

**travel** SPECIAL  
ISSUE &  
GUIDE

# High Country News

For people who care about the West

March 6, 2017 | \$5 | Vol. 49 No. 4 | [www.hcn.org](http://www.hcn.org)

**Raptor Viewing**

**Blast-Zone Hiking**

**Wild Streaking**

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### Editor's note

## There and back again

Many years ago, I traveled abroad for the first time, to visit a high school friend from Rock Springs, Wyoming, who had been stationed by the U.S. Army in Germany. On that trip, I nearly froze to death in the Bavarian Alps, lost my passport at a train station, and fell briefly in love with a woman I met in a Munich park. I spent the next two decades traveling, as a student and journalist, learning about other places and people in an effort to better understand myself.



Every year, *High Country News* puts together a special travel issue. We do this because, in the pages of a typical issue, we are primarily concerned with the facts and forces that shape the American West: the landscapes, water, people and wildlife that make this region unique. In most stories, we try our best to serve as experienced guides, bringing our readers useful analysis and insight. In the travel issue, however, we take a different tack. We imagine the region as though we were new to it, and in doing so, we see it with fresh eyes.

To travel, as Bilbo Baggins will tell you, is to go there and back again, to venture forth and then return to your Shire a changed person (or hobbit, in Bilbo's case). We pack our bags, tie our boots, and cross a threshold into the world. And on the journey, we have experiences that no one can ever take away.

In this issue, we have tried to push deep into the unexpected, or even uncomfortable, corners of the West, places not only beautiful but instructive. Associate Editor Maya Kapoor visits an Arizona raptor show, prompting questions about the human relationship with other creatures. Writer Eric Wagner hikes through the wastelands of the Mount St. Helens eruption, pondering poetry and devastation. Contributing Editor Sarah Gilman travels to remote British Columbia with a group of like-minded women, all intent on being wild without judgment, running a river in the process. Our deputy editor, Kate Schimel, takes a thoughtful look at the lives of people in Montana's Yaak Valley, wondering what draws them to it even as she feels repulsed. And our editorial fellow, Anna V. Smith, returns to the Oregon timber country of her youth, finding new sympathy for logging communities that proved just as vulnerable as old-growth forests to a changing world.

These are not vacation stories, necessarily. But they *are* travel stories. They are tales of change and growth and discovery. They are as much inner journeys as outer, all prompted by the unique features of our great region, places often forgotten or ignored – but only if we fail to take the time to appreciate the adventures that await us, outside our front door.

—Brian Calvert, managing editor



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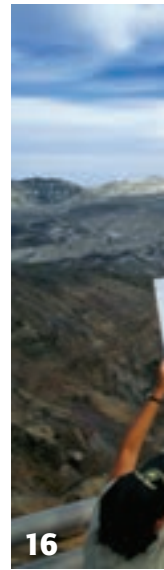
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### On the cover

**Hyla, a ferruginous hawk, up close during Raptor Free Flight west of Tucson, Arizona.** DON SORENSEN PHOTO COURTESY ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM



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**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. (ISSN/0191/5657) is published bi-weekly, 22 times a year, by High Country News, 119 Grand

Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: **800-905-1155** | **hcn.org**

Printed on recycled paper.

◀ A red-tailed hawk gets a treat from handler Daniel Trocola during Raptor Free Flight at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

JORDAN GLENN



DIANE SYLVAIN

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▲ At the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, visitors compare the cone to a photo of it before the eruption.

JIM RICHARDSON

◀ Loading canoes onto a floatplane on Eddontenajon Lake in northern British Columbia, during a 16-day all-women canoe trip.

KRISTA LANGLOIS.



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**Sarah Gilman** is an HCN contributing editor and writer based in Portland, Oregon. Her work will be anthologized in *The Best Women's Travel Writing*, in May.  
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**Eric Wagner** writes about science and the environment from Seattle, Washington, where he lives with his wife and daughter. He's currently writing a book about Mount St. Helens.



**Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, on Instagram Feb. 1, announcing he'd withdrawn HR 621. "I'm a proud gun owner, hunter and love our public lands," he wrote.**

**Sportsmen on the public-lands defensive**

In a legislative season full of threats to public lands at the state and federal level, hook-and-bullet groups have mobilized to fight for the landscapes they value. Having convinced Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, to withdraw support for public lands transfer bill HR 621, opponents of the legislation are working to oppose the companion bill, HR 622, the Local Enforcement for Local Lands Act. If passed, it would hand law enforcement responsibilities on Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands to local police. Hunters and anglers fear that would make federal lands more vulnerable to abuse — and set the stage for potential land transfers. **REBECCA WORBY**  
 MORE: [hcne.ws/sportsmen-unite](http://hcne.ws/sportsmen-unite)

*"The implication is on the order of a trillion dollars and close to 150 million people displaced or adversely affected by a one-meter rise in sea level, which is not that unreasonable to expect in the coming 50 to 100 years."*

—Waleed Abdalati, director of the University of Colorado's Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (CIRES), a joint program with NOAA, explaining NOAA's work and how it impacts Westerners.  
 MAYA L. KAPOOR MORE: [hcne.ws/ask-noaa](http://hcne.ws/ask-noaa)

**10 million** number of California residents who were born outside of the United States

**1 in 10** number of workers in the state who don't have documents needed to work legally

**65** percent of California adults polled who say the state should have its own laws that protect the rights of undocumented immigrants

In early February, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers arrested more than 160 people in Los Angeles during a sweep. The raid pre-empted legislation that would prevent California law enforcement from having to share information with ICE agents. The raids are having a chilling effect on a burgeoning group of young activists: California's Dreamers, unauthorized immigrant children and students protected under a tenuous Obama administration executive order. "I have such a huge sense of despair these days," Karen Zapien, an activist, said. The sweep also signaled what was yet to come: an executive memo weeks later that has made all undocumented immigrants vulnerable to deportation. **RUXANDRA GUIDI**  
 MORE: [hcne.ws/immigration-sweeps](http://hcne.ws/immigration-sweeps)

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## UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

We asked readers: Where in the West have you traveled that helped you understand an uncomfortable truth about the West? Here is a sampling of their answers.



RIAN LAUB

### Noisy truth at 14,000 feet Mount Sherman, Colorado

My husband has been working on Colorado's Fourteeners since he was about 14. We are nearing 64. One year I decided I needed to climb at least one so I could experience what he held so dear. So we decided to climb Mount Sherman. As I slowly approached the summit, I started to hear the roar of a motor. What was that noise? I struggled to reach the top and looked over at the Henderson molybdenum mine. My heart sank as I realized my effort to achieve what I thought would be an enlightening experience just gave me a bird's-eye view of a giant machine chewing up a mountain. It was then that I realized that the quaint mines dotting the hills were really just industrial sites in the middle of pristine wilderness. It was my first — and last — Fourteener.

— Kerry Coy

# This land is my land?

A Southerner discovers the West's public lands

BY LYNDSEY GILPIN

Through my car window, I watched the burnt orange blur of Utah rush by, feeling dizzy as I tried to keep up with each new patch of sagebrush or towering rock pile. I was on my first road trip through the West, traveling from my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, to a new life in Los Angeles, and I'd already crossed hundreds of miles of big sky and open spaces. Suddenly, a blue-and-green triangular signpost caught my eye, identifying an agency I had never heard of: the Bureau of Land Management. The next time I stopped, I pulled out my phone and searched for it on Google, entering a rabbit hole of wikis and websites. I learned that the BLM manages 264 million acres of public land, and that originally its holdings were considered "land nobody wanted."

For the next few days, I obsessively scoured Utah for the perfect remote, wild BLM campsite: cheap — or better yet, free — and secluded, silent except for scurrying wildlife and howling wind. On a dirt road east of the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park, a few miles from the Hamburger Rock Campground, I found my refuge: soft, flat red ground with one sprawling tree, miles of rocks to scramble, and a sunset that brought tears to my eyes. In the narrow beam of my headlamp, I set up the tent, unrolled my sleeping bag, and fought to stay awake long enough to watch the stars appear in a sky clearer than I'd ever seen before. I woke early to sit and sip coffee on one of those warm red rocks. A few hundred yards away stood that little BLM sign.

Back home in Kentucky, the whole concept of public lands — what they are, who protects them, why there is an ongoing battle over their management — rarely entered my consciousness. The wild spaces closest to my hometown are privately owned or managed by the city or state. The federal government owns 28 percent of the U.S., and about

92 percent of that land lies in Western states. Less than 5 percent of Kentucky and several other Southeastern states is federally owned. The lack of immediate access to nature inhibited my relationship with it. I adored exploring the outdoors, and yet I couldn't help but feel distant from it. So I was ill-prepared for the sheer size of federal land Americans share — land that I had no idea existed — and the cultural, political and economic tangles in any given corner of it.

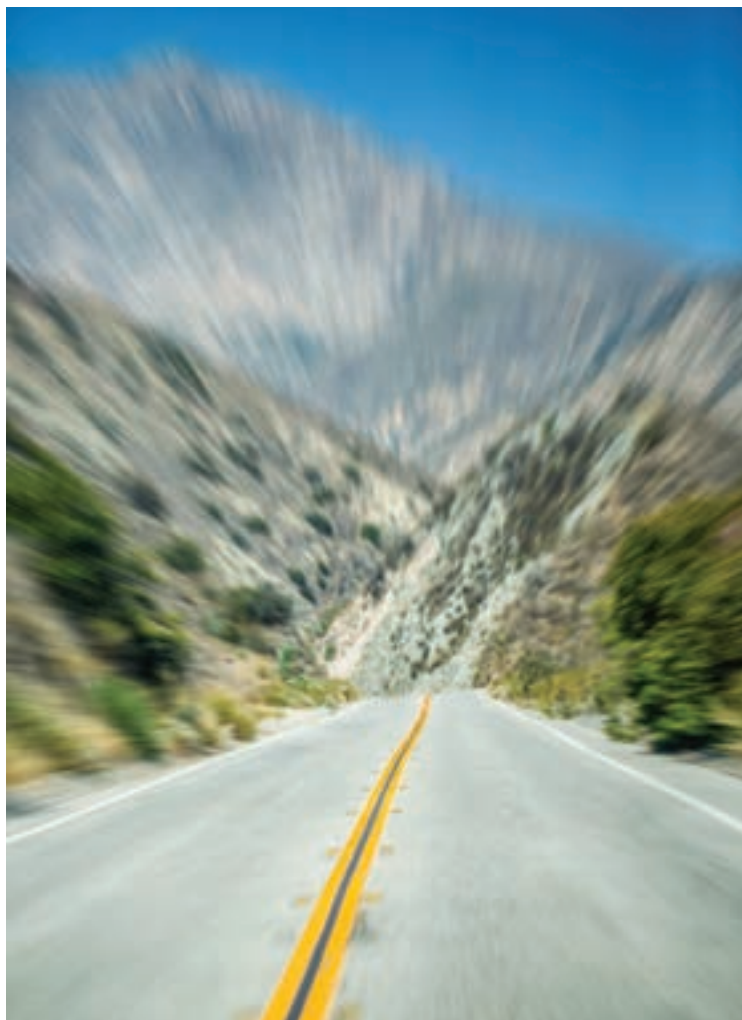
About a week into the trip, outside of Durango, Colorado, a National Park Service sign directed me toward Mesa Verde, which preserves cliff dwellings from the Ancestral Puebloan communities that lived there from about 600 to 1300 A.D. It was only an hour out of the way. Back East, visiting national parks required deliberate planning, a search

to find historic landmarks or places, and a long trip to see them. Here, I happily veered off-course for a spontaneous history lesson and a chance to wander through pockets of fire-scarred trees. At the Montezuma Valley overlook, I waited until all the cars left, so I could stand alone at the edge. As I shivered in the chilly evening breeze, I focused on the valley below, imagining it filled with thousands of people bustling in villages and tending farmland.

In the last week of August, in the dead of night, I pulled up at Chilao Campground in Angeles National Forest, just outside Los Angeles — 4,300 miles from home. Angeles, the first national forest designated in California, covers about 700,000 acres and five designated wilderness areas. At 5,300 feet above sea level, Chilao provided a respite from the smog and traffic of the city below.

I did not know then that the public lands and the agencies that manage them would define the next two years of my life. I would spend countless hours in the national forest, in the Santa Monica Mountains and in other nearby recreation areas. By early 2016, the land-transfer movement dominated the news; the first story I remember reading — and understanding — involved the armed occupation of Oregon's Malheur Wildlife Refuge. Those militants were trespassing on *my* land.

But that night, a few hundred yards from my tent, I just stood on a rock and stared at the radiant lights of Greater Los Angeles. Between my boots and my new home were thousands of acres of protected land. The glow of the full moon sharpened the edges of chaparral and yucca — flora I had never before encountered. Though I was far from home, I felt more attached to the land than ever, reveling in the fact that all of it — no matter where I was from or how long it took me to realize it existed — was mine to discover, explore and protect. □



The drive through Angeles National Forest towards Big Tujunga Canyon.

THOMAS HAWK/CC FLICKR



Anna Santo and Kate Lauth steer their canoe toward Red Goat Mountain on a calm stretch of the Spatsizi River.

KRISTA LANGLOIS

## Go North, young woman

*In a place no one can see you, you can see yourself more clearly*

BY SARAH GILMAN

*... Trust the road in your name. Ride / Your moon hide through the pitch black. Gotsta be your own bride.*

— Angel Nafis, from the poem “Ghazal for Becoming Your Own Country.”

**T**hink of your skin as a map. Its marks inscribe a story of your life. The raggedness of your fingertips from biting your nails. The lines in your cheeks from laughing. The scar from surgery to help knit broken bone. The burn you gave yourself when only pain would calm you. The nick on your wrist that, whenever you touch it, makes you think of the talus field where you stumbled and cut yourself, the mountain lake where you washed the blood away.

On this August afternoon, the skin on my calves is tanned dark, crisscrossed with scratches, welted with bugbites, scummed over with beaver pond. On this August afternoon, my skin says that I’ve ventured into the boreal forest, and that it’s kicking my ass.

I’m a few days into a 16-day canoe trip with five girlfriends down the remote Spatsizi and Upper Stikine rivers — joined threads in the high reaches of a great system of braided, salmon-bearing waterways that originate in a swath of northern British Columbia known as the Sacred Headwaters. It’s a place toothy with mountain ranges, broad-shouldered with tundra plateaus, and furred with endless forests of white and black spruce and bursts of poplar just turning gold.

Roads are sparse here, so travel is by floatplane, boat, horse, and, for those who don’t mind shredding their flesh in thickets of grasping branches, by foot. Which is why we’ve generally stuck with the canoes until now. But Krista Langlois and Kate Greenberg, our navigators, had consulted the topos and sparse guidebook entries and identified the far end of Cold Fish Lake, which appeared to be about a dozen miles off the Spatsizi, as a good base to backpack into the high alpine for tarns and tundra. So we hauled out our trusty boats and struck up a winding tributary called Mink Creek, where we would supposedly, eventually, find a trail.

