's bustling Front Range — the area is a magnet for people.

123,128

Number of people who rode the Maroon Bells Scenic Area's fleet of five shuttle buses in 2014. The road is closed to other traffic from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day during high season.

189

Percent increase in overnight visitation in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness since 2006. (2006: 4,020; 2014: 11,615).

1,500

Number of complimentary "WAG bags" — specialized zip-lock bags, which hikers can use to pack out their scat — distributed at the trailhead to Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness's Conundrum Hot Springs, to reduce human waste around the popular overnight destination. Cost to Forest Service: \$2,250.

11

Number of backcountry campsites in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness closed last August due to problems with habituated black bears.

21

Number of rescues in 2014 involving ATVs or helicopters in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness.

SOURCE: WHITE RIVER NATIONAL FOREST



Misadventures in packrafting

A more expensive way for less experienced people to access rivers

BY KRISTA LANGLOIS

I'm not going to die. Or so I tell myself. I'm huddled on a rock ledge in the Alaskan bush, crumbly cliff above, whitewater below; I can't see my friends and I don't have bear spray or even a granola bar. And now, Lord help me, it's raining.

This is my introduction to packrafting, a sport that takes its name from durable boats small enough to fit into a backpack yet capable of navigating class V whitewater. In Alaska, where packrafting evolved, an adventurer with a two-pound raft and a break-down paddle can hike, bike or ski deep into a river's remote headwaters, then inflate her boat and paddle back to civilization. But

as rivers become increasingly crowded and permits more elusive, packrafting's popularity has expanded beyond Alaska's backcountry.

It's hard to gauge just how much the sport has grown; pioneering manufacturer Alpacka Raft won't release official numbers. But founder Sheri Tingey says that in 15 years, the company has grown from a single employee to 15. Meanwhile, the overall number of packraft manufacturers has jumped from one to nine. The National Outdoor Leadership School offers packraft-specific courses, and tourism companies rent packrafts to basically anyone.

Packrafts are easier to paddle than hardshell kayaks, and inherently cooler than bulky, old-fashioned inflatables. They "are to kayakers what snowboarding was to skiers two decades ago," says Brad Meiklejohn, president of the American Packrafting Association, which formed in 2009 and now has 1,900 members in 40 countries. At \$1,500 or so for a setup, though, they've also become a more expensive way for inexperienced people to get on the water. "Packrafts make it easy to get into trouble," Meiklejohn says frankly. "They're an idiot-friendly craft."

I'm an OK whitewater kayaker, so when my friends Jule and Steve invite me to try packrafting near Anchorage, I assume I'll swiftly master the more forgiving sport. I'm disappointed when I learn we won't be tackling some remote river we'd have to hike miles to reach, but figure that since I'm here to cover the sport's growing popularity in the Lower 48, paddling a road-access river in Alaska makes sense. Plus, how much trouble can I get into with a highway nearby?

On a sunny June morning, we load up Jule's Subaru and head into the vast boreal forest that rolls out beyond the city. I squeeze into my dry suit as suavely as one can squeeze their head through a rubber gasket, which is to say I appear as though I'm being birthed by a rhinoceros. Before long, we're paddling down class II rapids in brilliant sunshine. The

float ends without incident. We high-five. Then Jule asks if we feel confident enough to run the upper section of the creek, which is class III-plus. Gamely (stupidly, one might even say), we agree.

This time, as we push through the forest to the river, the roar of the whitewater is deeper. We climb into our boats, snap our spray skirts into place and bounce through a rocky, foaming drop, off boulders that could have easily tipped a hard-shell boat. "This is fun!" I holler.

We drop through a few more rapids. Clouds build overhead. Then I paddle into a hole and find myself upside down, popped out of my packraft and swimming. There's an eddy of calm water on the right; I swim for it, gulping air and water in equal measure. Distantly, I hear Jule yelling for me to swim left.

In the eddy, heart pounding, I stand up and realize why: I'm cliffed out. If I want to get downstream to where Jule (I hope) has rescued my boat, I'll have to cross the river. So I jump back in the frigid water, aim for an eddy on the opposite shore — and am immediately swept downstream. Just before I'm pulled into another ugly drop, I manage to haul myself onto a dinner table-sized ledge, where I sit for an unknown period of time contemplating the increasingly rain-sodden abyss of my own mortality.

Then Steve's head appears through the tangle of green bushes above. "Jule thinks you should swim," he says. "She's waiting for you below."

I eye the rapid. I envision myself hurtling down it with the force of 600 basketballs a second, ping-ponging off rocks. I envision myself *not* making the tiny eddy that Steve claims is down there. I vigorously shake my head.

So while Steve dashes off to get a rope, I MacGyver a climbing harness out of my PFD and a carabiner. When he returns, I tie in, take a breath, and toe onto a microscopic foothold. Then in what feels like the bravest act of my life, I swing out into the void, suspended for a split second over the whitewater. Steve grabs my hand and yanks me up into the bush.

"YOU'RE THE STRONGEST MAN IN THE WORLD!" I scream.

Afterward, drinking a beer at the take-out, I wonder if Meiklejohn was thinking of me when he called packrafts "idiot-friendly." But he'd also said that, despite their hardcore reputation, packrafts today are just as often used for casual floats in front-country lakes — something you can keep in your car and inflate whenever you feel like getting on the water. Next time, I'll stick with that. □

The author, ready for her big float.
COURTESY KRISTA LANGLOIS





Resting along the White Rim Road. SARAH TORY

Where there's a wheel, there's a way

Bikepacking can get you beyond the Western sightseeing hit list

BY SARAH TORY

One weekend in May, I bump down the swooping turns of a jeep track in Utah's Canyonlands National Park. My friend Cecilia and I are embarking on a three-day bike trip along the White Rim Road, which skirts the chiseled contours of the Colorado and Green rivers at the southern edge of the park's Island in the Sky district. Cecilia and I met in college and have since made many poor decisions for adventure's sake; tackling 100 miles of blazing-hot desert promises to be no different.

Aside from one spot two days in, where the road descends from the rims to touch the muddy Green River, for example, there is no water. This means you must carry nearly all you need — and fight the urge to guzzle it prematurely as the dry air sucks moisture from your body.

A friend had insisted we cache water along the route or enlist a support car — “so you can drink beers in your camping chairs at the end of the day.” (The Park Service “highly recommends” the same, for soberer reasons.)

“No way,” I replied. I wanted to carry everything in my bike's three small bags, following in the tracks of cyclists going back to the early 1900s. But where they mostly rode pavement on skinny tires, we journey over more rugged ground: The White Rim Road is high-clearance and so remote that a tow can cost drivers more than \$1,000. This makes it perfect for bikepacking — a cross between classic bike touring and backpacking that opens up vast networks of underused national forest roads, ATV tracks and singletrack, often far from more conventional destinations.

Bikepacking was popularized in the early 2000s by mountain bike racers, who pedaled hundreds of miles over many days with little gear. By 2010, non-racers had picked up the minimalist ethic, and manufacturers began designing bags that were lighter and less cumbersome

than traditional rack-and-pannier setups. New routes were pioneered and competitions created, including the unofficial 750-mile Arizona Trail Race and the 2,700-mile Tour Divide Race along the Continental Divide from Canada to New Mexico. In 2004, the Tour Divide's first year, less than 20 people entered. This year, there were 150.

Bikepacking's appeal is obvious to Cecilia and me. You can ride much farther than you can walk over the same timeframe, without heavy backpacks. And you see places in unexpected ways: The routes are often hybrids, linking singletrack with dirt roads and occasional stretches of pavement. Sometimes you have to drag your bike under a fence. The goal: Find those in-between places lying halfway between wilderness and civilization.

We pedal beneath crumbling red-rock towers, and stare into canyons that tumble away in sudden, stomach-turning drops, as if an angry god scooped out great chunks of earth. Spring moisture has carpeted rocky ledges with green; cactus flowers splash pink in a sea of reddish brown.

And we are alone, mostly; the park's permit system strictly limits backcountry campers. A few jeeps loaded with uncomfortable-looking passengers rattle by. There are some bikers, too, though all are on van-supported guided tours. “Need any water?” one driver asks, slightly incredulous when we shake our heads no.

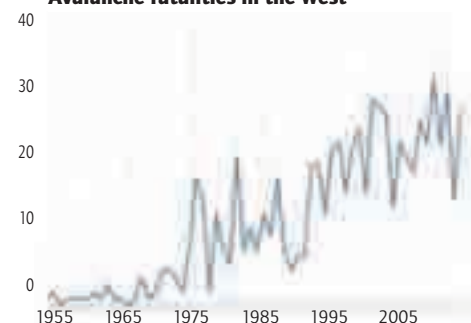
Luckily, recent storms left pools of water in the rocks where we spend our first night. Otherwise, our 15 liters might not have lasted. Unluckily, dark clouds roll in the next afternoon, bringing thunder, lightning, and more rain. “I guess we should have brought the tent,” says Cecilia; to save weight, I had left it behind. But just before the storm hits, we find a rock ledge to sleep beneath, sheltered from the rain. And what if we weren't so lucky? Well, I remind Ceci, at least we could get out of here faster on bikes than on foot. □



New rec has new impacts

- 15%** Decline in number of skiers and snowboarders using marked trails in ski resorts between the winters of 2008-2009 and 2013-2014.
- 49%** Increase in number of skiers and snowboarders visiting backcountry terrain (including terrain accessed from ski areas) over that same period.
- 144%** Increase in registered snowmobiles in Western states except New Mexico (1990: 110,829, 2015: 270,770).

Avalanche fatalities in the West



Fatalities in Western states, including Alaska, associated with backcountry touring, sidecountry skiing, climbing and snowmobiling.



- 3.6 million** Estimated number of four-wheeled ATVs in use nationwide in 1999.
- 10.2 million** Number in 2008. (183% increase)
- 130,000** Number of visitors to BLM's Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area in southeastern California on Thanksgiving weekend in 2014. The majority were there to ride ATVs in a 127,000-acre motorized use area.

SOURCES: SNOWSPORTS INDUSTRIES AMERICA, INTERNATIONAL SNOWMOBILE MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION, COLORADO AVALANCHE INFORMATION CENTER, GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, BLM.

An extreme pursuit

*Recent deaths
renew calls to
rescind
a national
park BASE
jumping ban*

BY CALLY CARSWELL

In October 1999, five people climbed El Capitan in Yosemite National Park to commit an act of civil disobedience: parachuting off the 3,000-foot-high granite cliff. They knew that park officials would dole out notices to appear in court afterward, fine them \$2,000, and confiscate their gear, because BASE jumping, or parachuting from stationary objects, is illegal in national parks. A 1965 law that predates the sport forbids “aerial delivery” of people or goods into parks.

The jumpers were protesting that law, which was unjustified, they said, and had contributed to the recent death of Frank Gambalie, who drowned fleeing rangers after a jump. Media, park officials, supporters and tourists gathered in a meadow to watch. “Jump to freedom!” someone hollered, while another howled, “Down with the Park Service!”

Jan Davis jumped fourth. She wore a black-and-white-striped jumpsuit, and anticipating confiscation, a borrowed parachute on her back. Ten seconds in, when her parachute still hadn’t released, a man filming from El Capitan tensed up. “Pull, woman,” he begged. “Dude, she’s got problems, man,” he said after a few more seconds passed. Then, he gasped: “Oh, my God.” Davis hit the base of the cliff, dying on impact.

“It was a horrible thing,” says Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman. The park’s willingness to consider legalizing BASE jumping ended that day.

Two high-profile deaths in Yosemite this May, however, provoked new calls from jumpers to end a ban that they consider discriminatory and an indirect cause of fatalities. “This is public land, these users are not impacting the resource, and they have every right to be there,” says Steph Davis, a Moab-based professional rock climber and BASE jumper.

In the U.S., BASE enthusiasts say that many of the best and safest features to leap from — very tall cliffs — are in national parks. The height and verticality of Yosemite’s sheer walls and the broad valley below make it, in particular, a jumper’s dreamscape. By comparison, the cliffs on Bureau of Land Management land near Moab, where jumping is legal, are much lower — and thus, more perilous — with sketchier landings.

“To a U.S. mountain flier,” explains Zak Tessier, a wingsuit pilot, an advanced form of BASE jumping, “the question would be, which would you rather put more at risk: Your life on a 20-second BLM flight, or



your freedom and wings on an exponentially safer one-and-a-half-minute national park flight?”

Dean Potter and Graham Hunt took the latter risk on May 16, when they launched off Yosemite’s Taft Point after 7 p.m. They wore wingsuits, with fabric between the legs and under the arms that allows humans to soar like flying squirrels, sometimes within feet of trees and rock. Both men perished when they failed to clear a shadowy notch on a nearby ridge.

Their deaths renewed outrage over the law. Avoiding “ranger danger” is always a major concern, says Tessier. “We feel a real need to be like ghosts,” and jumping in fading light is a common, but risky, strategy. “There’s a thing called the ‘doom factor,’ which is shadows,” explains Rick Harrison, a longtime BASE jumper. “As the sun sets, shadows move over the land very

rapidly. It can really play tricks on you.”

Harrison says the sport’s illegality has been a factor in “almost every fatality” he knows of in parks. “It causes jumpers to jump in low light, using old or used gear. It causes them to rush, instead of focus.” Davis believes the law played a part in the death of Sean Leary, a close friend, in an after-dusk jump in Zion last year.

But the jumpers’ own rule-breaking record is one of the reasons the ban persists. In 1980, soon after skydiver and BASE pioneer Carl Boenish filmed some of the earliest jumps from El Capitan, Yosemite officials agreed to a trial period, issuing up to 12 daily permits, similar to how they regulate hang gliding, which is legal one day per week from Glacier Point. When all the permits were claimed, however, some jumped without them, and a group known as the “flatbed 10” drove a truck up El Cap-





itan to avoid the hike. “The hang-gliding community has always been very compliant with the regulations,” says Gediman, “whereas the BASE jumpers have not.”

Gediman adds that jumping created a “circus-like atmosphere,” and Park Service policies specify that activities must not interfere with “the atmosphere of peace and tranquility.” Crowds gathered to watch during the trial period, and on its last day, Boenish and others jumped from a pogo stick, skateboard and stilts. “There were just too many free spirits, and we had to shut them down,” Bill Wendt, then chief ranger, says in *Sunshine Superman*, a new documentary about Boenish.

Jumpers today argue that BASE is a Leave No Trace sport, with as little environmental impact as hiking. Plus, says Davis, “(Yosemite) has an ice cream stand and a skating rink.” The idea that jump-

ers would taint the “natural” atmosphere of the RV-clogged park is, she says, “a little ridiculous.”

Ultimately, though, a proposed activity must not only do no harm, it must enhance a park’s “purpose,” “values” and “visitor experience,” subjective criteria that can make decisions seem somewhat random. Along with hang gliding, for instance, Yosemite allows highlining, a sport that Potter pioneered, where people walk a thin piece of webbing rigged across canyons or other chasms. Mountain biking is allowed in portions of some parks, but not most, and kayaking is illegal in parts of Yellowstone and Grand Teton.

A 2006 policy revision allowed individual parks to permit jumping at their discretion, but it’s still authorized at only one in West Virginia, only one day annually. Cindy Purcell, chief ranger at Zion,

says her park hasn’t formally considered legalized jumping. But if they did, they’d consider whether landings might impact sensitive plants or animals, what sort of demands might fall to search and rescue, and whether the activities of the few would impact the experience of the many. “We always have to ask that question: How does it relate to the purpose of the park?” she explains. “Is the spectacle in Zion the geology, or is the spectacle watching somebody fly from the cliffs?”

The BLM, on the other hand, takes a “come one, come all” approach. Beth Ransel, head of the Moab field office, says that BASE jumpers are light on the land and seldom provoke conflict with other user groups. There’s plenty of space, and their numbers remain small. “Thank God for the BLM,” says Davis. “It’s nice to have places where we’re just normal people.” □

Dean Potter BASE jumping in Yosemite National Park in 2007. DREW KELLY

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THE CROWN OF THE CONTINENT: THE WILDEST ROCKIES

Steven Gnam
193 pages, softcover: \$29.95
Mountaineers Books, 2014

The only place in North America where no plant or animal, including the grizzly bear, has gone extinct in the last century is a corridor of remote Rocky Mountain wilderness stretching from Montana into southern Canada. Photographer Steven Gnam has been exploring this region since he was a child. Those early forays — often carried out solo and inadequately prepared — inspired his first book, *The Crown of the Continent*. His goal, he writes, is to “take people into the far reaches of the Crown, up into the mountains, down under the clear waters, deep into its forests. I also wanted to share the views you could see on foot, the views you see with a little sweat and persistence.” The book features 150 full-color photos along with three essays exploring the region’s biodiversity and describing recent conservation efforts. Gnam’s photographs will be on display this October at the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana.



Catch-and-release fishing on the North Fork Flathead River, far left. Gnam en route for a weeklong trip to photograph wildlife and landscapes in midwinter, left.

STEVEN GNAM

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Spring board meeting, and profanity

In early June, just as Colorado’s miraculous May showers evaporated into dry summer heat, *High Country News’* board of directors convened in Paonia. After updates on editorial work, circulation and fundraising, the board spent Saturday working with staff on a new strategic plan. We discussed both internal trends — the continued strength of the print magazine and the rise in online readership — and external ones, such as the boom in online media startups and the struggle to find financial support beyond advertising. (*HCN* itself increasingly relies on philanthropic dollars.) Overall, we’re doing well: Our paid subscription base continues to grow — more than 7 percent over the past year — and we maintain a balanced mix of revenue sources. But board and staff agree that *HCN* needs to be more widely read and have a louder voice in national issues, including climate change, energy development and water. That, however, requires more dexterity in the digital realm, and — as always — more money.

We said a sad “so long” to board members **Wendy Pabich** of Hailey, Idaho, **Sean Benton** of Missoula, Montana, and **Lou Patterson** of Longmont, Colorado, thanking them for their service and dedication to *HCN*. And many thanks to two local businesses — **Ollie’s Ice Cream Shop** and **Revolution Brewing** — for donating ice cream and root beer to the ice cream social that followed “Tug of War,” our panel discussion on local control of federal land.

**PROFANITY POLICY**

It’s obviously been too long since our mothers threatened to wash our mouths out with soap, which explains why, as some readers have noted, a few recent stories have had a few too many four-letter words. We have since clarified our policy on profanity, and will include such words, in direct quotes, only when they are essential to a story’s meaning — as in last October’s “Defuse the West,” for example, where we quoted angry threats directed at federal employees.

CORRECTIONS

In our cover story, “Dust to Dust” (6/22/15), we inadvertently relocated Molycorp’s Mountain Pass Mine; it’s between Baker and the Nevada border rather than Baker and Barstow, California. The subtitle of *Spare Parts*, reviewed in the same issue, should have read *Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream*. In our profile of John Podesta, “Monument Man” (5/25/15), a photo caption misidentified the Washington Monument as the “National Monument.” No snub intended, George.

“It sounds like an Easterner has infiltrated your ranks,” alert reader **Jean-Pierre Cavigelli** wrote recently, responding to a May 25 Heard around the West item about goldfish and pelicans in Boulder, which claimed pelicans are “usually found at the seashore.” White pelicans live and breed in the Interior West, Cavigelli wrote, adding, “Who started this myth that pelicans live near the coast, and why oh why is *HCN* perpetuating it?”

Like the saying goes, “A little bird told us”; we just should have paid more attention to its T-shirt, which read “Greetings From Key West.”

—Cally Carswell,
for the staff

Circulation Associate
Kati Johnson and
Finance Manager
Beckie Avera dish out
treats at *HCN’s* ice
cream social.

BROOKE WARREN

End of the Trail Wars

On a rainy August day in 2012, Jeff Harris entered the scrubby Coconino National Forest near Sedona, Arizona. He carried loppers and pocket saws, but left behind his usual warning system — his dog, Mesa, who'd bark if anyone came near him.

Harris, a well-muscled 38-year-old with a thick Texas twang, was one of Sedona's most notorious mountain bike trail-builders. He had crafted many masterpieces — G-Spot, Bootylicious, Skidmark, Wall Ride, Wash Up, Lovey Dovey, Sloppy Biscuits — trails that total only about six miles, but weave through incredibly rugged country. Most of them are “very black diamond,” the landscaper and part-time professional biker, says proudly.

With a small cadre of two-wheeling diehards, Harris helped transform the quiet New Age mecca of Sedona into singletrack heaven, with over 200 miles of trails winding past towering red rocks and over slickrock in the piñon-and-juniper-covered high desert. There was just one problem: Most of his trails were illegal.

Though Harris had previously promised to stop building trails, he had recently moved to a different part of town and couldn't resist starting what he told himself was his final project: clearing 500 yards of juniper and shrubs to connect two of his favorite trails to a prominent hole in the rock called the Keyhole Cave.

That evening, two Forest Service law enforcement agents came to his house and questioned him. Did Harris know about any illegal trail building behind his house? No, he replied. Then they broke out the pictures: A series of grainy shots caught by a game camera that showed him lopping off tree branches and tossing them aside. In one, he holds a branch triumphantly overhead while downing a beer.

It was one of those “do-gooder” types, Harris says, speaking

of the person who tipped off the Forest Service after following him on one of his previous outings. “She really thought I was out there doing damage — harming trees and killing stuff.”

Harris considered his ad hoc landscaping a public service that prevented bikers from creating their own haphazard paths, but the Forest Service disagreed: It charged him with illegal trail building and destruction of federal property, slapping him with a \$2,500 fine and a year of restricted access to the Coconino Forest.

The bust was part of a larger effort to get a handle on Sedona's mountain-biking explosion, which over two decades has mushroomed from a low-key activity done by a few passionate locals, into a major sport attracting thousands of riders hungry to test their ever-burlier gear on ever-gnarlier terrain. Three years ago, after passively watching the revolution, the agency closed many of the most popular unsanctioned trails and started busting their builders.

The crackdown infuriated many longtime bikers. “I'm proud of what the mountain bikers have created here,” says John Finch, who was recently barred from entering Forest Service land and fined \$5,000 for illegal trail work. Like Harris, Finch spent hundreds of hours building trail, and at one point even created a spreadsheet showing that locals created the majority of the forest's popular trails. Still, he says, “we were considered renegades.”

Recently, however, both bikers and forest officials have begun to wonder: Just how much wear and tear can the forests take? And can bikers peacefully coexist with all the other forest users — motorized and non-motorized?

These questions are being asked on heavily used public lands across the West, but what's happening in Sedona hints at an uncomfortable possibility: Maybe there's just not enough room out here for everyone to do their own thing. Not anymore.