Three hours later, we’ve puzzled through thatches of fallen logs and climbed in and out of the creek channel dozens of times, but have traveled only a mile. Even when we find the first triangular trail-blaze nailed to a tree and begin hoofing up a faint single track through yet more tangled forest, Cold Fish hovers, mirage-like, beyond reach. At 8 p.m., Krista and I drop our packs and jog ahead through deepening blue shadows until we can finally get a clear view of the lake’s placid waters. They’re another decidedly un placid mile away, through a thickly vegetated bog. “Fuck

*this,*” we say in unison, and trot back to the group to throw down camp by a mosquito-ridden stream.

By 3 p.m. the next day, we’re battered, smelly, smiling and back at the Spatsizi. “Mothah Rivah!” someone exclaims, as we shed clothes and plunge into the water. “Hey, check this out,” Krista yells, bending over some fireweed, then ambushes Kate Lauth with a fistful of mud. Muck flies. Anna Santo paints a smiley face on her belly. Jen Crozier washes earth from Kate Greenberg’s hair.

My scratches sting as I rinse the silt away, but I feel more comfortable in my skin than I have in ages. There is no one here to see us, no one but ourselves to judge what we should do or what we are capable of doing. In a world that expects women to look and act in certain ways, we’ve staked out territory where we can move without thought for our bodies as anything other than our native homes. We are making and remaking our maps, letting this place write itself on our arms and legs — sketching where we’ve been, and where we might go, should we follow these routes emerging below our feet, under our paddles, across our flesh. And after dinner, Anna slides into a sassy red dress from the costume bag, grabs a fly rod, and wades across the Mink to find a good spot to cast.

**T**he seeds of our excursion were planted in northern Minnesota, a place made as much of lake as of land. The Kates once attended a summer camp there that culminated in a 45-day wilderness canoe trip

## UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

### Heartbreaking abstraction becomes reality

Tucson, Arizona

I lived two hours north of Tucson in 2011 and was in town the day Congresswoman Gabby Giffords was shot. My husband and I attended the vigil at the hospital later that evening. The fact that someone could so easily get a gun and shoot a group of people in a Safeway parking lot — including a child — had always felt like an abstraction until that day.

— Anna Wilde



MIKE BAIRD/CC FLICKR

### From paintings to "progress" in remote places

Santa Barbara, California

I live in Santa Barbara and don't travel much, but I have sailed and backpacked the remote areas of this county. The Chumash lived here for 15,000 years and left a few rock paintings. The newcomers settled here a little over 200 years ago and have nearly turned the area into a dead zone. That's progress.

— Thomas Harper

and decided they wanted to carry that tradition into their adult lives. In the summer of 2015, they reached out to like-minded women they'd met in college, through work, in Colorado mountain towns.

Krista had guided troubled teenagers on backcountry excursions in Alaska. Jen and Kate L. had done the same in the Southern Rockies. I'd spent a few summers building trails and studying birds in the high alpine. Kate G. had worked on restoring the Colorado River Delta across the border in Mexico, and Anna had researched beavers in Patagonia. All of us, now in our late 20s to mid-30s, loved the idea of building a community of outdoorswomen that we could keep coming back to as we moved on into careers in writing, medicine, therapy and advocacy.

We weren't aiming to make first descents of whitewater canyons. We just wanted to be far out in the world together for the longest stretches we could muster. I imagined us still at it in 30 years — silver-edged women in the mold of Mardy Murie, a naturalist who raised her family in the wilds of Wyoming and Alaska and helped lead the charge to preserve the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

We gave ourselves a name, Wild Streak, and met by Skype on autumn evenings, researching the Northern rivers we might float — the Noatak or Kluane, the Gataga and Kechika. We chose the Upper Stikine and its tributary Spatsizi for their on- and off-water opportunities and the fact that they fit our budget of \$2,000 per person. We scoured trip reports, ordered maps, marked out possible camps. Doing it just for ourselves didn't seem like enough, so we used the trip to raise money for nonprofits that give teen girls opportunities like the ones that helped us become confident in the wilderness — ultimately bankrolling several scholarships for canoe and glacier trips.

Finally, late last July, we rendezvoused in Bellingham, Washington, stuffed a minivan and sedan with gear, and blew across the U.S. border and 1,000 miles of British Columbia to the tiny backwater of Iskut. There, on the shore of Eddontenajon Lake, we piled into a floatplane. The unexpectedly handsome pilot, Dan Brown, flashed us a dimpled grin, then lifted us with Canadian nonchalance into the sky.

Mountain ranges, then more mountain ranges, and then the Spatsizi uncoiled below us like a rope thrown across the valley floor. Aprons of rust-colored scree descended from high ridges to oxbows that looped around pocket lakes. Our landing on one of them was so smooth that I barely registered touching down until I saw spray jetting past my window. Standing on the gravel beach next to a fresh pile of bear scat, we watched the floatplane rise again, drag its reflection into the trees, vanish. We were

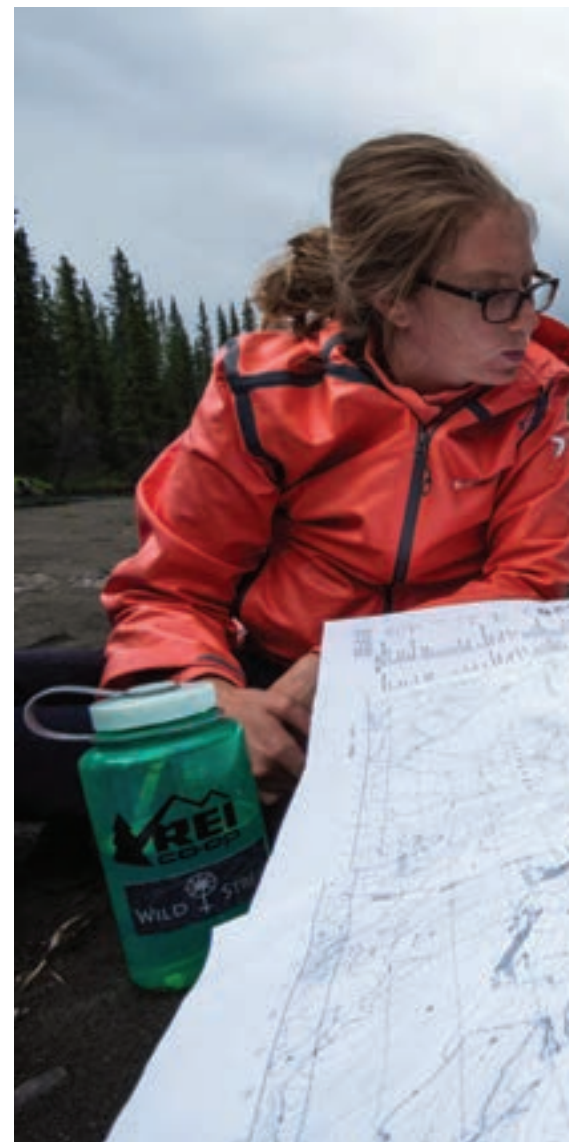
alone in the middle of nowhere, alone in the middle of everywhere. Then, we were in the water, swimming our first loaded canoe to the portage that would put us on the 135-mile stretch of river we'd waited so long to paddle. That night, as I climbed into my tent on our first beach camp, mayflies glittered in my headlamp beam like animate stars. They reminded me of the constellation of bruises on my shins. They pointed the way.

The trip spools out as languidly as the river. We wake when we want, build morning campfires, stop when the impulse to explore strikes. Sometimes we float more than a dozen miles a day, sometimes none. We fish for Arctic grayling and Dolly Varden trout that, cooked in the coals, taste of snowmelt and salt. Not everyone has canoed whitewater before, so on the calmer Spatsizi, Kate L. and Krista help us brush up on paddling strokes and practice swinging in and out of currents and eddies. Later, we mock up a pulley-assisted rope arrangement, called a Z-drag, on a sapling. This would help us pull a canoe off a mid-river rock should a mishap occur in one of the mellow but respectable rapids.

The boats become as beloved — and irritating — as family members, and we name them accordingly. There's the Sphincter, for the puckered passenger openings in its ill-fitting brown canvas spray deck — a snap-on cover meant to keep the canoe from swamping. There's the Pussy Rabbit, for the Russian feminist punk band and the pipe-smoking bunny emblazoned on the canoe's red sides. And there's the sleek green 17-footer that we vie for each day. That one we call Dan Brown.

Kate L. becomes my frequent paddling partner, talking me through maneuvers around submerged logs and whale-backed boulders, then pumping her fist with me in triumph as I gain confidence steering Dan Brown from the stern. In the wide valley where the Spatsizi pours into the broader, faster Stikine, we float over the hard line where the water shifts from opaque beige to a turquoise so clear I can see river-bottom stones six feet below, our shadow slipping over them as if we're still flying.

An old fire scar marks the shore with miles of skeletonized trunks, like a splatter of gray paint across the dark landscape. When it rains, which is often, the drops bead brightly across the Stikine's surface before melting into its flow. We stay warm in skintight wetsuits and dub ourselves the Future Dolphin Trainers of America. In one spot, sheared-off earthen banks rise 20 feet above our heads where a landslide blocked the river earlier in the summer. The Stikine still tears insistently at the remains, dragging whole spruce trees free and pulling them along in the





▲ Anna Santo, Jen Crozier and Kate Lauth use a map and GPS to try to ascertain the group's location on the Spatsizi River.



◀ During the bushwhack up to Cold Fish Lake, amphibious footwear was necessary for the many stream, beaver pond and muddy suckhole crossings. KRISTA LANGLOIS

current beside our canoes. A thunderstorm boils up over the confluence with the Pitman River as we're eating dinner one evening. The towering clouds catch the last sun, send down a spark of rainbow, set the forest burning anew with light. We stand watching, ankle-deep in mud with our arms around each other, our faces gold, our gnocchi forgotten.

Save for a man we glimpse a week into the trip, tending a remote riverside lodge, we meet nobody. Little wonder, then, that the landscape feels secretive. We encounter few animals, but each sandbar is brailled with tracks: Bears, both grizzly and black, wolves with paws larger than my palms, bobcat, lynx, moose, beaver, porcupine. We find skulls and antlers

pressed into the spongy forest floor. Odd splashes ring from the river some nights, and groans and crashes haunt the bushes. Even one of the three moose that we actually see seems insubstantial as a ghost. The young bull clacks his teeth and rolls his eyes, splashing down the center of the channel, and then, when Krista and I turn for a moment to navigate a riffle, vanishes without sound or trace.

There are other mysteries, too. Along one bar, the river's high-water flows have left not-quite-cairns of clustered stones. Delicate, almost deliberate, arrangements of bone-white driftwood decorate high-water lines and former eddies. It's as if the country murmurs just beyond the edge of hearing, moves just beyond the edge of vision, watches us as even we watch it slip past.

But if the country keeps itself close, it steadily reveals us to one another. We make decisions by consensus, move fluidly together on the water, support each other taking risks, or choosing not to.

On our last day, we come upon a significant rapid, one we'd failed to note on the map. Anna — one of our boldest members, and one of the least experienced on whitewater — decides she wants to test her new steering skills. We eddy out so she can replace Kate G. in the stern of the Sphincter, and all of us rock-hop down the shore to scout routes through midstream boulders that churn the Stikine into a froth. Then, we slide back under our spray decks and push off, one by one, into the current.

Krista and Jen take the lead without incident, then Kate G. and Anna, who punches through a big hole, scoops in a fair amount of river, but does just fine. In the rear, Kate L. steers the Pussy Rabbit beautifully from the stern, while I paddle hard in the bow. Exposed rocks and pourovers slip by, waves splash across my arms and fill my lap. When the rapid spits us out into the slackwater of the tight canyon below, we lift our paddles to the cloudy sky and cheer.

Later, long after we've repacked our gear and driven hundreds of miles south, we stop at a busy lakeside campground. I cook dinner for the crew in silence, then break away to sit at the water's edge alone, feeling scraped out by the end of the journey, the sudden plunge into a frenetic world of strangers, cellphone service, social media. Two loons paddle nearby, singing long and low from the reeds. And then the full moon surprises me with its sudden appearance. Its first fingers of light fold over the ridges to the east, slowly hoist its glare into the sky, reach for my hands. I see my cracked knuckles, the thick new calluses on my palms. *Look where you've been*, I whisper to no one. *Imagine where you'll go*. I wipe my eyes with the back of my wrist and head back to my friends. □

## UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

### A camping trip turned more rugged than planned

Mesa, Arizona

I took my new son-in-law for an overnight hike into the Superstition Mountains, east of Phoenix. It was October, and the weather in the Phoenix Valley was sublime. This was not a backpacking initiation, as I had both a packhorse and a BLM-adopted wild burro to pack the gear. I put the "comforts of home" (our tent and two warm sleeping bags) in a duffel and securely — I thought — attached it to the horse's pack saddle. With a late start, we could not reach the destination. It was pitch-dark. But somewhere along the way, the duffel fell off the horse, and we had to set up camp huddled under sweat-saturated saddle blankets at 4,100-foot elevation.

— Tom Taylor



PAUL ASMAN AND JILL LENOBLE/ CC FLICKR

## UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

### Fitting in a little too well post-election

Farmington, Utah

The day after the 2016 presidential election, my friends and I needed some recuperation time in the desert. We packed food, beer, whiskey and guns. A couple of us stopped at Cabela's on the way to get ammunition and propane. During checkout the employee scanned our propane too many times, and when we pointed it out, his response was, "Oh, whoops, you don't need that much propane. We won the election; no need to head to the hills now." Little did he know, that was exactly what we were doing — because we had lost. But we were diesel-truck-driving, gun-toting, public-land-visiting Utahns, so how could we be disappointed with a Trump presidency? The assumption we shared his views was unnerving and uncomfortable. We left the store shaking our heads, bound for The Swell.

— Erin Bragg



RACHEL ZURER/CC FLICKR

# Growing pains

*In timber country, a writer returns to the old-growth forest of her youth*

BY ANNA V. SMITH

This winter, at home for the holidays, I talked an old high school friend into visiting one of our favorite stomping grounds. The Valley of the Giants is a small public-land inholding hidden amid the carved-up timber country of western Oregon, a patch of old-growth forest that offered an escape from my home just outside of Dallas, Oregon. An awkwardly sized town, big enough for a Wal-Mart but surrounded by farmland, Dallas lies 15 miles west of Salem and doesn't offer many reasons to visit. I had not seen the giants in eight years, but I had thought about the area often over the last few months. So I asked CJ Drake, a friend who was also in town, to come with me, because it was tricky getting around out there, and because he, too, loved the valley. We had gone to high school and college together in Oregon, and he was now in forestry school. And we both had begun to understand our roots in timber country in a different way, pushing past the teenage angst of small-town living and coming to see our hometown as part of a much larger picture.

The day was already getting on by the time we arrived at the trailhead. The winter sun had finally started to shine through the fog, and the thick trees on either side of the road cast deep shadows. It was chillier than I thought it would be, and my fingers began to turn red as we stood there on the gravel, the only noise the distant rumble of the North Fork of the Siletz River.

Fortified with a pre-hike snack of homemade Christmas cookies and fruit leather, we started down the narrow path, heading toward the river. On the drive to the trailhead, we had passed the signs of Oregon's timber industry — semis filled with long logs and machines moving felled Douglas firs with giant claws, arched necks swiveling, windshields reflecting the cold sky. But here the woods were different. Life thrust through the soft forest floor. Fir saplings sprouted from downed logs, joined by the odd oily mushroom or bracket fungus. Lichen crept along the branches of hemlocks and firs above our heads. The 51-acre protected area, an island of Bureau of Land Management territory surrounded by timber companies, gets more than 180 inches of rain a year. The result is constant growth. CJ, the pragmatic one in our group of friends, had his own take. "A lot of death and a lot of time, that's

basically what created this," he said, as he walked down the path ahead of me.

After a few twists and turns in the trail, we encountered our first giant, one of the huge trees for which the place is named: a Douglas fir, so tall that we couldn't even see its first branch and so wide it would take at least five people to wrap their arms around it. Its furrowed bark, thick and old, was filled with moss, its base covered in a mound of its own dead needles.

On my first visit to Valley of the Giants, I was a junior at Dallas High School. That year, 2008, Barack Obama was elected president on a wave of hope, even as the countdown began on the lumber mill in town. The mill, which was founded in 1905, had survived the Great Depression and two world wars. By 1955,

when Willamette Industries added the plywood mill, 440 people worked there. In 2002, it endured a hostile takeover by Weyerhaeuser, and by the fall of 2008, it had already gone through several rounds of layoffs. The mill would close altogether a few months after Obama's inauguration, firing its last 78 employees amid a recession that fueled anger and resentment in my town — towards regulation, sagging markets, joblessness, and, in general, a changing world.

I was part of a small group that saw many of our peers as small-minded, or backwards. My friends and I wanted up and out. We'd read Ginsberg and Kerouac, Thoreau and Emerson, and thought we knew all about howling at the moon, about transcendent self-reliance. We took to exploring the network of logging roads that wound through the hills and valleys of the Coast Range, west and north of town — short drives to wild places. Sometimes we took day trips, sometimes we went camping, but it was always just us — me, CJ, a few others — suspicious of any other cars we saw that far out in nowhere. Some roads we followed to dead ends; on others, we'd drive through a sylvan spiral, up and down logged-over mountains, until we got bored, or tired.





These gravel roads were nothing special, but sometimes they led us to a stream or a river or a scenic vantage point, and always they took us toward a kind of peace: an absence of other people, a quietude that we filled with a campfire, whiskey, and a bit of music, laughter and teenage ruckus.

The Valley of the Giants gave us the chance to explore a realm that seemed mostly untouched, saved from the voraciousness of industry. But in those days, I didn't connect the giants to their surroundings. I was simply in awe of the size of the trees left standing, some nearly 200 feet high and up to 450 years old. I imagined what the forest might have looked like centuries ago, but back then I never really thought about its place in the modern world.

**C**J and I continued down the path, where on both sides of the trail trees had fallen and were fading into the duff-covered ground, as new growth reached for sunlight. Snapped-off snags jutted skyward, and tall firs that had tipped over were caught in the canopy. Some trees had crashed to the ground long ago, leaving craters where massive root balls hung suspended. As we walked through

the tangle, I thought how easily you could get lost in here, without the river as a reference point. The area is only lightly maintained, and the path winds around and over downed trees, creating a verdant labyrinth.

Hidden throughout, I knew, were the various flora and fauna that rely on this mysterious ecosystem. In June, for example, threatened marbled murrelets fly in from the Pacific Ocean to roost in the high branches of the giants, one of the dwindled old-growth stands left in the Coast Range. Creamy white trillium flowers open up along the forest floor, and wood sorrel runs rampant.

After the first big trees, we crossed a steel footbridge over the Siletz River, wide and shallow in this section, with white rapids crashing against smooth boulders. I paused in the center of the bridge to watch the cold water run toward the ocean. Downriver, I caught a glimpse of two small creatures pulling themselves out of the water, gray coats against gray rocks, sleek and silent river otters that had made this place their home. I looked back to tell CJ, but he had gone on ahead, across the bridge and into the tree cover. The otters disappeared behind a boulder, leaving nothing behind

but the rumble of the river on the rocks. I gleefully skated over ice patches on the bridge to catch up with my friend.

About halfway through the loop, we came upon Big Guy, a fallen 600-year-old-plus Douglas fir that was once famous for being the second-tallest tree in Oregon. Big Guy fell in 1981, at 230 feet tall, and was eventually sawed in half for the trail, so that visitors could walk through the narrow passage made by the cut. I stood in the trail between the two massive halves of the tree, as though in a corridor. The first time I came here, standing in that spot felt impressive. But it didn't feel the same today. It felt better to stand next to the living giants, not one that had been cut in half, and with clumsy initials carved into its rotting heart.

As we made the loop and circled back to the car, we passed a soaked wooden picnic bench, a manmade anomaly in a damp silence. We took our time, stopping to watch moisture drip from lichen that hung like tinsel from the firs, or the fog as it drifted through the woods, or the sunlight that backlit the trees, giving the whole forest a sense of holiness.

Driving back, we stopped at the site of the abandoned town of Valsetz, looking for remnants of the former logging community owned and operated by Boise Cascade, a company that still exists today. Established in 1920, the town once had a school, a store and its own newspaper (run by a 9-year-old, who proudly proclaimed, "We believe in hemlock, fir, kindness and Republicans"). In 1984, the corporation drained the millpond, and pushed out the residents. Finally, as if for metaphorical effect, the old mill was burned down. All that was left today was a swamp filled with skinny alders. It felt ghostly, haunted by the memory of the loggers who toiled away here, whose work slowly ate away at the old-growth stands, nearly destroying them — before the town itself disappeared. I used to think it was backwards for people to cling to a known way of life, to what feels safe. But in the end, the people here were as exploited by outside forces as the trees themselves.

When I first explored the Valley of the Giants, it felt apart from everything — a hidden place to be discovered, an escape unconnected to the mill closures, the recession and the anger of my town. It seemed like a place untouched by time or politics, an old-growth sanctum of murrelets and otters. But seeing it again, years later, I understood the forest as one small piece of a confusing whole, as vulnerable to human foibles as any other part. From the West's economically depressed towns, to the shining halls of its state capitols, the Valley of the Giants rests somewhere in there, too, an ancient patch of land that has somehow kept its secrets. □

## UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS



SCOTT DIETZ

### Deep divides Central Oregon

Seeking solace from the cacophony of the presidential election, my family traveled to our favorite place in our beloved state: central Oregon, with its striking volcanic edifices, ponderosa pine forests and sagebrush steppes. We stayed at our usual cabin in LaPine State Park and explored the Deschutes River with our 3-year-old son, nourishing ourselves in nature. We took a day trip to Christmas Valley, passing myriad election signs en route, predominantly reading "TRUMP / PENCE." Our new president-elect, and all the moral and ethical bankruptcy he represented, was inescapable. These thoughts lingered as we visited Crack-in-the-Ground, a remarkable 1,000-year-old fissure deep in the earth with jumbles of intimidating boulders and grassy, intimate paths between them. It occurred to us that in descending this cleft we were also navigating a metaphorical divide among our own fellow citizens, one entrenched in the history of this country but now painfully pushed to the foreground.

— Matthew P.



Moss and lichen ornament the living branches and decomposing trunks of trees in the Valley of the Giants in Oregon.

MIKE SCOFIELD

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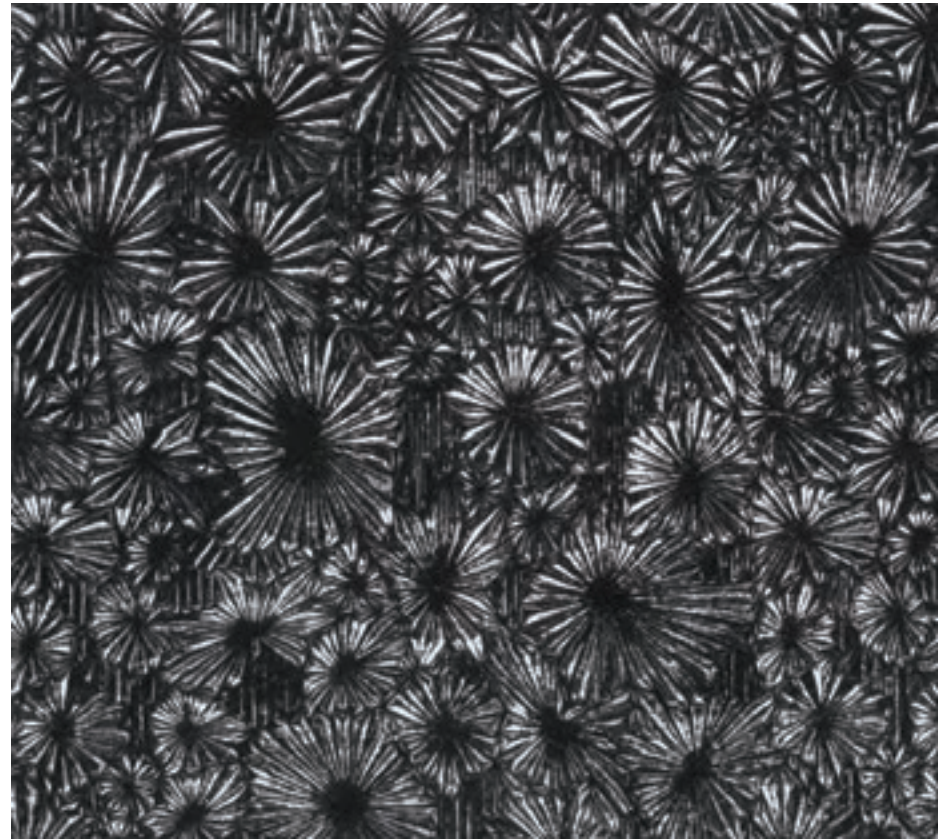
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**WHAT THEY LEFT BEHIND**

By Richard S. Buswell  
88 pages, hardcover: \$29.95.  
University of New Mexico Press, 2017.

In *What They Left Behind*, Richard Buswell takes ordinary bits of Montana's past and renders them abstract and haunting in black-and-white photographs. Rather than simply collect and arrange artifacts, he seeks to expose the unexpected beauty in their patterns and shapes. Divorced from context and cast in sharp light and shadow, antlers and spokes, hip sockets and bulb sockets reveal their common geometries.

Buswell had a long career as a physician, and the photos in this book reflect the sensibilities of both a medical professional and a deeply observant artist. His subjects, from doll parts to bones, insistently evoke mortality. These images capture each object in an unsentimental state of "after": after decay, after a lifetime of use, after abandonment, after death. But they also invite us to notice the beauty concealed in everyday details, and in the forgotten fragments of our own lives.

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*Church Window, 2014.* RICHARD S. BUSWELL



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## Young poets, and a visit from our Bulgarian bureau chief

What promised to be a snowy white winter has quickly devolved into rain and mud here in Paonia, Colorado, where *High Country News* is headquartered. The trails above town are a sloppy mess, and the mountains themselves are already showing patches of dirt and mud. The days have switched from rainy and gray to balmy and bewildering, given that it's only February. The deer are happily sharing hay meadows and cornfields with the cattle, and there are reports of sandhill cranes already passing through — way early.

Of human migratory visitors, we've seen but a few in recent weeks. Readers **Vern** and **Melinda Hill** from Grand Junction, Colorado, dropped in to see the office in mid-February. The two retired teachers came out for a drive on a sunny day, visiting Hotchkiss and Dominguez Canyon before winding up in Paonia. **Jim Matusoff**, a new reader, also came by in February. Jim made the move to the Western Slope of Colorado just last year after working in communications in Tucson, Arizona, and is now enjoying the retired life in Paonia. Thanks for subscribing and coming by, Jim!

As busy as we are with our normal biweekly publishing schedule, *HCN* staffers somehow find time for other projects and community efforts.

Managing Editor **Brian Calvert** was recently a judge at the Aspen Words Fourth Annual Youth Poetry Slam in Carbondale, Colorado, which featured the original poetry of middle and high school students

from the Roaring Fork Valley. Twenty-three students from around the valley competed, sharing work that ranged from angry, fearful anti-Trump verse to heartfelt expressions of teen angst and poems about love and empowerment. "It was really inspiring to see young poets courageously take the stage and bare their souls," says Brian, who is currently working on an MFA in poetry from nearby Western State Colorado University. "I asked to be invited back next year."

Our farthest-flung contributing editor, **Jonathan Thompson**, who is currently living in Bulgaria, stopped by for a rare visit. Jonathan was in Denver as a featured guest for the premiere of *Beyond Standing Rock*, a documentary on tribal sovereignty, where he discussed the recently designated Bears Ears National Monument in Utah — the subject of his feature story "A Monumental Divide" in *HCN's* Oct. 31, 2016, issue. From Paonia, Jonathan headed west to Utah to say hello to some red rock before returning to Bulgaria. Always good to see you, Jonathan!

We also have an update on **Lisa Song**, former *HCN* intern from the 2010 cycle. Lisa, who won a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2013, will be moving on from *InsideClimate News* to *ProPublica*, to work as a reporter covering the environment, energy and climate change. And to think she started off in Paonia! Good luck to you, Lisa, you make us proud.

—Anna V. Smith for the staff



**Vern and Melinda Hill** stopped by our offices on an afternoon roadtrip around the Western Slope.

BROOKE WARREN





# Now You See Her

*Enduring relationships  
begin with encounters*

FEATURE BY MAYA L. KAPOOR

**H**yla is done for the morning. Amanda, crouching behind a snag, waves at her through the ocotillo and mesquite, but Hyla is not coming over, not in this wind. Not for all the glistening raw rodent flesh in the world. She's down a hill, almost out of sight. She stays there.

Gliding near the ground, maneuvering between saguaros, braking precisely — this is difficult for Hyla to do on any day. Ferruginous hawks are the largest soaring hawks, or *buteos*, in the United States; they stand almost two feet tall, and their wings can reach four feet from tip to tip. Because of their size, *buteos* are slow to lift off. It takes them several broad flaps to clear grass clumps and junipers and ascend to where thermals can carry their weight for miles, sometimes thousands of feet above the ground. On especially windy days, short demonstration jumps are difficult for Hyla to navigate, and if she gets up a little too high, she soars like a kite. “*Wheeeeeeee!*” Amanda, Hyla’s handler, says by way of explanation. Hyla’s handlers don’t press her on days when she demurs. On the blustery morning I attend Raptor Free Flight at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum outside of Tucson, hoping for a glimpse of Hyla on the wing, all I see of her is a distant blur of white and rust-red, hopping once from a human’s glove-covered arm to a nearby tree branch and back. Carroll, the docent, a charmer with chin-length gray hair who is mic’ed over a loudspeaker, maintains a calm, engaging monologue about Hyla’s species, while making dramatic decapitation motions at Amanda — *Should I cut Hyla’s part of the show?* Amanda, in the creosote, gives a quick nod.