As a decades-long battle between a tribe of local mountain bikers and the Forest Service dies down, Sedona faces the end of its free-wheeling era

FEATURE BY SARAH TORY

JONATHAN "RAMAJON" COGAN moved to Sedona in 1987 from Cleveland Heights, Ohio, drawn to its crystals and natural foods. He soon grew disillusioned with the new-agey kitsch, but found a new spiritual path: Surrounded by wild forests and desert, and blessed with almost-perfect weather year-round, Sedona, he believed, was a mountain-biker's paradise. "It still felt like the Wild West," he remembers, and Cogan, who goes by Rama, wanted to be a modern cowboy.

The Forest Service managed most of that wildland in Sedona's backyard — some 550,000 acres, 18 percent of it federally protected wilderness that was off-limits to bikes. Still, there seemed to be plenty of room for a biking entrepreneur, and Rama asked the agency for a permit to lead commercial mountain biking tours. But he was rejected, he says, primarily due to the straight-laced agency's reluctance to accommodate long-haired rebels like himself.

Undeterred, Rama started a bike shop devoted exclusively to mountain biking. Mountain Bike Heaven became the unofficial center of Sedona's biking culture, which included then-13-year-old Jeff Harris.

Rama and crew began constructing a network of secret trails. They had no desire to build beyond what the wheels of their bicycles — old-school hardtails with no suspension — could create. "We did not cut a branch or move a rock; we rode everything in," says Rama. Sometimes they followed old cattle paths, but mostly they simply picked a starting point and an end point and wove their way through the shrubbery to get there. The final products were curvy and twisty and full of rocks, and encouraged exploration more than athleticism, says Rama. Riders would often take an hour or two to travel just a couple of miles, stopping to tell stories and smoke pot.

None of this (except the pot) was illegal; Forest Service policy allowed "cross-country travel," meaning you could walk or ride

Jason Firstly rides high above Sedona, Arizona, on an exposed rock slab in the Coconino National Forest known as Submarine Rock, a legal trail for mountain bikers.

COLIN MEAGHER





wherever you wanted, so long as you didn't deliberately do anything to alter the landscape.

As the network of unofficial trails grew, though, so did Sedona's reputation in the biking world. By the late 1990s, growing numbers of enthusiasts were descending on the Red Rock District, which abuts the town. New bike shops opened, and, in the years before the recession, Sedona experienced a housing boom. For 15 years, its real estate market was in the top five nationwide, as more and more people, including bikers, bought second homes.

"That was the lifeblood of the town," says Rama. "They'd come in and buy a new house and then come to the bike shop and buy a couple of bikes for their friends; then they'd come back and say, 'I need a couple more.' Literally every week, people would come in like that. It was incredible — phenomenal. And all the construction workers were bikers, too."

Meanwhile, Rama and his crew had become the bad boys of biking. In 1998, during a budget-related government shutdown, Rama and four others tried to ride the Grand Canyon from rim to rim, which was strictly off-limits to bikes. They were arrested at Phantom Ranch and helicoptered out, high on mushrooms. Their exploits earned them the title "the Sedona Five," and in the mountain-biking community, a celebrated place in history.

But the sport was changing. By 2001, there were more than 40 million bikers, and manufacturers began building tougher bikes with forgiving suspensions that allowed riders to test themselves

on harder terrain. Different trails were needed to accommodate the new gear, and a new breed of trail-builders emerged to meet that demand. Using pickaxes and shovels to smooth out paths or build massive jumps, they built new trails that had a bigger impact on the landscape than the pioneer trails. Though several builders, including Jeff Harris, added drainage ditches and special rock placements to prevent erosion, others did not. Some trails careened straight down steep fall-lines or through Native American ruins, which abound around Sedona.

These new trails were illegal, but the Forest Service had limited success in stopping them, says Jennifer Burns, the recreation director for the Red Rock District. The old Coconino forest plan dealt primarily with "traditional uses," she says, mostly grazing and land swaps. It was revised in 1998 to address rising tourism and recreation, but did not consider the rapid growth of trail use. At the time, she says, "the district was focusing on other things." Soon, the agency's laissez-faire approach would be turned on its head.

THE PARKING LOT IS ALMOST FULL when, on a Friday afternoon in late March, I meet Burns at the Yavapai Vista Trailhead, just west of downtown Sedona. Tall and red-haired, wearing turquoise earrings beneath her Forest Service ball cap, Burns has a no-nonsense vibe. She leaves a bright blue expensive-looking mountain bike on the back of her car, as we head onto the trail.

"Most people just want to walk 10



From top left: Jonathan “Ramajon” Cogan, far left, talks with fellow illegal trail-builder John Finch, who is now banned from Forest Service trails, on the streets of Sedona. Forrest Saville points out a trail to a visitor in the Coconino National Forest near Sedona. Below, Jennifer Burns, recreation director for the Red Rock District, with a map of legal forest trails. Facing page, bottom: Lars Romig, president of the Verde Valley Cycling Coalition, has worked with IMBA and the Forest Service to help reduce the number of illegal trails. BROOKE WARREN



minutes, take a picture and leave, so parking just gets crazy,” Burns says, gesturing to the hikers and a few bikers heading into the forest. Over 2 million yearly visitors — more than many national parks receive — arrive on this thin strip of national forest along the highway between Sedona and its smaller offshoot to the west, Oak Creek Village. Today, the road is jammed with cars full of tourists heading into town. “It’s a zoo,” she says.

When Burns started her new job with the Forest Service in 2009, the agency had been fighting a losing battle against the unruly trail system, sending teams out to place rocks, logs and other barriers across the illegal trails causing the most obvious damage. Mountain bikers resented the work, and it quickly turned into a game of cat-and-mouse: As fast as the agency could dismantle a trail, bikers would rebuild it. The local newspaper helped foment the fury when it ran a front-page story on the agency’s destruction of High on the Hog, a prized local trail. “People were at each other’s throats and really disappointed in the Forest Service,” Burns recalls.

Burns believed the agency needed to do more than dismantle the worst trails; it had to start actually providing trails. That meant formally “adopting” some of the illegal trails by doing the necessary archaeological and environmental assessments to make sure they didn’t run through Native American sites or cause erosion. It also meant building some new trails. All of this took money and manpower, though, and with a recreation

budget of just over \$100,000 a year, and a trail crew consisting of one temporary employee and a seasonal crew of two, Burns couldn’t move very fast.

“We are totally budget-strapped,” she says, noting that the regional office simply says, “If you can’t sustain it, don’t build it.”

So Burns turned to the biking community, reaching out to local clubs and to the International Mountain Bike Association, or IMBA, the country’s largest mountain bike advocacy group. Together they organized volunteer trail-work days and an “adopt-a-trail” program in which a rider could take charge of maintaining a particular trail. As part of those efforts, in 2009, the Forest Service announced it would start bringing some of the illegally built trails into its system, including the legendary Hangover — famous for its hold-your-breath-and-pray cliffside traverses. The relationship between Sedona’s mountain bikers and land managers began to improve.

But some thought the agency wasn’t moving fast enough. “I know the bureaucracy,” says Jeff Harris, which “takes forever.” With his own volunteers, Harris could accomplish in a few weeks what would take the Forest Service a whole season — plus, he’d do it for free. Illegal construction continued at a torrid pace: A 2013 Forest Service summary of the activity found brand-new bridges and walls and numerous illegal trails under construction; of the 46 miles of illegal trails it documented, 84 percent were built for mountain bikers. And Burns did not

appreciate the help. “We were blown away by the scale of construction,” she says. “It was just out of control.”

A few months later, in March 2013, the Forest Service clamped down, issuing a two-year order prohibiting mountain bikers from traveling off designated routes in five areas around Sedona. Suddenly, a number of prized trails were illegal, and lawbreakers risked a fine of up to \$5,000 or six months’ jail time.

This drove a wedge into Sedona’s bike community: On one side were those who saw the order — which did not apply to hikers or equestrians — as proof that the Forest Service was biased against mountain bikers. Others were tired of fighting and ready to move on.

The Sedona Mountain Bike Club, many of whose members came from Rama’s old Mountain Bike Heaven crew, fell into the first camp. The club drafted a petition against the closure and posted it on Moveon.org. The Verde Valley Cycling Coalition, on the other hand, was willing to cooperate. The rift widened after IMBA learned of the petition and booted the Sedona Mountain Bike Club from its chapter program — the only time the organization has ever done that.

Patrick Kell, IMBA’s Southwest regional director, declined to discuss the issue, but in a memo that was later posted on a popular mountain-bike forum, he stated that IMBA and some members of the Sedona Mountain Bike Club had “divergent” approaches to mountain-bike advocacy and that IMBA “cannot align with the style of advocacy that some

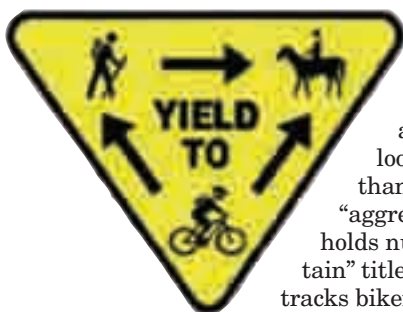
“We were blown away by the scale of construction. It was just out of control.”

—Jennifer Burns, recreation director for the Red Rock District, on the 46 miles of illegal trails documented in a 2013 survey of the Coconino National Forest



Horses and bikes share Bell Rock Pathway in Sedona, Arizona. BROOKE WARREN

A sign found in the Coconino National Forest meant to keep the peace among different user groups.



SMBC Board members are putting forth.”

“(IMBA’s) philosophy is that they need to work with the Forest Service,” Rama says. “As a lobby group, that’s really ass-backwards. Lobby groups are supposed to lobby for what they want on behalf of their constituents.”

But Lars Romig, president of the Verde Valley Cycling Coalition, thinks the Forest Service decision reflected a larger reality. The illegal trail building “wasn’t sustainable,” says Romig, a firefighter and mountain-rescue worker. He’s tanned and fit, and like many locals, looks about a decade younger than his 40 years. He’s also an “aggressive” rider, like Harris, and holds numerous “King of the Mountain” titles on Strava, an app that tracks bikers’ time on various routes. Romig acknowledges that years of illegal trail building have helped bikers. “But at a certain point, you can’t rob banks forever,” he says. “There’s a line in the sand somewhere. Eventually, you get caught, and it’s public land — it’s all of our land.”

Jeff Harris is also tired of fighting. The closure order and his own subsequent bust have changed his outlook. “One,” he says, “the fine sucked. Also, the threat of being caught again, which would mean jail time. I wasn’t down with that. More importantly, though, (the Forest Service) started working with us — and besides, butting heads wasn’t getting us anywhere.”

Now Harris is trying to help raise money to boost the Forest Service’s mea-

ger trail-building budget. Along with a few others, he’s started placing donation boxes at bike shops and hotels around Sedona, an initiative they’ve called the Red Rock Trail Fund. One hotel owner has even started asking guests to pitch in through an additional charge on their room. In one year they’ve raised \$26,000. Burns and her team increasingly rely on such volunteer initiatives to build and maintain trails. “It’s catch as catch can,” she says.

Other money has come from grants to the Verde Valley Cyclists Coalition, which the Forest Service has allowed to upgrade some trails, and last year the city of Sedona chipped in \$110,000 to build a bike-skills park (and a further \$10,000 annually for maintenance). All told, Red Rock County now has 222 miles of mountain-bike trails, and the business community is marketing Sedona as a biking destination, says Jennifer Wesselhof, president of the Sedona Chamber of Commerce. The sport, she adds, has matured: “We felt the mountain bikers and the Forest Service were coming together.”