During Raptor Free Flight, birds of prey such as Hyla are handled without jesses or hoods, the leashes and eye-covers falconers use. They are tethered to their handlers by the draw of fresh, uncooked animal protein — rabbit chunks, mouse heads, quail eggs. A crowd of Desert Museum visitors jostles behind metal gates, gasping and shooting video as one bird after another flits up from the shrubs.

“Notice the top of your head and the bottom of your feet,” Carroll says. “That is your space.” Everything else belongs to the birds.

“Are our eyes the top of our heads?” a woman asks tremulously. Corralled with other humans while predators glide just overhead, it’s easy to feel like prey.

*Pick me*, I think, envious each time a raptor swoops within inches of another person’s head. Hawks, primates: We must be equally inscrutable to one another. And it’s so easy to confuse

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Hyla, a ferruginous hawk, swoops low during Raptor Free Flight at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. DON SORENSEN, COURTESY ASDM



Visitors watch as a great horned owl, LB, skims past cholla during Raptor Free Flight at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. JORDAN GLENN

**I attend shows like Raptor Free Flight believing a moment under wing might change a person profoundly, including me.**

inscrutability with wildness, instincts with secrets. I long for a raptor to fly close enough to ruffle my hair with the movement of its wings, as if proximity would mean that a wild animal chose to collapse that other distance between us, letting me into its world, acknowledging me as one of the wild ones, too. But the birds keep their distance.

In my 20s, Raptor Free Flight would have upset me. In college, two decades ago, I spent four years learning about the environmental catastrophes my generation faced. Later, I collected biological field data in locations popular with tourists, from San Francisco to Yellowstone National Park. I came to comport myself as a weary insider to environmental heartache, detached from the naiveté of less well-informed visitors. Back then, I would have considered Raptor Free Flight's treatment of wild animals

cartoonish, the birds' lives cynically circumscribed for money. How could birds preening on saguaros matter to tropical deforestation or climate change?

I stopped feeling snobby about the right way to connect with nature once I realized what nourished my own passion and curiosity about science and the outdoors. What stood out were visceral moments of connection that could happen anywhere — on coastlines, under trees, in creeks, beside microscopes, in classrooms — moments that seemed, in some quiet way, to stop time. Now, with a bit more life experience — and, perhaps, humility — I attend shows like Raptor Free Flight believing a moment under wing might change a person profoundly, including me.

**F**rom below, Hyla glows pale white against the sky. Closer up, she appears to wear a deep reddish cape

that hoods her head and cascades across her shoulders and wings, a watered-down tea color staining her chest and muscular legs. It's these rusty markings that give her species the name "ferruginous" — from *ferrum*, Latin for iron. Hyla's scientific name is *Buteo regalis*, the regal hawk. Ferruginous hawks resemble eagles, with deeply set eyes under dramatic eye ridges, severely hooked beaks, and legs feathered all the way to their feet. Arthur Cleveland Bent, an early 20th century ornithologist, approved of the name — he may even have nursed some eagle envy. "This latest name, *regalis*, is a very appropriate one for this splendid hawk, the largest, most powerful, and grandest of our Buteos, a truly regal bird," he writes in the 21-volume *Life Histories of North American Birds*. "One who knows it in life cannot help being impressed with its close relationship to the golden eagle, which is not much more than a glorified Buteo." Hyla's call is the thin, high note of an eagle: A fluted sound so delicate that it's replaced with the cry of a red-tailed hawk in old Westerns. It's a piercing piccolo I've always found too fragile for an eagle's powerful form, revealing in sound a vulnerability not obvious by sight.

This is all I know about Hyla's history: Twelve years ago, she and her brother tumbled too early from their nest in Montana. A falconer kept the pair alive.

Ferruginous hawks nest in sun-struck places — sagebrush and native grassland, generally. In the nest, a chick's body temperature can fluctuate from 104 to 109 degrees Fahrenheit in a few hours. Nestlings huddle under each other for shade while their parents forage. Left alone, they sometimes find relief from the heat by seeking a breeze at the windward side of the nest. In his memoir of studying ferruginous hawks for three years as a graduate student, wildlife biologist Leon Powers describes babies sitting on the edge of the nest, legs sticking out in front of them, feet to the wind, mouths gaping open, catching the breeze on hot prairie afternoons. ("They have huge gapes," Carroll tells me. Hyla, in fact, was named for a genus of cavernously mouthed tree frogs.)

Sometimes accidents happen. Even when chicks are safely ensconced within a nest, the nest itself may be unwieldy — less construction project than hormonally driven nest Jenga, a prolonged bonding ritual for the parent ferruginous hawks. The whole thing may topple in a strong wind. I imagine a storm blew baby Hyla and her fuzzy, awkward brother over the rim of their nest, built in a low-growing juniper tree or on a mound of earth. I imagine that a recreationist or rancher found them on the ground, tangled in grass or struggling on sun-beaten soil, and called the falconer because he was an expert in raptor care.

Ferruginous hawks, however, are not popular pets among falconers. "Prospective owners of this bird of prey should consider their level of experience with

raptor birds very carefully before buying ferruginous hawks, as these birds can be extremely temperamental and require expert handling,” warns the British website *Birdtrader.co.uk*. “Some ferry hawks can be exceptionally difficult to train, so amateur falconry enthusiasts should perhaps consider alternative birds.” Hyla, though not the most social of creatures, made the cut for Raptor Free Flight. Her more aggressive brother was “sent to live at some zoo,” Carroll says vaguely.

“Rescuing does nothing for the birds,” my supervisor at a wild bird rehabilitation center told me, after neither of us worked there anymore.

I worked at the center the summer after I graduated from college. It was a converted home (previously a barn) in north-central New Jersey, full of wiped-down surfaces, bright lights and piles of towels. The center’s founders lived there in the 1960s, before shooting raptors was illegal. Eventually, they moved into the house next door. Now, hand-built walk-in aviaries, connected by trails, dotted the center’s wooded property, and waterfowl swam in a large walk-in cage with a pool. A gift shop in a squat wooden building across the gravel from the house sold T-shirts.

The littlest songbirds had sunken shoulders and yellow beaks closed in exaggerated frowns. I cupped them under my shirt, against my skin, until their icy bodies became warm or terribly still. Older songbirds lived in outdoor aviaries until they were ready for release. The center specialized in caring for injured or orphaned raptors, which stayed in rows of individual cages up a flight of stairs in an area generally off-limits to volunteers. Evolved to eat squeaking meals, wielding sharp beaks and claws, raptors require special handling, sanguineous food. We taught them to hunt in a hacking cage, an outdoor aviary large enough for young birds to glide and dive. We “taught” a young hawk or falcon by waiting until the bird was hungry, then letting it perch up high and releasing a live mouse. At the sight of the tentative mouse exploring the edges of the cage, the raptor’s instincts took over, its aim improving with practice. On occasion, while cleaning songbird aviaries elsewhere on the property, I pretended not to see a refugee mouse nibbling fallen birdseed. To my mind, it had earned its freedom.

The center had an educational component as well: Many visitors walked through the grounds to see birds in aviaries. Staff carried raptors into schools to teach children about conservation. The winter of my sophomore year of college, when I volunteered at the center, I sometimes carried a kestrel on my wrist, training him for teaching programs, training myself to act detached while my heart raced, trying not to love the complicated feelings that came with tying something wild, and beautiful, and self-contained, to my arm.

Being at the center was very stressful for many of the birds. My supervisor understood this. The discomfort and fear these wild animals felt interacting with humans, no matter how soft our voices or steady our hands, sometimes outweighed the prospect of their eventual release.

Captivity could result in injuries despite careful veterinary work. Bumblefoot, for example, begins as lesions on a

Does rescue do nothing for the birds? The summer I worked at the rehabilitation center, people brought in clutches of featherless, blind birds to be fostered and released. Every half-hour in the nursery, a chorus of tiny screams crescendoed and then subsided as we stuffed moist puppy chow into beaks with long silvery feeding tools. After every feeding, we cleaned out the strawberry



Ferruginous hawk chicks in an eye-level nest atop a stunted tree in Montana. RON DUDLEY

bird’s foot soles and can cause crippling or life-threatening infections. Rather than being euthanized, raptors whose injuries left them unreleasable were kept in cages on-site for the duration of their lives, a practice that my supervisor questioned.

Even the fostering of birds that seem completely unbothered by temporary captivity — the glossy dark starlings greedy enough to yank feeding tools right out of my fingers; the inquisitive, awkward young crows we had to feed wearing hand puppets so that they didn’t, in the end, crave human company — had questionable value as a conservation strategy. People were unlikely to encounter and bring us rare species. And wild bird rehabilitation — one concussed woodpecker, poisoned vulture, or bullet-torn owl at a time — hardly seemed to connect with larger-scale conservation issues, such as habitat destruction or climate change.

pint containers in which the chicks lived, moving on to the next box until everyone was asleep again. The nursery was the building’s kitchen when the center was a home. The baby boxes sat along the old island countertop. Between feedings, I’d clean the sink, pulling out mealworms, fetal mice, seeds and whatever else happened to gather over the drain, and toss it all into the trash. When the trash filled up, I lugged it away. I walked the trails between scattered outdoor aviaries with cleaning supplies, removing droppings from floors, changing water, checking feed. I did this endless physical work believing it mattered. With our care, many small birds grew their flight feathers and flew away; many older birds recuperated from human-caused injuries and swam, flew, or waddled off. We did not differentiate between native or non-native species, between common or rare; we took all

birds, from eagles to show chickens, doing our best to keep them comfortable and calm until the eagles could be released or the show chickens found a new home.

My supervisor did work that I wasn't trained for: surgeries, disentanglements, euthanasia. Perhaps it curdled her heart.



▲ Amanda Timmerman, lead trainer at the Desert Museum, prepares a breakfast of small birds and organs for the raptors.  
► Timmerman weighs the ferruginous hawk, Hyla, during feeding time.

JORDAN GLENN

For years, she witnessed the worst of bird suffering, and by extension the worst of humanity. The worst I saw balanced out against the rhythm of everyday feeding and cleaning. Helping with surgery was a treat. And I had to believe that rehabilitation mattered for the birds, because the good Samaritans who'd brought in naked nestlings, handling them with quiet tenderness, sometimes went right back to doing whatever it was that had caused the nest to fall.

Does wild bird rescuing do nothing for the humans? I believed then, and still believe, that the moment when a person narrates herself into the story of a distressed animal's life — when a person

chooses to feel, and act upon, compassion for a vulnerable animal — matters. Whether you pull over your car to round up the gawky yellow goslings whose Canada goose mother lies smashed on the road, or gently close a shoebox lid on a window-fractured woodpecker, or help an awkward young falcon master hunting, your choice has symbolic and actual significance. Such a small yet active way of caring unselfishly, of affirming or discovering where things stand between you and other living beings, matters. I decided long ago that rescuing wild birds was meaningful, most of all, for the people doing the rescuing — profoundly so. There may be a limited number of ways for a person to acknowledge that her choices directly impact the lives of other, wilder organisms. Some of us choose to gather up an orphaned infant hawk, fluffy and ungainly and really pissed off, settle it into the quiet darkness of a cardboard box, and drive it to people who know what to do next. The idea we've heard so often — that our choices, our actions, produce ripples — suddenly rustles its feathers in the car seat next to us.

Almost all of the birds skimming past during Raptor Free Flight are alive because of such an impulse, including Hyla.

After Free Flight, I say hello to Hyla's handler, Amanda, who has been rewarding the raptors throughout this morning's flights with food. Like the other staff and volunteers I have seen, Amanda wears bland desert colors. Unfolded from her position behind nearby foliage, she is lanky, taller than I'd realized. Her dark hair skims the top of her sunglasses and covers her ears. She holds out her hand. I grasp it eagerly, realizing belatedly that it's covered in blood.

Hyla and the other raptors return to their aviaries in hand-carried animal carriers, which the birds find less stressful than being carried in the open the whole way. Amanda and her coworkers make the carriers by putting perches inside small dog crates and modifying their doors to slide open more smoothly.

The mews is in a secluded place, so the raptors can relax when they are not earning their keep. Mews — the word comes from *meur*, French for *to change* — were developed by falconers to hold birds of prey while they molt. At the Desert Museum mews, each bird has its own aviary, blocked off so the birds can't see each other. But the walls facing the desert are fine mesh, so the birds can watch the world go by. Occasionally, a snake or mouse slips through her aviary's window frame, and Hyla, a veteran hunter, kills it.

Tension pervades the mews, mainly because of Hyla's unsociability. She is still in her carrier while the staff prepares to weigh her. This requires using a treat to entice Hyla to dash from the carrier to the aviary. In the aviary, she will sit on a perch scale for a moment. Then she will dash back to her carrier for another

treat, and the staff will remove the scale. Weighing Hyla after every Free Flight is a way to keep track of how much food she eats during the show so she isn't over-fed later.

Hyla does not want anyone invading her territory. Her neighbor, a prairie falcon named Franklin, is a personable bird amenable to primate friendliness. Hyla is not friendly. She glints and screams. Ferruginous hawks rarely participate in free flight programs because of their behavior. It would be unfair to blame their personalities; that would deny the role of evolution in shaping a ferruginous hawk's temperament, perception of threat, response to other living beings.

One of Amanda's coworkers gives me my own treat, the chance to toss Hyla a hard-boiled quail egg. The small egg is rubbery and sticks to my palm, and for a moment I have a terrible premonition that it will stay stuck, and that Hyla will get very angry. I have no idea what happens to the egg, because after it hurtles toward Hyla, I slip behind the aviary door, hiding from those sharp yellow eyes. My fear surprises me. Then again, the staff has cautioned me that Hyla is a human imprint. Had she stayed in her birth nest and grown up in the wild, Hyla would flee from humans — those strange, noisy, featherless, bipedal predators — as well as from their lights, machinery and vehicles. Instead, hand-raised since before her first feathers grew in, Hyla believes humans are what she looks like; she thinks she is human, insofar as she conceives of herself. As a result, she considers humans to be competitors for resources in her territory. And as far as Hyla is concerned, the Desert Museum is her territory — though the great horned owl believes it's hers, and the red-tailed hawk is convinced that it's his. This is why visitors at Free Flight must stay in their spaces and why no one enters Hyla's aviary while she is in it. Just as a wild ferruginous hawk would dive, crying out, all wings and talons, at an interloping hawk in its territory, Hyla would chase a human from hers.

After Hyla is back in her carrier, I pop my head into her aviary to look around. A long, clean space, with a few perches and a sandy floor. Lots of light from the mesh wall. "She likes to watch bird TV," Amanda says, meaning, the world. Amanda invites me to open Hyla's carrier so she can settle in her aviary, now that the scale is removed. I stand behind her carrier while doing this, so that if Hyla turns on me, I'll have somewhere to cower.

I reach over the front of the carrier and carefully slide the door open. But I'm not quick enough; Hyla bursts through, bashing her shoulders against the doorframe before she erupts into her aviary. *Ohjesuschrist*, I exclaim, jumping back. Amanda and her coworkers laugh. We shut the door to the aviary. Hyla is no longer a white-and-brown blur to me; now she is a sound and sensation of power, a *bang* reverberating through plastic



and metal into my hands and up to my shoulders. I had not expected so much force out of a 4-pound bird. Soft feathers and hollow bones are deceptive; it's easy to forget this beast can land hard enough to drive her talons deep into the muscles of a thrashing rabbit and then take off again.

After Carroll and I leave the mews, I ask if Hyla will likely ever come across a male of her species. I imagine her out in the wild, weaving creosote branches into a nest so big I could curl up inside it. Ferruginous hawks are monogamous, Carroll tells me, to the extent that humans are. Mated ferruginous hawk pairs maintain breeding territories in the northern shrub-steppe and grasslands of the Great Basin Desert and Great Plains of Idaho, Montana, Wisconsin and Canada. Ferruginous hawks do not engage in the showy mating behaviors of some birds — elaborate winged dances, complex singing or aggressive aerial displays. Instead, they bond over their homes. Some humans pick out bath towels together; ferruginous hawks pick out twigs and branches. They build up to four or five nests together scattered throughout their territory. On succeeding years, they return to their territory and visit their nests, renovating them, adding twigs and soft lining — perhaps the inner fibers of juniper bark or bits of vegetation — before finally choosing where to lay eggs for the season. Nests can be several feet high and four to five feet across. Unlike other raptors, ferruginous hawks will build nests in trees, on cliffs, or directly on the ground, messy piles that grow larger and larger over the years. Sometimes songbirds build nests within the sides of ferruginous hawk nests. In the early 1900s, biologists found hawk nests made of interwoven antelope ribs and bison bones, lined with soft bison fur. When wildfires passed through, the circles of bones were left behind. In 1995, the *Journal of Raptor Research* described a nest in Saskatchewan that was in use for 32 years consecutively, with baby ferruginous hawks hatching there every year. Ferruginous hawks don't live much longer than 20 years at the most, but they do migrate back to their regions of birth, so it may have been an old family residence.

In answer to my question about Hyla's mating prospects, Carroll shakes her head — the Sonoran Desert is not the normal haunt of wild ferruginous hawks. Hyla would have to go about 70 miles east to the agricultural fields of Sulphur Springs Valley, where rodent populations support some wintering birds. "But even if she did," Carroll said, "I don't know if she would recognize the other hawk as the same thing as her."

I wonder about this later. Wasn't there anything a male ferruginous hawk could do, a soft whistle, a hurtling dive, a gift of fresh cottontail, something unassailable by human fostering, that would trigger pair-bonding in Hyla? Once in a while, on a flight, Hyla takes off on the kind of long





**Amanda Timmerman, lead trainer at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, displays Solo, a Chihuahuan raven, to the crowd gathered for Raptor Free Flight.**

JORDAN GLENN

soar her body was built for. She wings it to a nearby hill, Brown Mountain. When she gets there, she perches on a familiar cliff and waits for a handler to come get her in a truck.

If Hyla did somehow mate, it would pose some interesting logistical challenges at the Desert Museum. Often, nesting ferruginous hawks do not take well to humans handling, tagging, or even simply approaching them. Leon Powers, the wildlife biologist and author, learned this the hard way at the beginning of his study, when he tried to hang a camera over a ferruginous nest and scared the parents away from their three chicks. The adults stayed away overnight. One chick died of exposure; Powers took home the other two for emergency feeding and warming. This shyness must have served Hyla's fore-hawks well. When their wide-open territories were filled with musky

herds of bison or haunted by hungry badgers and coyotes, the hawks' willingness to abandon their low-lying nests at the first hint of danger may have made them more likely to survive to nest again. Skittishness combined with site loyalty: It's a bad combination for a species that nests where North Americans dig, bulldoze and frack.

Wild ferruginous hawks live in the open spaces of Western North America: shrublands and native grasslands ranging from Canada to Texas, where a nest just eight feet up in a juniper provides a good view. These plant communities are not as vast as they once were. "How is it possible that something as dominating and widespread as sagebrush in Western North America could be threatened?" Powers asks in the epilogue to his memoir, *Hawk in the Sun*. "After all, even in our lifetime, we Westerners have

all driven through seemingly unending, monotonous stretches of sagebrush. How could all that gray-green vegetation possibly disappear?" He attributes this loss of habitat to a combination of fire and invasive cheatgrass, *Bromus tectorum*. Cheatgrass — an annual that turns brown and inedible in the spring and summer when other plants are just waking up — cheats farmers of their wheat crops by invading fields. Introduced from Europe in the 1800s via shipping ballast, agricultural products and livestock feed, cheatgrass has become a dominant grass in the Intermountain West. Cheatgrass burns intensely, wiping out native grasses and shrubland, erasing ferruginous hawk habitat. Then it's the first plant to grow back once the ashes have settled, sucking moisture so quickly from the soil that other plants have nothing to drink.

Paradoxically, in the American South-

west, fire suppression also has whittled away at hawk habitat, letting woodlands grow over native grasslands. “Ferruginous hawks hunt in a catlike manner,” hawk expert Joe Schmutz explained. “Very arid grassland is their primary home. Wherever forest encroaches, ferruginous hawks tend to avoid.”

Journalist Paul Tolmé points a finger at resource extraction as well, attributing habitat loss to the George W. Bush administration’s pro-development approach to public lands. Under Bush, energy-development restrictions by federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management became more difficult to justify. Oil and gas companies paid the salaries of temporary BLM employees who processed permit requests. To meet the requirements of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the BLM built artificial nesting platforms with buffer zones where ferruginous hawks could breed away from wells. But the zones applied only to new wells. Workers approached old wells within buffer zones even when adult hawks had chicks nearby to protect. Others have blamed the intentional shooting and poisoning of ferruginous hawk prey — prairie dogs and rabbits — along with urban sprawl and outdoor recreation for reducing ferruginous hawk populations.

Ferruginous hawks have been proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act more than once, and rejected each time. Some states list them on their endangered species lists, and Canada has bumped ferruginous hawk status up and down more than once on its version of the Endangered Species Act.

When it comes to rare animals, it’s easier to focus on direct threats with obvious solutions: overhunting, DDT spraying, prey poisoning. But the destinies of ferruginous hawks are largely determined by broad ideas: changing land use in the West and the impacts of climate change on prey.

Ferruginous hawks need wide-open spaces, and they eat animals that need wide-open spaces. Best of all, from a ferruginous hawk’s perspective, is jackrabbit, and in parts of the West where jackrabbits, well, abound, a ferruginous hawk can capture a good-sized meal in one snatch. In places without jackrabbits, ferruginous hawks eat ground squirrels. Jackrabbits and ground squirrels are not small animals; they attest to the size and strength of these hawks.

Like many top predators, ferruginous hawks cycle according to the boom-bust of their prey populations. When those populations have bad years, the hawks do not raise young. When roads divide sagebrush ecosystems, when transmission lines slice through them, when extraction projects fragment them, when fires, invasive species and climate change together eradicate their preferred prey, the hawks leave or simply die out. Ravens and red-tailed hawks — generalists capable of thriving in disturbed habitat and close to urbanized areas — move in.

Artificial nests, such as those created by the BLM, pose a different question than wild animal rehabilitation. This is the dependency — or the salvation — of entire populations, and as now implemented, might not even work. In 2011, researchers in New Mexico walked toward nesting ferruginous hawks and measured how close they could get before the birds flushed — and often attacked. The researchers calculated the buffer distance the hawks needed in order to not abandon their nests, waste energy or expose their young by freaking out: 650 meters, or approximately 2,133 feet. That’s seven football fields, almost twice the BLM’s currently used quarter-mile buffer. When it came to more intense disturbances, like mining or construction, the researchers recommended a buffer of one kilometer during nesting season. These buffers would protect ferruginous hawks — which are listed as sensitive species by the BLM and the Forest Service — and also, perhaps more to the interest of developers, follow the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which makes killing migratory birds or destroying their nests or eggs illegal. But these larger buffer distances have not been adopted.

Developers, biologists and consultants may argue about the size of buffer areas during nesting season. I have worked in environmental consulting and have seen how an environmental law may be both the last hope and a great sellout when it comes to environmental protection — how the same codified words can at different times be the best and the worst this country has, depending on who reads them.

The most prolific ferruginous hawk researcher, Joe Schmutz, describes artificial nests as a necessary but insufficient tool for ferruginous hawk conservation. “People are naturally fond of artificial nest programs,” he writes, “because it appears as something one can actually do to help the hawks.” What ferruginous hawks really need, he continues, are healthy grassland ecosystems. Schmutz suggests protecting ferruginous hawks by supporting a sustainable ranching economy in the Northern Great Plains.

“In my neck of the woods, we have ranching on expansive rangeland,” Schmutz told me, speaking from his home in Saskatoon. “It’s too arid for anything else. We have ferruginous hawk protection via public ownership of rangeland. We’ll have ferruginous hawks as long as we have that kind of land here.”

Boy Scout troops build artificial nesting platforms for ferruginous hawks: Of course this feels effective, proactive, positive. I can hear my old boss asking: Does this do anything for the birds? I think it depends on the builder. If it’s the Boy Scouts or any number of local community groups, then I want to believe that by building birds artificial nesting platforms, and making other decisions about the other lives around their own, they will become men and women who make

decisions believing their own actions matter. Because of that, their actions will. If it’s developers or resource extraction companies who erect nesting platforms only because their contracts to use federal lands require that they do, then no. But in those cases, the way things stand, I don’t think anything would matter for the birds.

**A**fter my visit to the Desert Museum, I visit the Raptor Free Flight website. There’s a gorgeous photo of Hyla perching on a thick dead branch. Against the gray, her orange digits, tapering to black claws, appear long and sharp to me, but the caption tells me her species’ feet are small in comparison to those of other hawks. I read that ferruginous hawks can form fists with their feet and punch through burrows, yanking prey out of the dirt. Carroll has seen wintering hawks in southern Arizona stalking along fallow fields and plucking grasshoppers with their claws in a manner more reminiscent of dinosaurs than modern birds. These hawks dwell in the liminal zone of earth and sky, a shoreline I rarely consider.

During Free Flight, visitors come close to bird species they otherwise might never notice, much less approach. The birds of Free Flight who brush a soft downdraft along faces and cameras, who land powerfully on handlers’ arms to quietly tug at meat curled inside fists, include species I have not seen in the wild. I am not a birder. Sometimes birds catch my eye, and I name the familiar ones, the ones attracted to the edges that humans make between cities and wild places: raven, red-tailed hawk, woodpecker, jay. From working long ago at the wild bird rehabilitation center, I know that a breathtaking diversity of bird species lives in North America at least part of the year. This avian diversity makes me unexpectedly proud. But I answered phones and the door and focused on shelters, towels, food, water. I have spent few crepuscular hours hunkered outside, carefully watching and listening, immersed in avian acquaintance-making. Like almost every other visitor to a raptor show, I could stand to learn more about North America’s birds of prey.

On days when Hyla declines to fly, I wonder how long visitors take to forget that she exists, that ferruginous hawks exist. I worry that this kind of forgetting makes it easier to tear up native shrubland and grassland and weaken the Endangered Species Act. But I am trying to take the long view. I am trying to remember that all meaningful relationships begin with encounters. Perhaps it does not matter whether the visitors recall all the Free Flight bird species, where they live, what they eat. Perhaps shows like this serve as introductions for people, useful ways of meeting the neighbors. If each visitor recalls only one bird flying from snag to desert sky, perhaps for today — just for today — that’s enough. ■

**During Free Flight, visitors come close to bird species they otherwise might never notice, much less approach.**

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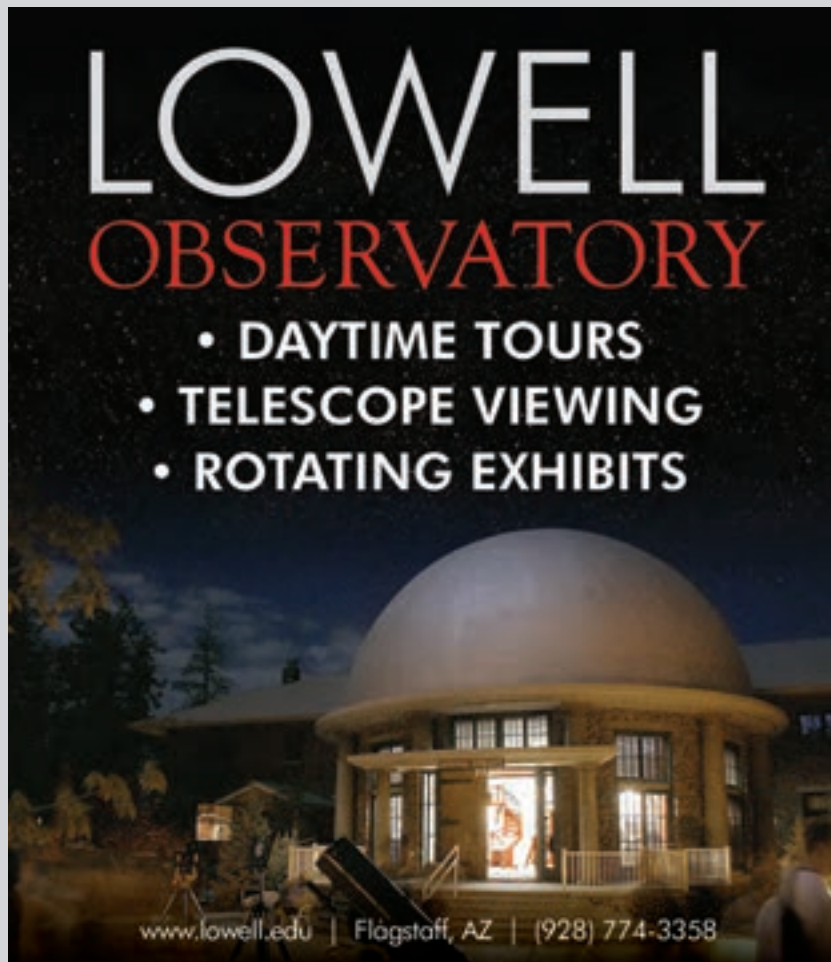
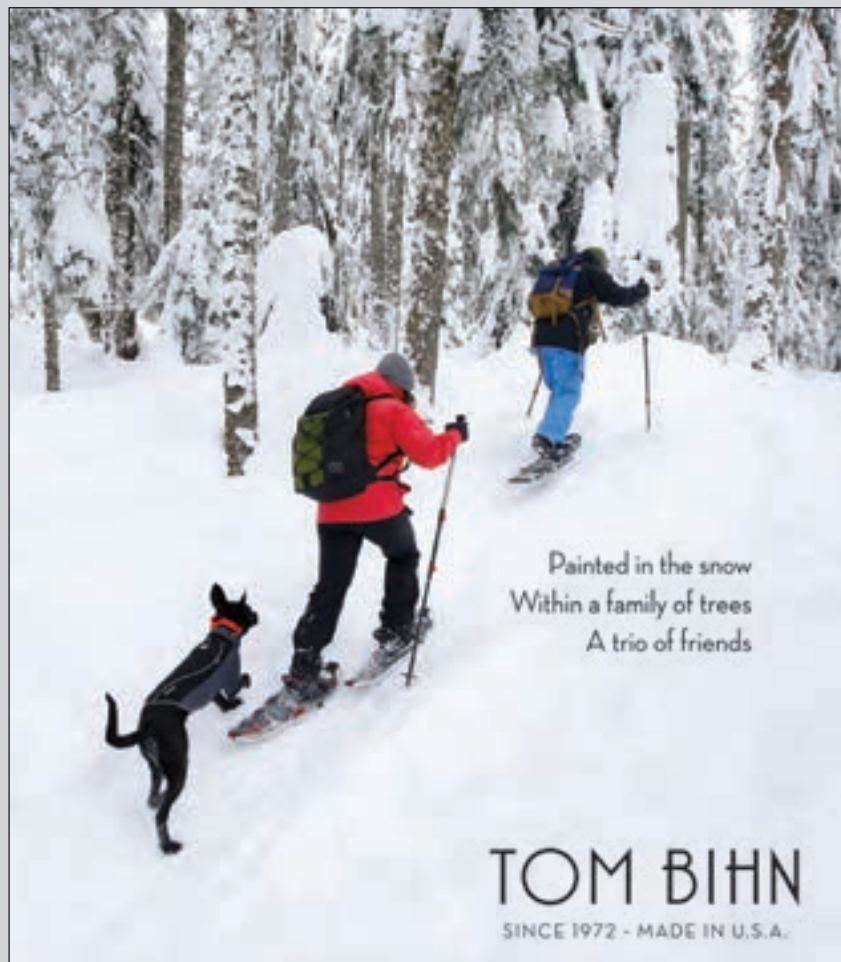
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Photo: Peg Abbott, Purple Honeycreeper