BEFORE WE LEAVE the parking lot, Burns stops to chat with a couple of mountain bikers just back from a ride. They’re from British Columbia, part of the annual early-spring influx of Canadians. They love it here and wonder when one of the recently closed trails — a favorite — will re-open. Burns assures them that the Forest Service is working on it.

But no one knows Sedona’s carrying capacity, and that troubles Burns. On the slickrock overlook above the Yavapai Vista Trailhead, hikers and bikers flow

over the top. Above us, the *thwack-thwack* of a helicopter punctures the air and far below, pink specks move along the highway — the now-ubiquitous “pink jeep” tours that take tourists on off-road excursions through the desert.

“Everyone wants to have a good trail system,” she says, “but what is sustainable recreation? It’s not just about having more and more of it; we have to make sure it’s compatible with the land.”

Burns hopes the agency will ultimately implement a ban on cross-country travel on all forest land around Sedona. This would put Sedona in line with other recreation-intensive Western meccas, such as, such as Moab, Utah, where bikers have a great trail system but are limited to official routes.

In May, the Forest Service extended the closure order for another two years, effectively banning all cross-country travel for mountain bikers on unauthorized trails. Though some riders — chiefly those involved with the original petition — remain disgruntled, the general reaction has been more subdued. Most of the illegal trail building has stopped, something Burns attributes to the slew of successful convictions against unauthorized trail builders, along with the agency’s progress in building and adopting new trails that offer riders a variety of riding challenges and terrain. And perhaps mountain bikers are beginning to realize that the land itself has limits.

Burns believes the agency’s closure order is in line with its goal of offering citizens a contemplative experience in the wild. On the way back to the parking lot, she tells me that ultimately biking on public lands is “not really about sport.”

That’s a sentiment even Rama might agree with; he admits, on my last ride before leaving town, that “we are loving Sedona to death.” But the rules and regulations designed to protect places from people still raise his hackles. And he worries that Forest Service and BLM closures will continue, despite the recent collaboration.

One afternoon, we head out onto Anaconda, one of the original trails Rama and his crew “rode in” decades ago. He’s wearing aviator sunglasses and a faded Hawaiian shirt, his hair in a long graying braid — looking more like an easy-going aging hippie than a mountain-biking warrior in full-body armor. Instead of a \$5,000 carbon-fiber bike, he still rides an old hardtail. “People say watching me ride is kinda like watching water flow uphill,” he says, as we roll over chunky Sedona dirt through a tangled cactus-studded forest.

“We’re outspoken people,” he says, when I ask why he won’t accept the closure order. “We’re not just going to sit down and say, ‘Yes,’ because we’re not yes men.”

We reach an intersection where a big Forest Service alert sign warns us that the trail is closed except to pedestrian traffic. Rama stops and looks around briefly. “Well,” he says, a mischievous glint in his eyes, “I can’t resist.” □

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

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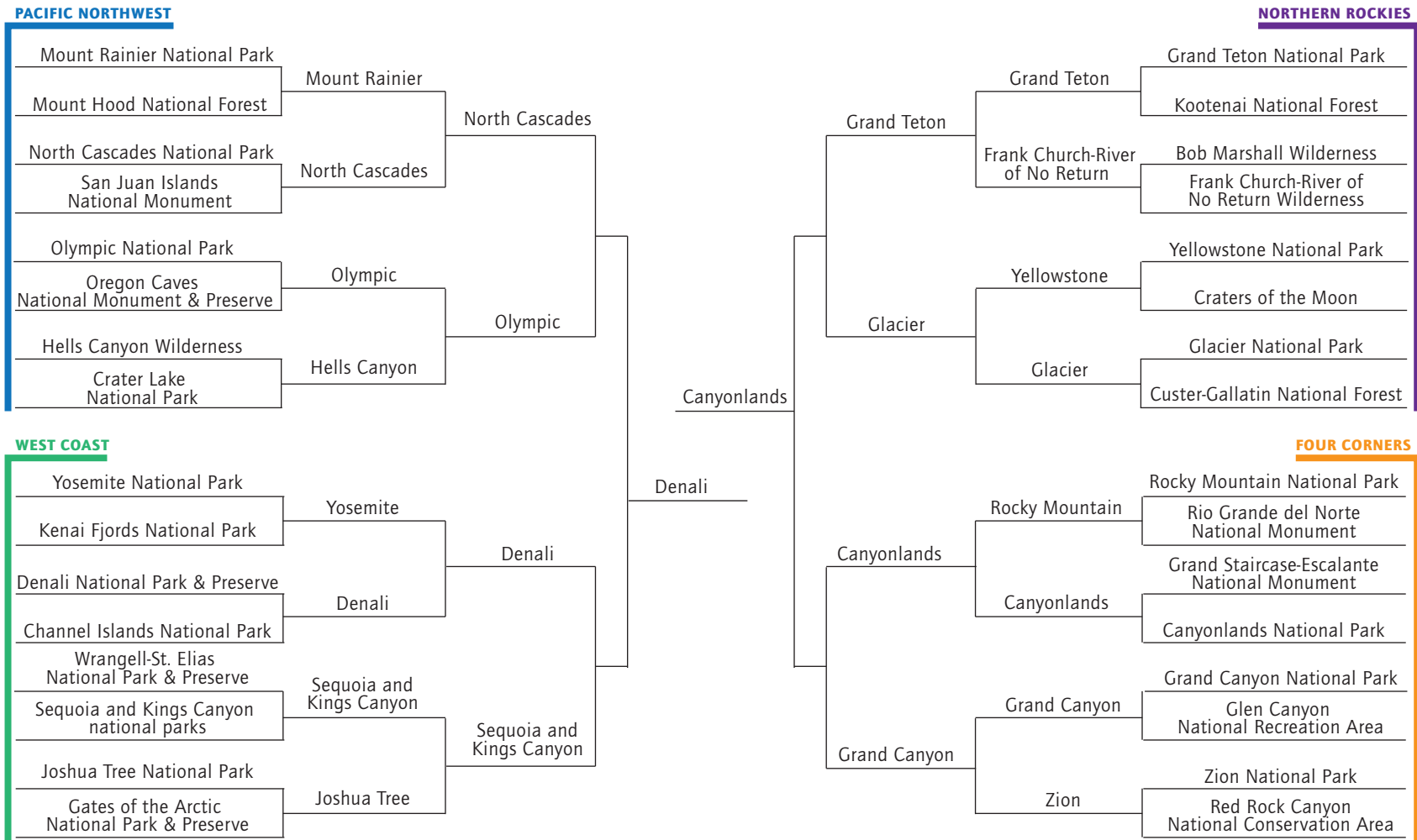


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Land of rock colonies

LOCATION: SOUTHEAST WYOMING

BY MANASSEH FRANKLIN

A friend once said that living in such close proximity to Vedauwoo is like living in a national park. Most days, I quietly disagree. The wind in southeast Wyoming is intolerable at best, crazy-making at worst. The landscape is mostly rolling, mellow, void of high summits and the knife-ridge summits I moved to the West to explore.

But there is something oddly enticing about these rolling high plains, something about the hardness of the wind-scoured lands, particularly in and around Vedauwoo. Here the landscape is punctuated by towering rock colonies that seem to have been deposited at random. Some days, these granite figures do feel like mountains — commanding, humbling, erratic and enticing. But they feel like something more, too — mysterious, operating on their own accord.

This didn't hit me, I didn't get it, until

I took a trail run one day. Now, I can't stay away.

It was spring, warm. Birdcalls filled still air. Green shoots

burst from the edges of a trail that wound among piles of boulders, some as the size of one-story houses, others as tall as city skyscrapers. There were fins of rock, striations extending from the far edges of the trail, rock layers embedded in layers of prairie hill, sagebrush. My legs charged up, my legs braced down. In some spots, aspen groves spilled out between rocks. The white bark popped against the sandy-colored granite. A muted breeze touched my face, bare arms, neighboring sage leaves.

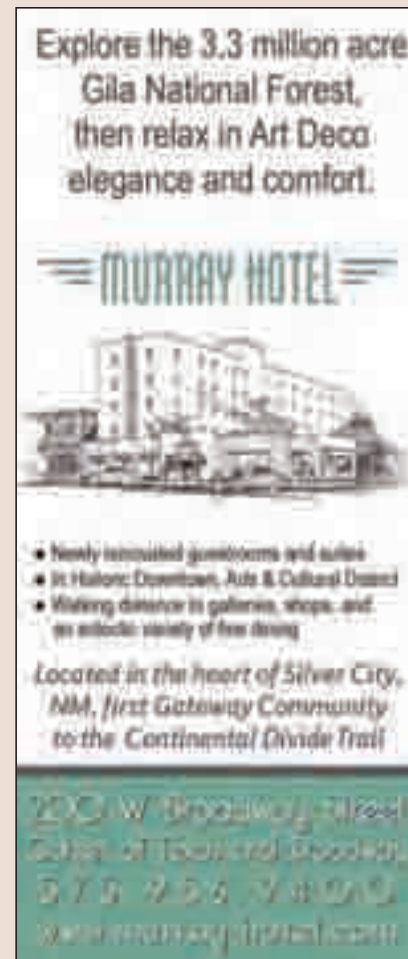
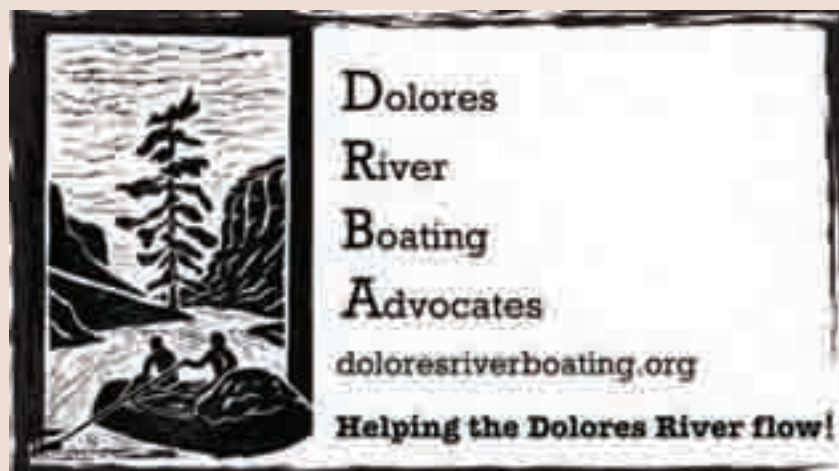
In between hard, fast breaths, I filled my lungs. I filled my eyes. This place is incredible. I laughed. And I ran, and I ran, until my breath — but not the space, never the space — finally came up short. □



Climbers scale granite cracks in Vedauwoo.
COULTER SUNDERMAN/CC FLICKR

Readers' favorite recreation locations

We asked readers to tell us stories about their favorite adventures on the West's public land. Here are some off-the-beaten-path places to recreate.





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The wild unknown

LOCATION: THE WEST

BY AARON ANDERSON

The best place to recreate in the West? It's the unexpected place, the impulsive detour into the unknown.

I once drove the West with a good friend, on a trip that took three weeks. The hours behind the wheel were sometimes intolerable. Every day, we stopped to run, to stretch our legs and keep ourselves sane. (It reduced any sibling-style road-trip bickering.) Armed with only a *Rand McNally Road Atlas*, we would pick a patch of green on the map and hope for a trail.

These unplanned detours were the highlights of our trip. A quick exit off I-80 revealed Turtle Rock jutting out of the Wyoming plains, sunset illuminating the pine-ringed rock. We spent a joyful afternoon on the Skyline-to-Sea Trail, washed in the scent of eucalyptus and golden meadow on the California coast.