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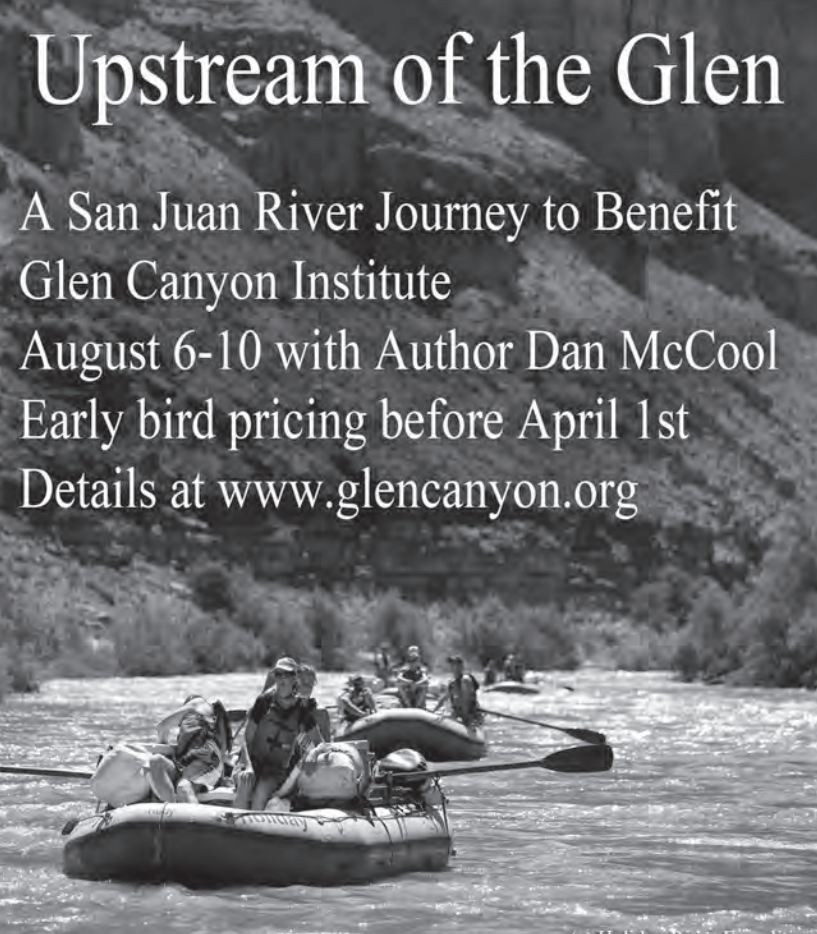
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# Cowboys with surfboards

*Parts of Hawaii are surprisingly like the new rural West*

I live in Hotchkiss, a cowboy town on the Western Slope of Colorado, where I raise hay in the summers and marvel at the mountain-and-desert landscapes that surround our hardscrabble little valley.

Nobody makes much money ranching anymore. We just tell ourselves we do it “for the lifestyle.”

But every winter, while my mostly graying cattlemen buddies hunker down over coffee at the Short Stop to tell tall tales and talk politics, my wife and I head off to another hardscrabble little town — Hanalei, on the North Shore of Kauai. How can a place where Julia Roberts recently sold her beach cottage for \$16 million and where Mark Zuckerberg owns a \$100 million coastal ranch be hardscrabble?

Hanalei is a tiny town, with a population of about 500 and a world-class beach. Instead of the glistening snow-capped Rockies, it is surrounded by the mountains of the Na Pali Coast, with puffs of dragon mist floating through their summits. The scenery is spectacular, but 25 percent of Hanalei’s residents live below the poverty level. They get by working part-time at restaurants or landscape companies, maybe selling a little Maui Wowie on the side. Not all that different from rural Colorado: You make ends meet any way you can.

We stay with a working-class Hawaiian family on the west side of town. It’s probably the last ungentrified neighborhood on the North Shore, full of laughing and crying children, barking dogs and the clattering sound of dishes being washed after supper. Before doing their homework, kids dart and swoop through the nearby 10-foot turquoise waves as if they were born on surfboards.

Brydan, our host, is a small commercial fisherman, and his wife, Jana, works at the nearby school. Brydan comes home with big ice chests full of fish for the Kauai markets. Jana’s extended family lives in the neighborhood, a rustic collection of funky old houses with badly corroded tin roofs. When not in school, their kids, Brock and Jordyn, roam the beach or buzz around on their little moped. They’re not much different than the ranch kids back in my valley — just replace the surfboards with .22 rifles and the mopeds with four-wheelers.

Hanalei, like Hotchkiss, is facing lots of problems, both cultural and environmental. This Hawaiian village reminds me of Aspen in the ’50s or Telluride in the ’70s — rustic mining towns where the locals scraped by before ski resorts and industrial tourism transformed them into the enclaves of the millionaires and billionaires.



What has saved this Hawaiian town so far, I think, is the creaky one-lane wooden bridge that is the only way into the Hanalei Valley. Surrounded by classic Polynesian taro fields, which replaced the sugarcane of the old colonial plantations, the bridge prevents big trucks and heavy equipment from invading Hanalei to build Trump Towers and Hilton resorts. I’ve heard the locals are very protective of that little bridge.

Kauai’s south shore has been taken over by vacation homes and golf courses, its western shore by a missile base and large test plots of corn raised by multinational companies experimenting with GMOs and new herbicides. Monsanto is a dirty word to many locals concerned about their children’s health. When the Kauaians attempted to regulate the herbicide industry — much as my own county tried to regulate coalbed methane — the state and the courts swept in to nullify the regulations. So far, only the North Shore and Hanalei have avoided the power of big-money corporations and Honolulu-style tourism.

Can these small-town Hawaiians save their little piece of *Jurassic Park* paradise from the giant corporate wastelands that James Howard Kunstler so eloquently described in *The Geography of Nowhere*? He foresaw the cars, strip malls and fast-food shacks — the end-

less sprawl of suburbia and commercial tourism — eventually overrunning the working neighborhoods and locally owned businesses of small-town America.

I’m worried about Hanalei. It reminds me a bit of Carbondale, a small mountain town near me once known for its Hereford cattle and annual Potato Festival. Now it’s known as the posh Mount Sopris village where the millionaires landed after being pushed out of Aspen by the billionaires.

It’s one thing to scrape by on a daily fish catch and occasional landscaping jobs, but when your beach shack is suddenly worth a couple of million dollars, it’s hard to resist gentrification. I’m from the New West, and I know what happens to peaceful, friendly little towns with spectacular landscapes.

I finally find some cowboy-style old codgers complete with tall tales on this visit. They’re 60-something surfers — the kings of the wild waves back in the ’70s and ’80s — and they congregate every day at the end of my street to watch the younger surfers and to try to convince a dubious Coloradan that they’ve conquered 100-foot waves on the Na Pali Coast and survived 50-foot tiger-shark attacks.

It’s all bluster, I’m sure. But I love these guys, as I love all of America’s small Western towns and the magic journeys on which they’ve embarked. I just hope they can survive the trip. □

**The one-lane bridge to Hanalei, Kauai, with its 15-ton capacity, helps keep big development out.** EDMUNDS DANA/  
GETTY IMAGES



## *Backpacking through the Mount St. Helens blast zone*

# THE MORAL OF THE MOUNTAIN

**F**orest Road 99 starts about 18 miles from Mount St. Helens, approaching from the northeast. If the volcano no longer commands the southwest Washington skyline like it once did, having shed 1,314 feet of itself in the 1980 eruption, the 99 has a way of making you appreciate the landscape. Narrow and precipitous, it slows you down to speeds more conducive to observation, all the better for you to dwell on the spectacle of St. Helens whenever it appears around the bend.

I had eyes only for pavement. I still had nine miles to go to the Norway Pass trailhead, where I was to meet my friend

Carson, and I was late. The scenery blurred past. When I finally swerved into the parking lot, it was almost 8 p.m. There was one other car. A bearded and rather burly fellow perched on its hood, reading a book. He slid off and ambled over.

"Sorry I took forever," I said. "Seattle. Traffic."

"No problem!" said Carson, for he is inveterately good-natured.

"How long have you been here?"

"I dunno," Carson shrugged. "Maybe two hours?"

*Oof.* I set to packing. We planned to go for a three-day hike through the Mount Margaret Backcountry, which sits in the



The setting sun illuminates dust rising from the crater on Mount St. Helens, about 20 years after its initial eruption.

JIM RICHARDSON

versary, and *Danger on Peaks*, a collection of poems by Gary Snyder. I grabbed the Snyder and wedged it between my long underwear and sleeping bag. I tugged my pack zipper shut. The seams strained, but held. Good for them. You can always make room for a little poetry.

If Mount St. Helens has a literary celebrant, it is Gary Snyder. He grew up nearby, and was just 15 the first time he climbed it, on August 13, 1945. The mountain was 9,677 feet tall then, with a near-perfect cone, and foothills cloaked in dark evergreen forests. Spirit Lake, deep and clear, lay before it like a vanity mirror. Snyder started his ascent with a group before dawn, crept over the mountain's glaciers, around its crevasses. When he reached the summit, he was elated. He sat for a while, watched the sky, did a little dance. "To be immersed in ice and rock and cold and upper space," he later wrote, "is to undergo an eerie, rigorous initiation and transformation."

The next morning, having come down from the mountain so transformed, he dropped by the old lodge at Spirit Lake to check the bulletin boards, where the owners would pin the day's news. It was then he learned of the atomic bombs American pilots had dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki a few days before. "Horrified," he wrote in his poem, "Atomic Dawn,"

*blaming scientists and politicians and the governments of the world, I swore a vow to myself, something like, "By the purity and beauty and permanence of Mt. St. Helens, I will fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all my life."*

"Atomic Dawn" is from "Mount St. Helens," a cycle of nine poems that opens *Danger on Peaks*. The first four are Snyder's recollections of his early years with the mountain, before it reminded everyone it was still a volcano. The fifth, "1980: Letting Go," marks that abrupt transformation, on May 18, when the entire north face collapsed, killing 57 people and leaving a mile-wide crater. The final four poems tell of Snyder's return to the blast zone 20 years later. Taken together, they follow an arc of reconciliation, as Snyder weighs the idyllic mountain from his youth against the radically revised form he found as an older man.

"Atomic Dawn" is the third poem in the cycle, but it was the first I had seen after I came across it excerpted somewhere. By the time I read the cycle in its entirety, "Atomic Dawn" had acquired its own resonance for me, having come dreadfully to

## 1980: Letting Go

Centuries, years and months of —

let off a little steam  
cloud up and sizzle  
growl stamp-dance  
quiver swell, glow  
glare bulge

swarms of earthquakes, tremors, rumbles

*she goes*

8.32 AM 18 May 1980

superheated steams and gasses  
white-hot crumbling boulders lift and fly in a  
burning sky-river wind of  
searing lava droplet hail,  
huge icebergs in the storm, exploding mud,  
shoots out flat and rolls a swelling billowing  
cloud of rock bits,  
crystals, pumice, shards of glass  
dead ahead blasting away —  
a heavenly host of tall trees goes flat down  
lightning dances through the giant smoke

a calm voice on the two-way  
ex-navy radioman and volunteer  
describes the spectacle — then  
says, the hot black cloud is  
rolling toward him — no way  
but wait his fate

a photographer's burnt camera  
full of half melted pictures,  
three fallers and their trucks  
chainsaws in black, tumbled gray and still,  
two horses swept off struggling in hot mud  
a motionless child laid back in a stranded ashy pickup

roiling earth-gut-trash cloud tephra twelve miles high  
ash falls like snow on wheatfields and orchards to the east  
five hundred Hiroshima bombs

in Yakima, darkness at noon

Copyright c 2004 by Gary Snyder, from *Danger on Peaks*.  
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## FEATURE BY ERIC WAGNER

north-central portion of the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. Our loop was only 25 or 30 miles, and the forecast called for sun, so I wanted to travel light. Thus began a series of hard choices. Out went the tent, save for the ground cloth to sleep on. Out went my down coat. Out went a third of my bagels, the block of cheese, some extra socks.

"You're sure you've got enough?" Carson asked, hefting his own pack.

"Almost," I said. I opened the passenger door and considered two books in the front seat: *In the Blast Zone*, a volume of pieces by scientists, writers, and poets commemorating the eruption's 25th anni-



**The trail all but disappears on Whittier Ridge on Mount St. Helens.**

PHOTO BY OUTDOOR PROJECT CONTRIBUTOR ANDREW STOHNER

mind in April 2010, when I climbed Mount St. Helens and learned on the drive home about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. I felt similarly enraged and helpless, and the irony of Snyder's invocation to the purity, beauty and permanence of Mount St. Helens was doubly painful, amplified as it was in a world twice broken. But Snyder, just deeply changed himself, had been in desperate need of something stable and certain, and what seems more stable and certain than a mountain? What else, in the face of unforeseen catastrophe, are we to swear by?