A hot night run in the Mojave showered us with meteors, framed by sparkling stars and the craggy silhouettes of Joshua trees.

We spent one night in a roadside ditch in a national forest in Utah, stringing up our "emergency tube tent" just below the road. When the first dump truck roared overhead at 5 in the morning, our groggy annoyance was tempered by a view of golden peaks reflecting the soft sunrise.

This is not to disparage the Big Surs and Grand Canyons of the West — there's a reason people visit those places. (Heck, we certainly did.) Go explore the national parks, the mountains, the canyons, the coastlines! But whenever the opportunity strikes, on a trip or at home, take a moment and detour to someplace unknown. □



Folks bask in the sunset at the Hidden Valley campground in Joshua Tree National Park. ARTHUR/CC FLICKR

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A natural arid beauty

LOCATION: EAST OF WENATCHEE, WASHINGTON

BY CAROLYN HOLTHOFF

Steep canyons and coulees formed from 17 million-year-old basalt surround you as you wander through the sagebrush and bitterroot. This delicate shrub-steppe environment, a patchwork of public lands east of Wenatchee, Washington, has no official name. Just a fragile, vanishing landscape carved during the ice age floods, complete with caves and mesas, trails and endangered plants — beautiful and wild and open to all.

I've hiked those trails, winding along dry streambeds, surprising chukars and partridges and sidestepping rattlers. I've stumbled across old forgotten homesteads, where all that remains are the small, brittle details of a hardscrabble life. I've outrun lightning storms from high atop mesas and inhaled the sage-filled air. You can feel small and alone here, but not lonely.

Few people know about this place; most travelers simply drive past the towering basalt cliffs on their way to somewhere else, in search of a landscape more dramatic or famous or simply more welcoming. They never realize that they are missing something remarkable.

Nameless and fragile, yet alluring and impressive, this area represents our open public lands at their best, offering solitude, adventure and peace of mind. □

Dusty Lake, one of the ancient lakes in a region east of Wenatchee, top. Six separate lava flows are visible in columnar basalt formations, bottom.

PETER PREHN/CC FLICKR



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Frozen silence

LOCATION: GREAT BASIN NATIONAL PARK, NEVADA

BY HOWARD WATTS III

I've found my piece of our public land. "Home means Nevada," as my state song says, and Great Basin is the only national park in this rugged, expansive and downright weird Western state.

The park is just hard enough to reach, at four to five hours' drive from major cities, that you can spend an extended week-end there without seeing crowds of tourists. It gets 100,000 visitors a year, nothing compared to nearby Zion's 3.2 million. A trek across seemingly endless desert valleys and mountain passes, then an easy-to-miss turn at the sleepy gateway town, and suddenly you're in the heart of the mountains. There are pines here that sprouted before the pyramids, sprawling limestone caverns, glassy alpine lakes and the clearest night skies I've ever seen. This little, remote, almost-unknown park has a way of enveloping you.

Once, two companions and I set out along the Baker Creek loop for a quick autumn jaunt. Seeing a sign for Baker Lake at the halfway point, we charged forward on a whim instead of heading back. For the next five miles, we followed the creek on a path of glittering, frosted aspen leaves, flanked by turning trees. As the altitude increased, we trudged through deepening snow, following a lone set of footprints and telling ourselves at every bend that our destination lay just ahead. Finally, we made it to the half-fro-

zen lake and sat silent, tired and content in the pews of the surrounding mountain cathedral. Then we walked back, never seeing another soul. That night, with the creek's babble as our lullaby and the Milky Way our blanket, a satisfied exhaustion gave way to sleep, with the promise of wild turkey gobbles to wake us. □

Great Basin National Park has some of the darkest night skies in the park system.

DAN DURISCOE/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



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Memories from the gear shed



ESSAY BY
MARY EMERICK

I could put it off no longer. The gear shed had long been an object of contention in my marriage. “You don’t use half this stuff,” my husband observed, more than once. “You need to go through it and make more room.” Defiantly, he rolled his fat-tired bike into the living room and left it there.

He met my gaze. “Why is that bike in here? That bike is in here because there’s no room in the shed! Because the shed is full of your stuff!”

I surrendered. “OK, I’m going in,” I said, and steeled myself for the task ahead.

For decades, I was a gypsy; everything I owned fit in the back of a Chevette. A seasonal park ranger, I followed summer, ranging from Washington to Idaho to California, making a long loop through Florida and New Mexico, fighting fires and leading interpretive talks. More recently, I moved from Oregon to Alaska and back again, stripping down to the basics. I pared down everything —

except for my outdoor gear.

I kept it all because I suspected that it would be hard to let anything go. And I was right. This was like an archaeological dig: I was finding my way down through the layers of the person I used to be.

Each item I added to the to-go pile felt like letting go of a memory. Here were the water-bottle packs from my pre-knee surgery days, when I could still run 26 miles in four hours and change. Sorting through them, I remembered my intrepid running partner, Ken, just outside of Sitka, Alaska, the two of us dodging salmon guts freshly dragged by brown bears onto a fish-hatchery road. I could hear us singing, “*I’ve lost that lo-o-ving fee-ee-ling*,” bellowing soulfully at the top of our lungs to scare away the bears.

That Coleman backpacking stove, the first one I bought with my own money, was a behemoth by today’s standards. The upgrade, the finicky MSR Whisper-

lite, had a bad habit of exploding in a ball of flame in the Idaho backcountry as a result of over-priming. I remembered nights at high lakes camped with long-gone companions encased in down jackets, the darkness giving us the courage to talk about our dreams.

A dozen backpacks lay piled on a shelf. They reminded me of old boyfriends: The good-looking ones that were too good to be true, the ones that worked until the relationship became uncomfortable, the ones that turned out to be unexpectedly fragile. A few of them — the backpacks, not boyfriends — ended up getting chewed by marmots.

In one corner lurked the Xtra Tuf rubber boots and kayak paddle from my Southeast Alaska days: In this land-locked, sun-drenched corner of northeast Oregon, would I ever need them again? Would I ever fix fence again with these leather gloves, feel the full-body shudder of a rock bar hitting immovable earth, or hold one end of a misery whip, slicing through a downed tree that blocked a trail? I had once had the latest in fire-fighting gear: high-heeled logger boots that slid like butter onto my feet, a fancy lumbar pack that hung just right around my hips. Now that was old school; there was newer, better gear.

By the end of the day, I had accumulated a large pile to bring to my town’s gear swap — sleeping bags I’d forgotten I owned, a kayak cart, tents that could house a small family. Piling everything in the truck, I felt both relief and sorrow. Why was it so hard to let go of the past? I had a great life now, no longer subject to the whims of the weather, no longer beaten down by a \$5-an-hour wage and the hefting of a heavy chainsaw in the freezing bitter rain. Those were the times it was easy to forget when reminiscing.

The truth, I knew, was this: It’s hard getting older when you’re still in love with the outdoors. As much as you fight aging tooth and nail, as much as you work to keep up the pace, you will never be 20 again, scrambling fearlessly up a talus slope, knowing everything will turn out all right because it always has so far.

But how many more years, months, days did I have? When would 20-mile days become 15, 10, five, zero? I knew I was luckier than others who had succumbed to random falls, lightning strikes, illness. It was unfair to complain. But I did. I wanted it all — the freedom to follow the seasons, plus the security of steady work, the sense of being footloose yet firmly anchored — a thousand more sunsets and mountains, and a life with no end in sight. □

WEB EXTRA

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THE HUMAN FACTOR

We're better than ever at understanding the dangers of avalanches.

So why aren't we better at avoiding them?

"We human beings are not very good at logic. Our brains are hard-wired for social interactions and pattern recognition."

—Bruce Tremper,
director of the Utah
Avalanche Center

ALL MORNING, I'D HEARD THE ROAR of sloughs rocketing down cliffs as I skied up a mountain in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Now, standing at the summit with my six friends and our two guides, I gazed over treeless sheets of white plunging to the inky ocean. A virgin slope beckoned to us. I felt uneasy — the snow was clearly unstable — but said nothing.

I was there as a travel writer and photographer, so the group agreed that I would go first to set up my camera, accompanied by Dan, the lead guide. I shook off my nervousness and skied off, arcing turns down a mellow powder field and stopping before a knoll. Dan whizzed past me and disappeared over the bump, flanked by steeper slopes. Suddenly, a line tore across the snow, releasing a massive avalanche that crashed 700 feet down the slope, engulfing Dan in car-sized panes of broken snow that settled, slowly, into a terrifying stillness.

With the help of his inflatable airbags, Dan kept afloat and survived, unhurt. He took a few moments to collect himself, and then put his skins back on. I stood there in awe and terror, my heart racing, glad to be alive.

I don't know whether some misjudgment or breach of professional protocol contributed to this accident. It's exceedingly rare for a slope shy of 30 degrees to slide so dramatically. But for years, I have relived the incident, questioning my own assumptions about safety in avalanche terrain. Was it a wild fluke, a simple miscalculation, or a serious mistake made possible by complicated psychological factors? In other words, how dumb were we?

Over the last 10 years, skiers and snowboarders have swarmed the backcountry, thanks to rapidly improving equipment, new gates that allow access to untracked slopes beyond resort boundaries, and, perhaps, a culture that glorifies dangerous routes while minimizing risks. There are more avalanche-prevention classes and resources than ever before — in 20 years, the handful of schools has grown to more than 100 — yet the fatality rate has steadily risen since the early 1990s. On average, approximately 30 people die in avalanches in the United States annually. (Last season, fortunately, there were only 11.) About a third are novices, but two-thirds have some level of avalanche training. Why are capable people making such deadly decisions? And what can those of us who emerge unharmed learn from our close calls?

"I ONCE THOUGHT if you just give people the critical information, they'll automatically make the right decisions," says Bruce Tremper, director of the Forest Service Utah Avalanche Center and author of *Avalanche Essentials* and *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain*. "But I found out — just like economists and stock traders — it doesn't work that way. We human beings are not very good at logic. Our brains are hard-wired for social interactions and pattern recognition."

For decades, we have understood the basic science behind avalanches. But unfortunately, we don't make decisions based solely on observations. There are other forces at play — the emotions, biases, beliefs and mental shortcuts that some call the human factor. Relatively little empirical research has explored this, but a sweeping new study, led by two Montana State University researchers, may soon help us understand how skiers, snowboarders and others make decisions in avalanche terrain. This could change how avalanche prevention is taught, and also shed light on our relationship to risk in

other hazardous endeavors, such as hiking in grizzly country or fighting wildfires.

The project, initiated during the winter of 2013-2014, asks recreational skiers and snowboarders to record their backcountry routes using an app, Ski Tracks, and then complete a post-trip survey. Over the past two seasons, more than 400 people from the U.S., Canada and Europe contributed more than 1,000 tracks. Researchers hope to gather thousands more over the next two years, but already trends are emerging. For example, experts ski similarly steep slopes regardless of whether the local avalanche forecast predicts a moderate, considerable or high hazard. (With a higher forecasted hazard, they do modify their plans slightly — avoiding, say, northeasterly slopes that could be more slide-prone.) And all-male groups typically ski steeper slopes than all-female groups on days with the same avalanche hazard, although the data on all-female groups is still small.

Jordy Hendriks, a tall, energetic earth sciences professor, is leading the study with Jerry Johnson, a political scientist. Hendriks has studied avalanche science on four continents for years, but after several friends and acquaintances died in slides, he became intrigued by the human factor.