**F**rom the parking lot, the trail climbed quickly. Carson and I could see the beveled prominence of Mount Adams in the distance, but our immediate surroundings were equally arresting. We walked through evidence of earlier devastations, both human and geological: the clipped stumps from old clear-cuts, and the weathered trunks of trees knocked flat after superheated clouds of ash, rock, and steam roared over them at more than 300 miles per hour. The trunks lay in ordered patterns, like iron filings aligned to a magnet. A few remained upright as snags. Younger, living trees filled the patches between, having had the past 36 years to grow substantially unimpeded.

I listened to our footfalls: not the usual soft pad on rich Cascade humus, but the light crunch of pumice. We reached Norway Pass after a couple of miles, and stopped to catch our breath, put on a layer and take in Mount St. Helens. The volcano was lit in wan rose, with a few gray snowfields left on its upper slopes. We could just make out the hazy chaos of its crater, ash and dust wafting from the wide, serrated rim. Beneath was Spirit Lake, a dense white mat of logs obscuring its surface.

I would have liked to stay longer, to watch the mountain move from shadow to void, but Carson and I had four or five miles to go to our first camp. Stars were massing when we crested the hill higher up the trail and began the steady drop to the lakes that sit in the heart of the backcountry. As we made our way by headlamp, the slope came alive with the buzzings, chirpings and rustlings of night creatures. Western toads had moved into the middle of the trail, and we had to take care not to step on them. They struggled in an animatronic way when I picked them up. Some of them were bigger than my fist.

**T**he summer before, I went with a biologist from the U.S. Forest Service named Charlie Crisafulli to Meta Lake, a mile down the road from the Nor-

way Pass trailhead. "Want to see something cool?" Charlie asked, before loping off into the bushes. I scrambled after him to the lakeshore. I saw fallen logs (always the logs), the quiet lapping lake, brown earth. What was the big deal? Then I looked more closely: the earth was moving. More than moving — it was seething, writhing. What I had thought was earth was actually thousands of western toadlets, each tiny and delicate, clambering over one another, filling all space.

"Pretty neat, huh?" Charlie said.

"Amazing!" I said. "Kind of gross, though."

Charlie laughed. I got the sense the toadlet swarm was one of his favorite Mount St. Helens party tricks. He was among the first scientists to visit the blast zone after the eruption, and he guesses he has since spent more than 3,000 nights on the mountain. Nothing goes on here that he doesn't know about, isn't somehow involved in.

The strange story of the western toad, he said, was one of many from the eruption. The species is declining over much of its range, but not at Mount St. Helens. Toads like open habitats, which were rare here when forests were thick. Then the blast knocked down almost every tree over a 143-square-mile area. Algae thrive

in newly exposed lakes and ponds, and the toads gorged. The blast also killed many of their predators, like snakes.

“But it didn’t get the toads, too?” I asked.

“Nope,” Charlie said. It was one of the blast’s several quirks. In mid-May, the snowpack was still deep in places, and the toads were snug in underground dens. They hopped out into a transformed world, where debris blocked creeks and streams to create more than 100 new lakes and ponds to explore. Other organisms survived, too: young conifers pressed flat under the snow, ants sheltered under logs, Pacific jumping mice hibernating in subterranean dens, trout idling in lakes shielded under a foot of ice.

Charlie and his many colleagues would spend the next three decades puzzling out the dynamics of who survived, who didn’t, who returned, how and why, and what it all meant for the shattered ecological community. “Mount St. Helens upended a lot of our thinking,” he said. Earlier, he had told of another surprising character, the prairie lupine. In June of 1982, while surveying the Pumice Plains from a helicopter, he spotted one on the ground. The Pumice Plains are a 6-square-mile stretch directly north of the volcano that was buried under a layer of pumice up to 600 feet thick, which had poured from the crater in wave after scorching wave. The plains were absolutely sterile, and biologists thought it might be decades before life returned. But two years later, here was a single purple flower, surrounded by a ring of tiny seedlings.

Charlie was shocked. The prairie lupine lacks the usual traits of a species quick to claim open ground. It produces a few big, heavy seeds, rather than hundreds that float away like dandelion tufts. Also, the site was higher in elevation than lupines were thought to prefer. Yet somehow one had found its way to these bare expanses. Thereafter, the wildflowers spread. They helped the ground retain water, and they enriched the soil with key nutrients like carbon and nitrogen. All of this made the Pumice Plains more hospitable for other animals and plants. Now, during the summers, the plains are awash in color — not just the light purple of lupine, but the richer purple of penstemon, the yellow of hairy cat’s ear, the red of paintbrush.

A plaque marks the site of the founding lupine, but the story would repeat with other species, many showing traits no one suspected they had: the ability to grow in a blanket of ash so dense it was like concrete (fireweed), the ability to scurry over miles of hot open desert even though you weigh less than a quarter of an ounce (shrews), the ability to dig through the ash and mix it with soil to make the ground more amenable for plants (pocket gophers).

The time Charlie spent in the blast zone changed his feelings about how we should think about disturbance, about

loss. “Dynamism is a pervasive theme in nature,” he wrote in an essay in *In the Blast Zone*. Like Snyder, he had his own three terms to define what he saw, and he used them in his piece’s title: “Change, Survival, and Revival.”

The next morning, Carson and I awoke in damp sleeping bags.

While we waited for them to dry, we climbed a hill near small, convoluted Panhandle Lake, where we camped. Carson, who gets up exceptionally early,

round, and near that the rumpled Goat Rocks, and to the east Mount Adams. South of us was the sharper, hooked profile of Mount Hood, with Mount Jefferson dimly visible over 100 miles away. Mount St. Helens loomed, of course, dominant because of its proximity, but still the smallest of the bunch.

“These views!” Carson said, exulting in this excerpt of the Cascades Ring of Fire. “The trees are so short it’s like being in the high alpine, and we aren’t even at 6,000 feet.” Carson likes to play outside



had found a garbage can buried under a tree during his dawn explorations. We pried off its lid to reveal a scientific cache: a musty old Forest Service shirt (Charlie’s?), a fishing pole, a clipboard of tattered datasheets, a few unopened bags of dried fruit.

“Think the fruit is still good?” I asked. Carson made a face.

After breakfast, we made our way up to Whittier Ridge. I had been anticipating this part of our trip in a not terribly eager way. It’s a two-mile scramble, with steep drops-offs to either side of a long knife-edge, and the Washington Trails Association calls it “The Scariest Hike in Southwest Washington.” Carson and I spent more than two hours on the traverse. At one point, as we plotted a course around a hulk of rock, we heard an ominous clatter of stones. We risked a peek over a cliff, and saw a female mountain goat and her kid skip lightly away on impossible hoof-holds.

“Look at them go,” Carson said. “They’re so quick!”

“Bastards,” I muttered. My ankles ached from the torque.

Still, we were richly rewarded. With nary a cloud in the hemisphere, we watched snow peaks pop up and down from behind nearby ridges like gophers. There was Mount Rainier, grand and

more than anyone I know, but he hasn’t spent much time at Mount St. Helens, even though he lives a couple of hours away. I asked why. “Oh, no good reason,” he said. “Part of it is it’s easy to feel like you know the place well enough already.” The volcano’s history is so thoroughly commemorated, from roadside placards to jars of ash for sale on Craigslist, that it sits at a peculiar intersection between recreation and tourism, the familiar and the strange. “Also,” he said, “you aren’t allowed to do as much here as you can at other mountains.” The Mount Margaret Backcountry is the only place anyone can legally camp in the blast zone, and just 32 people are allowed at a time at designated sites.

Save for the scientists like Charlie who work here, it is hard for anyone to have a casual, intimate relationship with Mount St. Helens, the way people did before all the recreational infrastructure — lodges, cabins, other camps — was obliterated. The event that makes the landscape so singularly compelling is what keeps the public from getting close to it again. The monument has unprecedented ecological value as an outdoor laboratory, and by unspoken implication its delicacy requires strict provisions to protect it. But this does not seem like

**Thousands of dead trees still float on Spirit Lake in this 2009 photograph, taken in Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, Washington.**

DIANE COOK AND  
LEN JENSEL/NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC/  
GETTY IMAGES

particularly delicate land. For all the charming anecdotes about individual species and their pluck, the message from the blast zone's wider community is less heartwarming. Before the eruption, for instance, biologists thought the process of ecological succession was an orderly one. Some species were innately better suited to the conditions created by a massive disturbance. They would do well for a while, and then another suite of species would move in and displace them, and then another, until the community stabilized.

The theory was old and well-established, until Mount St. Helens showed that all those rules might not be rules at all. One of the most important findings to come from the eruption was that survivors, whether plant or animal, could have a tremendous influence on a system as it reassembled. There was nothing special about them other than the fact that they were there, yet they helped rebuild the landscape we were hiking through. Their success isn't a dark side to the Mount St. Helens story, but it is more complicated than the sunnier tales of resilience I often hear. Biologists use words like "chaos" and "lottery" to describe what they saw in the blast zone, and Charlie never, ever says "recovery." Once the ash settled, there would be no long arc bending towards the restoration of everything that had been killed. The whole event was defined by chance, its outcomes largely haphazard and contingent. To walk near the volcano was to walk through a naive landscape, with a host of creatures that just saw their opening and took it.

Carson and I reached Coldwater Lake by late afternoon. We were tired from the long day, and after dinner it was a relief to spread sleeping bags under a cold, depthless sky. When we woke the next morning, we were surrounded by thick fog, unable to see more than a few feet in front of our faces. We ate quickly, packed, and began the long hike back to our cars, returning the way we came. The day warmed and the fog lifted. Soon, we were retracing sections of trail we had walked earlier, with Mount St. Helens presiding over us. I felt like we were being ushered out.

We made it to the parking lot a few hours later, washed the dust off, said our goodbyes. As I drove away, I switched on the radio. There were no catastrophes, no disasters, thank heavens, just a relentless series of bulletins from the presidential

campaign trail, each with its own cast of outsized characters. I hit "seek" until I found a station playing classical music.

Forest Road 99 wound out of the monument. I rolled down the window, let the scents of younger forest whip around the car. *In the Blast Zone* bounced around the front seat next to my pack. The book has five sections, most with a few essays and poems, but the last section is devoted to a single poem, Snyder's "Pearly Everlasting." Reprinted from *Danger on Peaks*, it gives the collection a welcome summary air. Likewise, as the penultimate poem in "Mount St. Helens," it is where Snyder, during his visit to the backcountry, at last reconciles himself to the eruption and its transformation of the places he knew. Midway through, he harkens back to his first ascent:



New growth in 2005, the 25th anniversary of the eruption.  
KEN LAMBERT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

*I had asked Mt. St. Helens for help  
the day I climbed it, so seems she did*

Decades later, he has understood her response.

*If you ask for help it comes.  
But not in any way you'd ever know*

I've always liked Snyder's lesson, but I also never thought it was meant for me. I was 2 when Mount St. Helens erupted. I have no memory of its older beauty, knowing it only as it is today, in these times. I suppose I am also less interested in drawing a moral from the mountain, the cause of so massive a disturbance. Instead, I wanted to hear from the animals and plants that endured the aftermath, who went to sleep in one world and woke in another. The flowers shivering in the wind, the chipmunks scuttling over logs, the mountain goats dancing down cliffs. What do they say? There will be upheaval. The things of which you felt most sure can fail. Many will suffer. Many will die. Perhaps you will not. If somehow you are spared the worst, do not think it is due to any special virtue. It was nothing more than luck or circumstance. Accepting that, what will you do to help make the world that is to come? Now, prepare yourself. You are about to be tested. ■

## Pearly Everlasting

Walk a trail down to the lake  
mountain ash and elderberries red  
old-growth log bodies blown about,  
whacked down, tumbled in the new ash *wadis*.  
Root-mats tipped up, veiled in tall straight fireweed,  
fields of prone logs laid by blast  
in-line north-south down and silvery  
limbless barkless poles —  
clear to the alpine ridgetop all you see  
is toothpicks of dead trees  
thousands of summers  
at detritus-cycle rest  
— hard and dry in the sun — the long life of the down tree yet to go  
bedded in bushes of pearly everlasting  
dense white flowers  
saplings of bushy vibrant silver fir  
the creek here once was "Harmony Falls"  
The pristine mountain  
just a little battered now  
the smooth dome gone  
ragged crown

the lake was shady *yin*—  
now blinding water mirror of the sky  
remembering days of fir and hemlock —  
no blame to magma or the mountain  
& sit on a clean down log at the lake's edge,  
the water dark as tea.

I had asked Mt. St. Helens for help  
the day I climbed it, so seems she did

The trees all lying flat like, after that big party  
Siddhartha went to on the night he left the house for good,  
crowd of young friends whipped from sexy dancing  
dozens crashed out on the floor

angelic boys and girls, sleeping it off.  
A palace orgy of the gods but what  
"we" see is "Blast Zone" sprinkled with  
clustered white flowers

"Do not be tricked by human-centered views," says Dogen,  
And Siddhartha looks it over, slips away — for another forest —  
— to really get right down on life and death.

*If you ask for help it comes.  
But not in any way you'd ever know  
— thank you Loowit, lawilayt-lá, Smoky Má  
gracias xiexie grace*

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# An expedition through the Edgelands

Very early one morning on the cold cusp of February, I leave my house in Paonia, Colorado, to tromp 10 miles to the next town, Hotchkiss. I do this maybe once a month, weather and health permitting: Walking for hours, then collapsing for the night at a motel. Next morning, I leave before sunrise, loving that long slow morning twilight, the way the light fills up the sky, like pale wine in a deep blue chalice.

My walkabout takes me some time; I'm not as young as I used to be, and I bear old injuries in my bones. I use crutches and sometimes need a lift. But mostly I just clomp along, one foot after another. I trudge through what I call the Edgelands: the scrubby, rumpled, ragged places that border the back roads of small rural towns. It is a landscape caught between the human and the wild — alpine and desert, farmland and town, with mesas rising into snow-capped mountains and a river wandering through it. Old gnarled cottonwoods and dry yellow grasses, bare fields enlivened by the reddish brushstrokes of low-growing willows.

The sky this morning is a high pale blue feathered with wispy clouds. In a downtown window, my reflection looks unnervingly like R2-D2: Short and squat, two canes swinging like a droid's long arms, woolen hat like a round little head. I beep cheerfully and trundle onward, in love with the world, entranced by the solid connection my boots make with it.

I walk the Back River Road, past century-old houses and modular homes separated by small orchards. Ravens tilt and twirl overhead, introducing themselves in Latin: "Corvus?" "Corvax." A rooster crows; some chickens squabble; dogs bark officiously at me. People I know drive past, waving.

Time for a sit-down stop on a handy roadside boulder. I love the distinctive shapes of the bare winter trees. Mole, in *The Wind in the Willows*, would agree: *The country lay bare and entirely leafless around him, and he thought that he had never seen so far and so intimately into the insides of things as on that winter day when Nature was deep in her annual slumber and seemed to have kicked the clothes off. ... He was glad that he liked the country undecorated, hard, and stripped of its finery. He had got down to the bare bones of it, and they were fine and strong and simple.*

Wild geese unfurl overhead, honking in hoarse prehistoric voices, and settle on the fields. When a hawk swoops over, they scatter away from its shadow. The

hawk lands nonchalantly in a tree, and the geese go back to work. It is not as cold this winter as it should be. Still, the longer I sit, the colder I feel. I stand up, creaking, nose running.