"It's been almost an awakening for me," Hendriks said. "I realized I could spend the next 10 years researching how a particular snow crystal grows, and I'd help maybe two people make a better decision. Or I could spend the next 10 years really looking at how people interact with the landscape and how they make decisions, and I could make a much bigger impact."

I'd learned about the study this winter, when I saw a request for participants on the Colorado Avalanche Information Center's website. One Saturday this March, I enrolled, downloading the Ski Tracks app on my iPhone and filling out a questionnaire about my background — gender (female), level of education (college), years skiing (25), marital status (married), number of kids (zero). At the Deer Creek trailhead near Coal Bank Pass in Colorado, I clicked on the app's tracker. The forecast warned of a considerable avalanche hazard near and above treeline — it had snowed recently and warmed quickly — but I felt safe with my husband, Andrew, my friend Rachel, and her boyfriend, Chris, all of whom are more experienced than I am.

We skinned up a south-facing slope, in air so warm we stripped to T-shirts. Little puffs of powder fell from spruce branches and, lit by sunbeams, turned to glitter. I live to ski powder — that fleeting sensation of near weightlessness — and to experience the grounding silence of a forest muffled in snow. But always, there is an undercurrent of fear. Always I am listening for *whoomphs* or scanning the terrain for dangerous features.

At the top of the slope, we looked out over a forested valley and an exposed white ridge, joking, snacking, drinking water and tearing the gluey skins from our skis. And then, one by one, we skied down, gleefully slicing through buttery snow and launching off buried logs. But even on this mellow slope of north-facing trees, which I had always thought of as a safe zone, I noticed the crown lines of small avalanches that had pulled away from convexities. At the bottom, a three-foot crown gaped at us — no skier tracks in sight. This small slide, about 40 feet across and 120 feet long, had slid within the last two days, without the weight of a skier.



A skier sets off a pocket slab on the Shuksan Arm at Mount Baker, Washington. He outran this slide and no one was harmed.

GARRETT GROVE

Avalanche professionals have developed simple decision-making aids to help backcountry travelers evaluate the objective hazard and the risk of human factors. The only problem? Getting people to use them. Here are two easy mnemonics for your back pocket.

The ALP TRUTH test

Have you seen three or more of these danger signs on your tour? If so, pay extra-close attention. In the average accident, about five of these clues are present.

- A** = Avalanches in the last 48 hours
- L** = Loading by new snow or wind in last 48 hours
- P** = obvious avalanche Path
- T** = terrain Trap, such as a gully in which slide debris could collect
- R** = a Rating of considerable or higher in the avalanche forecast
- U** = Unstable signs like collapsing, cracking, or tough trail-breaking conditions
- Th** = Thawing or rapid warming

The FACETS test

Evaluate your near misses for the following human factors so you can become more aware of your own susceptibilities.

- F** = Familiarity with the terrain
- A** = social Acceptance or the need to impress others
- C** = Commitment to a goal
- E** = Expert halo
- T** = competing for first Tracks
- S** = Social proof, or the myth of safety in numbers



Above, backcountry skiers reach the apex of their ascent near Alta, Utah. One of the human factors that can lead people to enter avalanche terrain is skiing in big groups. Right, Bruce Tremper, director of the Utah Avalanche Center, investigates snow crystals from a large avalanche.
BRUCE TREMPER

“This is definitely weird,” said Andrew. “I haven’t seen that before in Deer Creek.” We traversed over the top of the crown line, into a bank of trees. The next gully looked exactly like the last, but it hadn’t slid. The snow sparkled in a pristine state. Andrew prepared to set off across it, and I felt a seed of unease sprout within me.

That evening, I pondered the survey questions. Did we accurately convey our observations to each other? Did we share observations freely? I thought about how, even as I realized that Andrew was approaching a potentially sketchy slope, I didn’t say anything. Andrew has skied a lot more than me, and I never question his expertise. Avalanche experts call this the expert halo — a blind faith in perceived masters — and it is one of the human factors that contributes to avalanche fatalities. It is my kryptonite.

AVALANCHE EXPERTS HAVE LONG KNOWN about the importance of psychological factors in decision making. But the Montana State University study builds on the work of one of the few researchers to analyze empirical data for evidence of the human factor.

Ian McCammon, a former National Outdoor Leadership School instructor with a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, knew from contemporary research that human beings synthesize patterns and devise simple rules of thumb, also known as mental shortcuts or heuristics, in order to make numerous decisions quickly. This ability allows us to do routine things remarkably efficiently, like driving and shopping. But when we use heuristic thinking instead of analytical evaluation in unpredictable, high-risk environments, it can prove deadly. And avalanche terrain is the perfect trap. It’s what researchers call a poor-feedback environment. Unstable, snowy slopes remain intact about 95 percent of the time, so terrible decisions are often rewarded with great skiing and a beer at the end of the day. This gives us confidence in our own ability, until somebody dies.

In the early 2000s, McCammon analyzed 715 recreational avalanche fatalities in the United States between 1972 and 2003, identifying six common heuristic traps. He observed that bigger groups and mixed-gender groups appeared to take more risks. People tend to find safety in numbers, and wish to impress friends or potential mates. He also noticed that skiers seemed to take more risks when they’re familiar with the terrain, highly committed to a goal, competing for first tracks, or following a perceived expert.



His findings, which confirmed what the backcountry ski community had suspected for years, are now commonly taught and discussed in avalanche classes. But simply knowing about the influence of human factors on accidents doesn’t appear to prevent them.

“We believe that we’re rational, and we think that’s the ideal largely because of the way our civilization is formed,” McCammon said. “Look at all the successes that analytical thinking has brought us — electricity, cars, planes. The evidence of its power is all around us, but there’s so much more to how we make decisions. We have some extremely powerful tools that we’re just beginning to understand from a scientific standpoint, in terms of pattern recognition and intuition.” Those tools enabled our ancestors to survive for millennia. They just aren’t so good in the backcountry. The key, McCammon said, is figuring out when to rely on heuristics and when to employ analytical systems.

Since that avalanche in Alaska, I have enjoyed backcountry skiing less. Even on extremely mellow slopes, I am occasionally seized by irrational fear. On some level, I believe that avalanches are wildly unpredictable and could strike at any moment. That, of course, is not true. The science behind avalanches may be complicated, but it is not magical.

SO FAR, THE HUMAN-FACTOR RESEARCH has focused on fatalities, but most backcountry skiers survive. Johnson and Hendriks hope that observing real-time decisions in successful outings will reveal how people make good decisions as well as bad ones.

“How do you teach people in avalanche courses to do the right thing?” asks Jerry Johnson. “Do you teach them by studying failure, or do you teach them by studying success? I would like to see this whole discussion shift away from accidents to positive behaviors.”

On Deer Creek, I watched my husband hesitate as he contemplated crossing a virgin slope. I felt uneasy but didn’t speak up for fear of seeming paranoid. Tremper had specifically told me how vital good communication is to backcountry avalanche safety, yet I still didn’t speak up.

Luckily, I didn’t have to. Turns out, this is a story about positive behavior.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go that way,” Rachel said, nonchalantly. Andrew hesitated, pensive amid the sparkling snow. In a pocket somewhere, the Ski Tracks app on my phone was marking the moment.

“Yeah,” said Chris, taking off his pack. “I’m cool with that.” □

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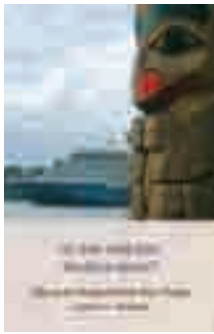
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Alaska tourism and the white man's native



So, How Long Have You Been Native? Life as an Alaska Native Tour Guide
Alexis C. Bunten
272 pages,
softcover: \$26.95.
University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

Alexis C. Bunten understands what it's like to be an outsider. A mix of Alaska Native, Swedish "and something else, French Canadian, I think," the writer spent her childhood moving across the country, from Hawaii to South Dakota to Alaska and Washington state. She may have faced less outright discrimination than her mother and grandmother, but prejudice was still a fact of life. "Starting with the kindergarten role of 'Thanksgiving Indian,'" she writes, "I was always inexplicably assigned the villain parts in grade school plays."

That outsidership forms the backdrop for her first book, a first-hand account of the cultural tourism industry in Sitka, Alaska. *So, How Long Have You Been Native?* was inspired by the two summers Bunten spent working as a Native guide for Tribal Tours, a company owned and operated by the Sitka Tribe. The book deconstructs how tourism — "sorely

undervalued as a suitable anthropological field" — influences modern Native identity. "The (Native) culture on display," she writes, "plays a bit part in a larger performance reflecting the dominant culture of the tourists themselves." One local wryly calls the guides "Stepford Natives," noting their perpetual cheer and willingness to go along with their customers' cherished fantasies of a whitewashed past. Not to mention their idealized notions of the present: "Alcoholism, neglect, jealousy and violence (don't) exist in the world of the Stepford Natives," Bunten observes. "The veteran guides carved out larger than life personas. ... It protected them from having to deal with never being able to live up to guests' expectations of what it means to be Native."

With journalistic precision, Bunten explores topics as varied as the influence of cruise lines on the Alaskan economy,

the history of the Tlingit people and the ongoing effects of colonization on tribes. Despite occasionally awkward attempts at softening the narrative with light-hearted banter or extraneous personal asides, she succeeds in creating a sharply focused picture of cultural tourism today, especially in villages like Sitka, where between 10 and 20 percent of the local jobs are tourism-related. By fusing economic data with the personal experiences of Native guides — including her own — Bunten exposes the side effects of turning one's culture into a valued commodity.

"Our clients longed for us to be further removed from modernity than themselves," she writes. "And we complied by talking about nature, subsistence, ceremonies, and demonstrating other signs of 'primitivism' — but we did so on our own terms."

BY CARSON VAUGHAN



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Climbing over the edge

Snowblind, the first collection of short stories by veteran travel writer and alpinist Daniel Arnold, explores mountaineering and the power it holds over the people who pursue it. Arnold's characters are drawn irrevocably to the mountains they climb, and their obsession works strangely on their minds, pushing them into sometimes-terrifying realms of thought and behavior. The locations range from cabins at the base of Mount Hood, in Oregon, to brutal mountains at the edge of human settlement in Alaska. The stories' protagonists tangle intimately with death in all its many faces, from storm-caused disasters to fatal falls and even suspected murder — as well as the lingering ache of mourning.

Even when death is not imminent, the threat of it hovers at the edges of the stories. In one story, after a dangerous climb, the mountaineers demolish a centuries-old cabin in a fury of pent-up emotion. In another, a climber's accidental death drives those waiting at the bottom to drinking and then to blows.

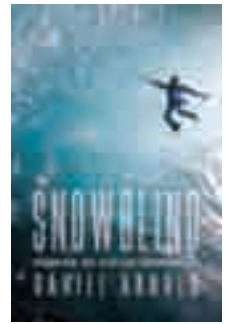
Both alpinists and those who find their

outdoor enjoyment in less perilous pursuits will recognize the emotional landscape inhabited by Arnold's characters. The wildness of grief, an encounter with an old flame, the underlying fear of loss — these are experiences common to all.

Still, it's the otherworldliness of climbing and the jagged beauty of the mountains that most grip the reader. In the collection's finest story, "Ozdon," Dane, a climber from Boulder, Colorado, and a native of the Wasatch, heads to Alaska to find a lost friend. The mountain where his friend vanished seems "torn from the earth, a bone from below dripping with ice and crusted with jags of black rock." It ensnares Dane physically and emotionally, drawing him in, as it has other climbers, "like flies to meat."

But Arnold avoids the traditional narrative arc of nobility and courage in the face of danger. The story of the climb remains unsettling and dark. It raises but never answers the question: What is the reward for all this risk and suffering? And, more important, what is its human cost?

BY KATE SCHIMEL



Snowblind: Stories of Alpine Obsession

Daniel Arnold
273 pages,
softcover: \$15.95.
Counterpoint Press,
2015.

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Knowing the Grand Canyon in your bones

When I was 9, I watched a TV show called *Four Winds to Adventure*. In one particularly vivid episode, a raging, muddy Colorado River tossed wooden boats around like toys. I yearned to see that river in person, but back then the Grand Canyon seemed about as far away as the moon.

Yet, when I finally got my first glimpse of it, in 1973, it was like “coming home to a place I’d never been before,” as John Denver sang on the radio that Memorial Day weekend, while two friends and I drove through the night toward the park.

We slept for a few hours in a U.S. Forest Service campground in Williams, Arizona, and then drove in early to obtain a permit for the Grandview Trail. And suddenly there, behind the gift shop, was the canyon, overwhelming all my senses. I felt as astonished and eager as the young cat whose first encounter with catnip was described by writer Joseph Wood Krutch: “Can such things be? Indubitably they can. He flung himself down and he wallowed.”

For the past three decades, I have wallowed in the Grand Canyon. My bookshelves sag with the weight of more than 40 volumes on its history, geology, biology and trails; my children’s heads are filled with the bedtime stories I told (and embellished) of John Wesley Powell’s epic first trip down the Colorado River; and my own brain is stuffed with the memories of dozens of trips made with family and friends.

What ignited my obsession with the canyon? I used to think it was the sense of freedom it gave me. I grew up in a small Illinois town, where my mom knew before Saturday morning which girl I’d sat with at the Friday night football game. I was trapped by a conservative religious upbringing, complete with eyes drawn on the blackboard when the nun left the room: “He is watching you!” The first time I hiked to Hermit Rapids as a young man, I came upon a mixed-gender group of skinny-dippers. Can such things be? When I was a kid, an angry farmer once pointed a gun at me for straying over his property line in pursuit of rabbits. But Grand Canyon National Park encompasses nearly 2,000 square miles, and I could explore every square inch. Here was freedom on an unimaginable scale.

With it came the opportunity to confront and overcome my fears. That first trip, I bought Harvey Butchart’s book, *Grand Canyon Treks*. It came with an official warning in stern capital letters: THE SUPERINTENDENT OF GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK HAS DETERMINED THAT HIKING IN MANY PARTS OF THE GRAND CANYON CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH. There’s a thrill in navigating a dangerous landscape, enduring hardship yet coming out on top.

But Butchart’s message struck home that winter when an acquaintance of mine, an extremely fit and strong hiker, died in a snowstorm on the Tanner Trail. Much later, my daughter and I ascended Tanner Trail in the same kind of whiteout conditions that killed my acquaintance. I had told her the story the night before. We decided to wait until the fog lifted enough for us to see at least 10 feet ahead, and to camp at 75-Mile Saddle, which we could reach even without a trail — as long as we didn’t climb the butte on the right, or fall in the canyon on the left. By the time we made 75-Mile Saddle, the fog had lifted enough for us to climb out.

On another hike, in the boiling heat of the summer, my son badly sprained his ankle at Sapphire Canyon, nearly 20 miles from either the South Bass or Hermit’s Rest trailheads, at a place one guidebook author called “no man’s land.” Looking

into his anxious and pain-filled eyes, I recalled the words of the driver who’d taken us to the trailhead the day before: “I don’t go down there this time of year.” A trickle of water in Sapphire Canyon meant we wouldn’t die of thirst, but I faced a difficult choice: Should I hike to the river and flag down a raft, something I could probably do in a half day, with some climbing and route-finding, or just hike out to Hermit’s Rest, which would take more than a day? We found a third way: We rigged two walking sticks, and I carried my son’s gear while he hobbled to the end of the trail. It was an oddly empowering experience.

But a few years ago, everything changed. I wanted to visit Deer Creek and Thunder River with my daughter and son-in-law. It was my fourth time there, so I thought I’d spice up the itinerary with a visit to Tapeats Cave and Spring — a major source of water to Tapeats Creek — and then make a cross-country exit at Crazy Jug Point.

Ryan and Ann were both experienced climbers, and I had done my due diligence, gathering trip reports, studying maps and talking to people who had hiked the area. Ryan brought gear for the little rappel (no longer permitted) into the Deer Creek narrows. We slid around in the chutes and pools and had a blast. Two days later, we hiked over to Thunder River and then up Tapeats Creek. It required some wading and pack-hoisting; there were places where you could fall and break an ankle, or an arm. But we were careful and took our time.

Near Tapeats Cave, we dropped our packs and headed for the nearby spring, taking only our water bottles and some lunch. Ann asked Ryan to help retrieve a granola bar from her daypack, so I said, “I’ll go ahead and take a look.”

I followed a faint path to the head of the canyon and reached a cliff. We couldn’t continue west. I walked down the slope to a lesser cliff, maybe 15 or 20 feet high. This wasn’t the way either. I yelled, “We are too high.” Ryan nodded, pointing downward toward some trees as a better route. I hurried to meet them, returning to the narrow, rock-filled ravine I had crossed just moments before. It was only about three steps across, I thought. I tentatively tested a big block of redwall limestone. It seemed solid — until I put all my weight on it. And then, suddenly, unbelievably, it wasn’t. “No, no, no, no!” I yelled as the slope about 10 feet above me collapsed.

Only shards of memories of what followed remain. But I clearly recall waking up in the intensive care unit of the Flagstaff Hospital — five days later. “This isn’t a nightmare, is it?” I asked the nurse.

I later learned that Ryan sprinted 10 miles to the river to get help, while Ann, a rehabilitation specialist, used all of her medical training to hold my fading body and spirit together. She wrote in her diary:

As the hours passed, I became more and more terrified. I was worried that Ryan might have gotten hurt rushing out for help or that he just wasn’t able to find anyone. My dad was becoming so cold that I climbed under the vegetation with him and tried to lie over his chest. He just kept shivering and his vital signs were weakening. At 6:30 p.m. I thought I heard a helicopter and I jolted up. I grabbed my headlamp and turned on the flashing mode and ran to the highest rock I could find nearby. The paramedic later said they only spotted us on the first pass because of the flashing light. I still don’t know what made me think to do that when it wasn’t even dark.

I almost died. My pelvis was separated and had multiple

I tentatively
tested a
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of redwall
limestone. It
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— until I put
all my weight
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fractures. I had multiple broken and dislocated ribs, a fractured sacrum, a collapsed lung and a badly shattered wrist and femur. (Somehow, my femoral artery wasn't severed.) I also damaged my left knee. All this was on my left side; I didn't learn until later that my right humerus had sheared off soft tissue in my shoulder socket. Miraculously, my internal organs were spared. Two surgeons worked on me for three long days. I spent a month in the hospital. Over the next two years, I had shoulder and knee surgery and six wrist surgeries.

And I still deal with the aftermath. My metal femur, pinned hip and chained pelvis have ended my running days. My surgeons warn me that their "fixes" are only temporary. Several times a month, I go to physical and muscle therapists. My personal exercise routine is down to about 17 hours per week — half of what it was the first two years after the accident. But I keep at it to maintain flexibility and control the ever-present aches and pains.

Falling always seems to occur slowly. *Thud!* — face down on the trail. A few inches to my right, and I would have cracked my head on a ragged piece of rock. I lie there for a moment, unhook my backpack, roll away and sit up. What happened?

Three years after my accident, I am once again on the Tanner Trail, near where it meets the Bright Angel shale. It is a moderately steep section that I have hiked several times without a second thought. This time, I stubbed my right toe on a protruding rock. It spun me around, so my right arm and pole were behind me. I instinctively tucked my left arm to my side to protect my multi-surgeried, inflexible left wrist.

I fall more often these days, taking tumbles while hiking and skiing. My reflexes haven't adjusted to the loss of agility in my new left hip. Sometimes, my brain tells me everything feels right when it isn't right at all.

I finish backpacking trips with a sense of relief, rather than exhilaration. I am way more careful, knowing how vulnerable my body is. This sometimes surprises, even disappoints, those who knew me before the accident. People like to say, "You're all healed now!" They want reassurance that when bad things

happen, they can be erased. My recovery has been remarkable, yes, but the scars of the accident are permanent, both physical and mental.

I always liked Stephen Crane's famous poem:

*A Man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist."
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."*

But now I know it in my very bones.

I used to go to the Grand Canyon believing that, every time I went, I could possess it a little more. But the Grand Canyon cannot be possessed. We fool ourselves if we think inanimate objects care about us. The Grand Canyon is neither my friend nor my nemesis. Yet I learned important lessons there. Embedded in its strata is immutable evidence that life changes — sometimes slowly, over eons; often dramatically, in an instant. □

Hiking Tanner Trail in the Grand Canyon.

KATHY SHARP



On a backpacking trip below Horseshoe Mesa, Nic Korte stops to bury the pins and metal rods that had held his arm together for two years.

COURTESY NIC KORTE

#OutdoorRec and #Tech

I run up a trail that climbs a steep ridge, through sage and piñon, ponderosas and aspen. About two miles in, the forested slope gives way to a small meadow, where thigh-high grass is sprinkled with lupine, penstemon and flax. I should stop and take an Instagram photo to share on Facebook and Twitter, just to make my friends and computer-bound colleagues jealous.

But I won't, because the Strava app on my phone is recording my location, my speed and, perhaps most importantly, my performance compared to that of others who use this social network for athletes. Stopping will sabotage my effort. If I only had a GoPro camera strapped to my chest, I could capture the image of the wildflowers and keep the data flowing to the app.

At the top, I look at the little screen on my phone: My fastest time yet! I celebrate by taking a sweaty selfie and sharing it. I also check the phone's altimeter and compass to orient myself, then pull up Google Earth to find an alternate route back. A chirpy ringtone violates the silence: My boss calling. Too out-of-breath to answer, I let it ring. That's when I notice I'm not alone: There's a guy sitting quietly under a piñon tree, wearing old hiking boots, cotton shorts and a T-shirt, giving me the stinkiest stink eye I've ever seen.

I don't blame him. Not only have I broken his solitude, I've brought the rest of civilization along with me. I'm one of the cyborgs — part human, part gadget, part app — who have invaded the outdoors with our devices and metastasizing cellular networks, snapping photos wherever we go and sharing them with the world. I consider explaining how this all makes us safer, and actually enriches the outdoor experience. But the man's look keeps me silent. I turn and run home, Strava monitoring my every step.

Back in 1921, Aldo Leopold wrote that wilderness should be "a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state ... big enough to absorb a two weeks' pack trip, and kept devoid of ... works of man." Leopold wasn't trying to save the wild from

roads, he was trying to defend the wilderness experience from the technological fad of the time, the automobile. To experience wilderness from behind the windshield or from a scenic pullout was hardly an experience at all. You need the bite of the wind, the sting of the sun, perhaps a little bit of risk.

We've come to accept that cars don't belong in the wilderness. Yet most of us don't hesitate to tote along other types of trendy, and often useful, technology: the kind of lightweight synthetic sleeping bags, Gore-Tex clothing, campstoves, water filters and guidebooks that Leopold and his contemporaries lacked. As a young backpacker, I eschewed such luxuries, too: It wasn't a real wilderness experience unless you got buried under half a foot of snow in the desert in a crappy sleeping bag, contracted giardia after slurping directly from a stream, devoured your oatmeal raw because the wood was too wet for a campfire, or wandered lost and scared for hours through Leopold's "blank spots on the map."