The road squiggles up to the top of a mesa, past barns and the unlit torches of tall bare poplars. Below, the valley is a tattered quilt, sewn together by the river. Before me, open land rolls and rises to the base of the two nearest mountains. The fields are covered with old frozen snow, sparkling like pinpoint diamonds where the sun catches crystals.

Up a long straight hill, and I'm on another mesa, looking north. It's a wonderfully geometrical landscape, the blue sweep of Grand Mesa lapped by angled lower mesas and round adobe hills. I rest again by a row of huge old cottonwoods. Their stillness today seems oddly deliberate, as if the trees are holding their breath and watching. Every sound is sharp and distinct; the crunch of my teeth in an apple like an ax splitting wood. The occasional thin dry stirring of grass seems portentous, almost too much to bear.

I pass a pod of horses and mules, who regard me thoughtfully. The cows seem about as alive and alert as a field of rocks. Then one lifts great tragic eyes to you, like Desdemona pleading with Othello, and you feel guilty. My back and legs are starting to hurt. Time for another novena to St. Ibuprofen. *Why did I think this walk was a good idea? Are we there yet?*

The road tumbles on down to my least-favorite section, flat square pastures like old carpet remnants. In rainy springs, the view is lovely, as green and glad as Ireland. But now it's bleached in tans and brown and the yellow of old chipped paint, blotched with patchy snow like lingering mange. Trees are fewer, trucks are faster, and the dogs sound meaner.

But that's the thing about the Edgelands: They aren't always beautiful. They can be sloppy and scabby and ragged and weedy, littered with fast-food wrappers and broken liquor bottles. This is not a landscape that cares about pleasing people. I wonder if I can keep going; everything hurts. But I flourish my crutches in joyous defiance and echo Gerard Manley Hopkins, declaiming at the top of my lungs to an uncaring quorum of cows:

*These things, these things were here/  
and but the beholder  
Wanting; which two when/  
they once meet,  
The heart rears wings bold and bolder  
And hurls for him, O half hurls/  
earth for him off under his feet. □*

*"I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in." — John Muir*

*"I have traveled a good deal in Concord." — Henry David Thoreau*



ILLUSTRATIONS: DIANE SYLVAIN



# Yaak attack

*At home at the Dirty Shame*

On the night after Thanksgiving, I wander into the Dirty Shame Saloon, in Yaak, Montana, with a few friends. A half-dozen people congregate around the pool table, not playing pool. Camo and hunter's orange are on abundant display. A Confederate flag hangs behind the bar; shotguns are embedded in the counter.

We've stopped here out of curiosity about the Yaak Valley, and the people, all 250 of them, who make it home. The valley is known, in its small way, for a few things: the writings of Rick Bass, a former petroleum geologist who has long and ferociously defended it; the haven it has provided to some of the West's darker elements — doomsday preppers, hermits and a few white supremacists — and the "World Famous Dirty Shame Saloon," with its reputation for rowdy drunkenness. The valley, wedged up against Canada, is a funnel for wildlife to travel south and then out across the West. In its dripping woods, species from the Pacific Northwest forests and the Rocky Mountains live side by side. It's a small valley, Bass, a Texas transplant, writes in *The Book of Yaak*: "Everything is all crammed in on top of everything else." But only around the Dirty Shame do the human inhabitants live close enough together to put on any appearance of a town. Still, they've left their mark in the form of the logging roads stitched across the valley, hemming in the grizzlies, the caribou, the wolves.

Bass and a few others chose this place to settle in, for reasons that elude me. I find its stands of ash, hemlock, pine and cedar — the way they form dense green walls that block the horizon — claustrophobic. I live in scrubby piñon-juniper, and, like a jackrabbit, prefer the open spaces. The Yaak "is not so much a place to come to," Bass says. Rather, it's a "biological refuge like the Great Dismal Swamp. There's nothing to see and no one to see." But I'm curious, too, about what draws people to these dark, unappealing corners of the West, about why some of them devote themselves to defending close woods and ugly vistas. "Reattachment," Bass calls it, even as the West splinters biologically and culturally; in *The Book of Yaak*, he writes, "I see more and more the human stories in the West becoming those not of passing through and drifting on, but of settling in and making a stand."

I sit at the counter's dimly lit corner as the bartender and owner, a man named John Runkle, entertains my

friends with stories of the Yaak's wild woods and bars, of the reality TV show producers who come to document both.

My neighbor, Andrew, a heavily bearded man in a ball cap, hunched over his beer, tells me a different kind of story: He says his cousins are Cheyne and Chevie Kehoe, white supremacist brothers who went on a murder, bombing and robbery spree in the '90s. They holed up for a time in the Yaak, where their mother lived. He describes an infamous cop car dashcam video of the two, getting pulled over in Ohio. "You can see one of them pull on a bulletproof vest," he says; the traffic stop, caught on camera, turned

Southern California transplant wearing flame-covered surf trunks, seems the most at home. Once a real estate broker with offices in seven states, he says he was driving one day, talking on the phone with a business associate, when he ran out of patience with the conversation, with the lifestyle, with the phone. He threw the phone out the window, quit his job and escaped to the Yaak. Some longtime residents, resentful over past squabbles, avoid the bar since he bought it. That doesn't faze him. Wet T-shirt contests, hats screaming "Yaak Attack" and an on-again, off-again employee who accidentally shot out the fridge: Those are



into a shootout. Andrew, whose last name I never catch, says he grew up in Florida and sometimes spent family vacations in the Yaak. He doesn't associate with his relatives, he says, but he settled here just the same.

He and everyone else I meet here have made an uneasy home in the Yaak, aware of its marginal location on the map of America but loyal nonetheless. "There is a certain undeniable raggedness of spirit — a newness, a roughness," Bass writes of the valley. "It's not a place filled with easy certainties." Runkle, a boisterous

concerns he can devote some passion to.

I finish my drink, and we drive the windy road back to our rented cabin. A great gray owl perches on the eaves, and calls. Behind the cabin, in the darkness, the Yaak River rounds a corner, rustling against the grassy banks. I walk across a meadow, softly lit by the cabin's windows, to the river. Although meeting a grizzly or other large predator is unlikely so close to the highway, I find the darkness unnerving. I walk closer, listening. Only silence, and the run of the river, rises from the shadows. □

**The only functioning gas pump in Yaak, Montana, sits across from the Dirty Shame.** JULIA MOSS/  
GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

# Together we pause

ESSAY BY ANA MARIA SPAGNA



A crowd gathered by the window, staring out: Our plane had arrived. Early summer on a budget carrier, there were fewer wing-tipped passengers waiting than usual, more families in flip-flops, plenty of kids dragging mini roller bags. There'd be no empty seats on this plane. We'd take a short hop to Oakland then transfer to Seattle, Denver, Minneapolis, and beyond. With the boarding call expected any minute, the waiting area should have been loud and lively, but I emerged from the bathroom to utter silence.

I stood on tiptoes to try to see over the crowd, three rows deep, but I could not.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

No one replied.

I'd seen a cop earlier, fully uniformed, not TSA, so I wondered if there was some kind of high-speed chase in progress on the tarmac — we weren't that far from Los Angeles, after all — or maybe a medical emergency. I knelt down to try to see between people's legs. As I did, I noticed that several men had removed their ball caps.

Then I saw. A casket had descended the baggage chute, flag-draped, secured in a frame of two-by-fours. Soldiers marched forward, five men and one woman, in full-dress uniform. They lifted the casket — the body — in unison and moved it to a rolling gurney. Then they stepped aside. Heat rose in waves from the asphalt. Nearby mountains stood barely visible, shrouded in wildfire smoke and ocean haze. All planes and vehicles and orange-vested employees stopped.

The family stepped from station wagons, a large family, mixed race, arm-in-arm, well-dressed. They approached the casket to have a moment to themselves.

With all of us.

We felt the guilt of voyeurism, the intrusion of privacy, but we couldn't turn away. This was, as they say, one of ours. Less than a month since Memorial Day, and what did we remember, really, besides picnics?

This. We would remember this.

Once before, I had a similar experience in very different circumstances. I'd driven the long winding road at Point Reyes National Seashore. Near sunset, I reached a packed parking lot at the road's end. But as I walked the last half-mile to the dramatic lighthouse surrounded by sea, I realized that I had yet

to see another soul, despite all the cars. Where had everyone gone? Suddenly, I came around the corner. A very large crowd of people was leaning against a chain-link fence, in absolute silence, looking out.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

No one replied.

A man pointed toward the sea, and I gazed out for a silent minute until a gray whale surfaced, then another, then another, more whales than I'd ever seen in my life, and the people *ooohed* and *aaaahed*, fireworks-style, but did not otherwise speak. When the whales submerged, we stood in silence until they surfaced again. This lasted three-quarters of an hour. Only when the whales moved north and the sun began to set and we dispersed did I realize several people in the group did not speak English.

Iraqandafghanistan. Are these wars — is any war — right or wrong? Are migrating gray whales wonders of creation or the last of their species in this age of extinction? We can stop to analyze — we should, always, pause to think — about the ways we're complicit, how the choices we make, deliberate or not, wreak havoc in the world.

But sometimes we just need to stop. Together. Like a shared reflex. We don't even have to think about it.

On the tarmac, family members bowed their heads, fingered the edge of the flag, and wrapped themselves around each other as their hair and clothes grew disheveled in the heat and wind. Then, at last, they backed away. The soldiers marched to the gurney and lifted the casket into a hearse, which drove away followed by the family cars.

Inside the terminal, no one dared move. Kids fidgeted and were shushed. I'd been kneeling longer than I liked to, but I stayed kneeling.

Not long afterward, bags began to drop from the chute and we lined up to board, no longer silent, but not loud either. Once we sat and buckled ourselves in, the pilot spoke over the intercom, voice wavering, to say what an honor it was to have brought a soldier home to a final resting place. Meanwhile, the rest of us were on the move to Oakland, Seattle, Denver, Minneapolis and beyond. We taxied fast and lifted into the air, higher and higher, above the tarmac, then the mountains, strangers bound together, the binds loosening as smoke settled thick in the canyons below. □

▲ Ground crew remove a casket from a Delta flight as members of the U.S. Navy salute.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/  
GETTY IMAGES

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## HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

## ARIZONA

**The earth's skin is so parched** in parts of Arizona that the land is literally splitting in two, with no ChapStick large enough to help. The newest fissure, 10 miles southwest of Picacho Peak State Park on Arizona state trust land, formed over the past few years and varies dramatically in size, state geologist Lee Allison reports in his blog, *arizonageologist.blogspot.com*. At 1.8 miles in length, it meanders from a narrow, inch-wide crack to a split as wide as 10 feet and 25 to 30 feet deep. Blame extensive groundwater withdrawal in the Sonoran Desert, which has already caused subsidence in Cochise, La Paz, Maricopa, Pima and Pinal counties.

## UTAH

**If it's true, as F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said,** "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function," then the state of Utah is juggling reality in an increasingly rickety manner. Almost every elected official — from Republican Gov. Gary Herbert to the state Legislature and the congressional delegation — has asked President Donald Trump to rescind former President Barack Obama's designation of the Bears Ears National Monument. State leaders say this would free up the monument's public land for extractive industries such as mining and drilling. Yet at the same time, Utah tourism officials enthusiastically promote Bears Ears on the state's website, devoting several pages to the new monument's scenic and recreational attractions, reports the Associated Press. The state's bipolar, but mostly hostile, approach to public lands infuriated many in the outdoor recreation industry, with Patagonia and other companies "vowing to boycott" the semiannual Outdoor Retailer show, which brings about \$45 million in annual spending to the state. A conference call between the governor and gear industry executives in February attempted to heal the breach, but neither side budged, and now, after two decades in Utah, the show is leaving Salt Lake City. A Colorado nonprofit, Conservation Colorado, would love to be the retailers' new venue: In half-page ads in two



ALASKA Lest you get confused. KRISTA LANGLOIS

of Utah's largest newspapers, the group brags that Colorado has "stronger beer. We have taller peaks. ... But most of all, we love our public lands."

## THE WEST

**The über-urban and noir novelist Paul Auster** told *The New York Times Book Review* recently that his favorite book was a 628-page tome that nobody else had ever heard of: *Weeds of the West*, written by a team of 40 plant gurus and published by the Western Society of Weed Science. Though the color photos were splendid, he allowed, what really delighted him were the plants' names: "Spreading dogbane. Skeleton-leaf bursage. Nodding beggarticks. Bristly hawksbeard. Tansy ragwort. Blessed milkthistle. Poverty sumpweed. Prostrate spurge. Everlasting peavine. Panicle willowweed. Ripgut brome." Reading about weeds never fails to lift his spirits, he said, calling their names "the poetry of the American earth."

## THE WEST

**A runaway drone launched** in southern Arizona was finally found hundreds of miles away in Colorado, and now "the military is trying to figure out how it got there." One theory: The \$1.5 million Shadow drone, which weighs 450 pounds and has a wingspan of 20 feet, is capable

of flying for eight or nine hours, and it just kept on trucking. The rogue drone was found stuck in a tree in the mountains west of Evergreen, Colorado, nine days after it was launched from Fort Huachuca, AP reports.

## UTAH

**Should you find yourself skiing off a 150-foot cliff** somewhere in the Wasatch Range of Utah, better hope you're wearing your backpack. Devin Stratton told the *Washington Post* that his unexpected backcountry plunge felt like a "near-death experience," until he realized that his landing had been cushioned by his backpack and two and a half feet of soft snow. When he first hit the ground, Stratton said it took him a few seconds to realize he was still alive; even more amazingly, he didn't suffer "a scratch or a bruise." And thanks to his decision to wear a GoPro camera that day, an edited video of his descent has gone viral.

## THE WEST

**Master gardener Peter Heffelfinger**, writing in the *Whatcom Watch* of Washington, assures his fellow gardening fanatics that spring is coming soon, and not just because those gaudy seed catalogs are sprouting up in mailboxes. But he had advice for folks itching to get their hands into the ground right now: "Be mindful of change. The weather will always be unexpected. It is best to remain flexible: re-sow when seeds rot out or plants go to seed early; plant a variety of vegetables, since what worked last year may fizzle this year. Try a few new things on the off chance they might work out well. Have lots of options. And be thankful for those tempting seed packets in February, as well as the cornucopia of vegetables starts in the nurseries when spring finally arrives. Seeds and starts are the gifts that last."

**WEB EXTRA** For more from Heard around the West, see [hcn.org](http://hcn.org).

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



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“I walk away. I leave her there to die. Nobody will be back through until spring. Without her flock, **this sheep is as hopeless as I am helpless.**”

Beth Raboin, in her essay "Life lessons from sheep," from *Writers on the Range*, [hcn.org/wotr](http://hcn.org/wotr)