Today, those blank spots are cluttered with blog posts, websites, apps, compasses and digital maps, and your traveling instructions are delivered in Siri's eerie voice. One app guides screen-gazers through Utah's canyons; others, using names like PeakHunter, meticulously chart routes up peaks. Google Earth allows us to "fly" into places and plan a route in advance, and even to "hike" backcountry trails or "raft" the Grand Canyon.

Just as I once scorned guidebooks because they robbed the unknown of its mystery, a part of me resents the new tech for relieving me of the freedom to get lost. For it is only then, when we are disoriented and confused, terrified and blissed out, that we really see where we are. Another part of me, though, the same part that relishes the information my weather and streamflow apps impart, can linger over Google Earth for hours, finding new places to explore and even "climbing" El Capitan in Yosemite.

Gadgets save lives, too. Last year, personal locator beacons, which use satellites to send 911 calls from areas beyond the



@recreator "Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?"
— Aldo Leopold
#wilderness



BROOKE WARREN

@recreator "A venturesome minority will always be eager to set off on their own, and no obstacles should be placed in their path; let them take risks, for godsake, let them get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, buried alive under avalanches - that is the right and privilege of any free American."
— Edward Abbey #lostoutwest

Tom Capra

July 10 at 6:04pm
Another day riding in the rain! Mud can't stop me.



STRAVA



How do our electronic gadgets, social media platforms and constant connectedness affect the wilderness experience?

ESSAY BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

cellular network, initiated 113 backcountry rescues nationwide. Many of those people might have died without their PLBs. But PLBs, not to mention satellite and cellular phones, are also a pain in the neck for rescuers. Consider the “lost” couple who were helicoptered out of the woods even though they were within sight of the highway, or the two men and their sons who used their PLBs to launch three separate rescue efforts over two days, first because they couldn’t find water, and then because the water they found was too salty.

“If you have cellphone (or satellite or PLB) coverage, you’re more likely to use it as a crutch, do more risky behavior,” says Brian White, recreation and wilderness programs manager for the San Juan National Forest. Indeed, the leader of the salty-water group said he never would have attempted that hike without his SPOT. The most popular personal locator beacon, it’s become known as “Yuppie 911.”

Search YouTube for “Moab Base Jump,” and it will spit back nearly 12,000 videos of folks free-falling, squirrel-suiting or otherwise cheating death among the sandstone spires and walls. Perhaps the most harrowing simply shows a guy on a ledge, high above the ground, talking calmly to his camera. “I probably lost my leg,” he says. “Yep. Not cool.” He crashed while BASE jumping, and his shattered tibia protrudes raggedly from the flesh just above his ankle. The video has been viewed more than 1 million times.

Not so long ago, that kind of experience would have been a solitary one. Any sharing would have been delayed for days, until you had time to recover and write a letter, develop your photos or tell the story to buddies over a campfire or a beer. And the backcountry storyteller’s ethic demanded that certain details — the exact location, for example — be discreetly withheld, even while others were embellished.

In the age of connectedness, however, the solitude, the ethics and even the storytelling have been tossed off the cliff without a parachute. We backpack for miles to some secluded spot “and we feel so alone and we want to tell someone. We want to hear

a voice,” writes Jim Stiles in a 2012 essay in his *Canyon Country Zephyr*. “But we can’t. Because this is The West — the big, hard, breathtaking, heartbreaking, unrelenting, unforgiving American West. Or at least, it was. ...

Now, you can bring the world to your favorite ‘lonely spot,’” via cellphone, Facebook and Twitter.

This past winter, when Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson free-climbed the Dawn Wall on El Capitan in Yosemite, the rest of the world was invited along, sharing a once-lonely experience through the climbers’ constant Tweets and Instagrams. “Sketchy” Andy Lewis, one of the world’s top slackliners and an avid BASE jumper, not only “performs” his risky feats for thousands of YouTube viewers, he has flung himself into live performance art, slackline-boogying alongside Madonna at the 2012

Super Bowl halftime show. If George Mallory climbed Mount Everest simply because “it’s there,” perhaps today’s extreme athletes hurl themselves off cliffs simply in order to “share.”

We’re not just rock climbers, backpackers and trail-runners; we’re performers and entertainers. Instead of storytellers, we’re broadcasters of a limitless stream of images. Or, in the case of Strava, data.

My 20-year-old self, the one who escaped a rainstorm by jamming himself and his stinky sleeping bag underneath an overhang crawling with black widows, is disgusted. My middle-aged, techno-friendly self tells him to calm down and look at the bigger picture. Our growing desire to “perform” outdoors to impress our friends and social media voyeurs is pushing us deeper into the wilderness and exposing once-hidden places to millions of strangers. But that increased visibility has the potential to build a new constituency that cares about those places. “Just think if they had all this technology back before Glen Canyon Dam,” says David Eckenrode, an avid outdoorsman and longtime commercial raft guide. “All these people could see what that place looked like. They could go BASE jumping, canyoneering, paddling there. The masses would say, ‘You can’t inundate this thing.’”

Maybe so. Yet I can’t help thinking that the experience of the hypothetically un-dammed Glen Canyon, flooded by digital signals, devices and extreme recreationists rather than water, would not fit Leopold’s vision of wilderness. It would still be spectacular, but no longer remote. Armed with devices to guide us, film us, even rescue us if needed, we have become insulated from the natural world’s harsh reality. We no longer feel its beauty as directly, even though our Instagrams look great. Our urge to capture and share every moment of our trip has reduced the singularly sweet experience of cool water pouring off a desert cliff into mere spectacle, its pixels repeated ad infinitum across digital platforms.

“The whole idea of wilderness is to get away from the trappings of modern life,” says White. “If you’re taking that into the wilderness with you, it detracts from the experience. When I’m on the job, I take that stuff. When I’m alone, I don’t: I want the risk.”

Until recently, this seemed like a good compromise. After all, if my younger self and the guy who glared at me from under the piñon don’t like technology, they can leave it at home, the Luddites.

But then I take off on another run, up a different hill, this time less worried about beating my time. After I dance around two women with tiny dogs, I hear a loud yell coming from the trail ahead. A mountain biker, GoPro camera on his helmet, on a bike that cost far more than my car, tears down the trail toward me. I’ve got the right of way and stand my ground, but trail etiquette is lost on him and it’s pretty clear that either I’ve got to give way, or end up as the guy’s handlebar ornament. I jump aside, wondering what could possibly motivate someone to act like such a jerk. Then he bellows again, giving me the answer: “Stravaaaaa ... !” □

“The whole idea of wilderness is to get away from the trappings of modern life. If you’re taking that into the wilderness with you, it detracts from the experience.”

—Brian White, recreation and wilderness programs manager for the San Juan National Forest



6.4 m
DISTANCE

01:24:36
MOVING TIME



HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

WYOMING

What animal is the size of a car and notorious for tossing cowboys through the air? A 2,000-pound Brahma bull, of course, though at a recent Cody, Wyoming, rodeo, the only way Mongo startled anybody was by sucking on a lollipop. Mongo is just “a big puppy” who doesn’t even know he’s a bull, reports the *Cody Enterprise*. That makes him unfit to buck and twirl in a rodeo for eight seconds but ideal for standing motionless while as many as three large people sit on his back and pose for a \$10 photo. Mongo’s predecessor, Hollywood, was fired as a photo-op prop last year because his temperament was — to put it mildly — unsuitable: “He hooked a lot of people,” said handler Justin Josey. Mongo never minds posing, as long as he gets to tongue up some treats along with his daily six-gallon dinner of grain. His favorites? Skittles and Tootsie Roll Pops. Some might see Mongo’s job as boring: “He eats, he sleeps, he stands for an hour, he eats and he sleeps,” said handler Nikki Tate. On the other hand: “His life is not hard.”

CALIFORNIA

Freelance reporter Rob Kuznia came up with a devilish story idea for the *Washington Post*: He’d ask the residents of Southern California’s super-wealthy Rancho Santa Fe what they thought about the state’s awful drought and the need to conserve water. Righteous indignation seems the primary response, because in its 92-year history, the community has never — ever — faced water rationing. As Steve Yuhas put it, “We’re not all equal when it comes to water. We pay significant property taxes based on where we live.” And Gay Butler, an interior decorator whose water bill averages about \$800 a month, demanded: “What are we supposed to do, just have dirt around our house on four acres?” Rancho Santa Fe is nothing if not a bastion of privilege: The median income is \$189,000, houses resemble mansions, and it’s said that PGA legend Phil Mickelson once requested a separate water meter for his



ALASKA Just in case you missed it. ... CAROLYN ROSNER

chipping greens. In fact, after Gov. Jerry Brown called on *all* Californians to reduce water consumption by 25 percent — water use “in Rancho Santa Fe went *up* by 9 percent.” But if residents resist this time, the enclave’s water supplier “reserves the right to install flow restrictors,” one of the toughest sanctions available. The crackdown has already caused hardships for homeowners who invested in exotic and thirsty plantings. As one man complained, he’s seen the value of his nine-acre plot “plummet from \$30 million to \$22 million.”

COLORADO

When you wake up suddenly in the middle of the night to find your truck blowing its horn, its headlights flashing and the vehicle rocking and rolling, you *know* something is inside that really wants to get out. Sure enough, said Dave Masters of Evergreen, Colorado, an approximately 200-pound bear was unhappily trapped in the front seat and ripping up everything from the dashboard to the wiring, reports KTVQ.com. Masters thought starting the truck by remote might help, “but it seemed to get (the bear) even more pissed off.” The sheriff’s office had a better idea: Deputies carefully opened the truck door and the bear scrambled out, free at last.

ALASKA

Alaska Gov. Bill Walker took pity on a sow and four cubs that were destined for extermination for misbehaving in Anchorage, so he asked the state game and fish commissioner to spare the family. A reprieve was granted, reports the *Alaska Dispatch News*, with the lucky bears taken to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for a second chance. Alas, they proved incorrigible, moving into the small town of Hope, where they scavenged on backyard chickens and chased moose through an RV park. Asked about the bears’ “alleged poultry consumption,” the chastened governor joked, “Last I’d heard they were eating dandelions

in Hope. ... Someone said they were perhaps strumming guitars. Fish and Game will handle this in their own professional way, and I am no longer involved in helping them do their job.”

MONTANA

On June 11, Glacier National Park celebrated its 100 millionth visitor. Tourists might want to visit the glorious park soon, says *Montana Magazine*. Out of 150 glaciers counted at the turn of the last century, only 25 remain, and by 2030, not a single one is expected to survive.

COLORADO

Diane Sylvain of Paonia, Colorado, tells us she took Amtrak from Grand Junction to Denver recently, only to be delayed for hours by rockslides and torrential rains. But one elderly woman seemed to be more worried about the dead lodgepole pines in the mountains. “What killed all the trees?” she asked her daughter, repeatedly. “Pine beetles,” the daughter explained. “Pine *beagles*? I never heard of such a thing. If dogs are killing the trees, they oughta just keep ‘em out of the forest!” We couldn’t agree more.

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

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org.

“Pointless cairns are simply pointless reminders of the human ego. ... Fight the urge to stack rocks and make your mark.”

Robyn Martin, in her essay, “Ego cairns have got to go,” from *Writers on the Range*, hcn.org/wotr



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