

High Country News

The cover image shows a serene landscape with four bison grazing in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. In the foreground, a calm body of water reflects the bison and the sky. The background features rolling hills under a sky with scattered white clouds. The overall tone is peaceful and natural.

**INSIDE THE ATTACK
ON PUBLIC LANDS**

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**A MISSING-MIGRANT
DATABASE GOES MISSING**

**TRACKING TERRORISM
ACROSS THE WEST**

**THE UNSUNG
BEAUTY OF FLIES**

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Smoke from the Caldor Fire shrouds Lake Tahoe near Zephyr Cove, Nevada, in 2021. Air quality in the Tahoe Basin during the fire was among the nation's worst. (See story on page 10.) **Max Whittaker**

Know The West.

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The altar of profit

THERE'S AN AREA ON THE CENTRAL CALIFORNIA COAST known as the Irish Hills — steep and green and traversed by winding single-track roads. Ascending through the oak-dotted canyons and emerging onto the grassy heights feels like stepping back in time. I encountered this place through a guidebook to back roads published in the 1980s and long out of print. Now, the Bureau of Land Management is planning to drill and frack around 850,000 acres across central California, including 76 acres in the Irish Hills. Other nearby parcels open for drilling under this plan include a 5-acre site directly across the street from a middle school; 1,222 acres within the boundaries of a popular coastal state park; and one parcel straddling a wild and scenic river that is critical habitat for endangered steelhead.

While I was writing this, the Trump administration declared Sable Offshore Corporation exempt from state laws that have inhibited its push to restart three oil platforms in the Santa Barbara Channel along with the degenerate pipeline responsible for the 2015 Refugio oil spill. Sable has been trying to restart operations ever since it purchased this aging infrastructure from ExxonMobil in 2024. Several of the required state permits are still pending or are wrapped up in litigation, but Sable started pumping oil through the pipeline anyway under “emergency orders” from the Department of Energy.

This is but a sampling of the threats this administration poses to my small corner of the West. No doubt you have your own list. The attacks on public lands from this administration have been endless, ruthless and unscrupulously focused on profit above all else. I think of the communities across the region that have been fighting the oil and gas industry for decades over the damage it has inflicted on ecosystems, infrastructure and public health, and of how, during his recent presidential campaign, Donald Trump promised oil executives that if they helped elect him, he would scrap environmental rules. Today, the industry is enjoying increased access to public lands and fewer regulations — along with a veritable windfall due to the war with Iran.

This issue's cover story focuses on the damage done to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem by budget cuts and layoffs from the administration's so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). The loss of jobs is sobering. And the disruption to long-term scientific research while the Western U.S. is being blasted by climate change is a huge blow to anyone working to mitigate the damage. Defunding research on the impacts of climate change is nothing more than a government-led coverup of the irreparable harm the oil and gas industry is doing to the region, and the world. History will judge these executives and statesmen harshly for stalling the rush toward renewable energy while they sacrifice people and places at the altar of profit above all else.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Gregory Nickerson / Wyoming Migration Initiative

The farther the walk, the fatter the deer, study finds

New research shows the importance of intact migration pathways for Wyoming deer.

By Christine Peterson



Ramsay de Give

Snowmaking could be the future of skiing. But at what cost?

As the climate changes, ski resorts have begun relying more on energy and water-intensive machine-made snow.

By Susan Shain



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Buffalo belonging to the Eastern Shoshone buffalo herd near Kinnear, Wyoming. (See story on page 18.)

Natalie Behring / HCN



The Daneros uranium mine in the Red Canyon uranium mining district in San Juan County, Utah. All uranium ore mined from this area travels through Bears Ears National Monument. (See story on page 7.)
Russel Albert Daniels / HCN

LETTERS

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

WHERE ARE WE?

In “Weakening the rules” (March 2026), the term Golden Triangle is repeated multiple times. I think I know what the author is referring to, but I’m not sure. A map would solve this. A textual definition would be OK, if done carefully.

Jim Rosenau
Berkeley, California

IN PRAISE OF CARE

Thank you so much for the excellent article by Laureli Ivanoff (“Iditarod idol,” March 2026). Every word was rich and meaningful. Care is soft, in tune, perceptive, understanding, responsive. We can spur change through our work, actions, care and feminine instincts. So powerful!

Janis Smith
Via email

BATTLES OVER CATTLE NEVER END

Thank you for the excellent article on the negative impact of cattle grazing throughout the West (“The Bird & the Herd,” February 2026). The fact that the Burns Paiute and Bannock Shoshone tribes are still battling our government and politicians for protection of the sagebrush steppe habitat and our native sage grouse isn’t spiritually uplifting. The tribes are correct to see cattle as an invasive species, as is the annual cheatgrass those cattle bring to the range. It

is a continuation of the battles in the late 1800s when our government tried to kill all the bison to force the Native Americans into poverty on reservations.

Chuck Trost
Pocatello, Idaho

The feature on public-land grazing of domestic livestock (“Free Range,” December 2025) was one of the most complete and informative articles on a complex issue I’ve ever seen in a publication. “Overgrazing,” however, is an inappropriate term to use, as it implies that some form or level of herbivory is benign or even beneficial to the natural environment of our public lands. It isn’t. We don’t use “overlogging” or “overmining” or “overdrilling” to describe those forms of environmental degradation. Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt concluded 20 years ago that “grazing, not overgrazing” is the most destructive activity perpetuated on our arid Western landscapes.

Donald Ehrich
Creswell, Oregon

MUSIC MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Thanks to all for another wonderfully diverse issue that illustrates what makes *High Country News* so valuable, interesting and unique. I especially appreciated the article on Portland’s Black Music Legacy (“The Sound of Black History in Portland,”

March 2026) and having a link to an audio playlist to accompany the words and visuals, which creates a wider sensory understanding of people and place.

Alex Clayton
Fort Collins, Colorado

WITNESSES TO HISTORY

I want to expand on Jennifer Sahn’s recent Editor’s Note (“Called to respond,” February 2026) about Ansel Adams’ Manzanar photos and the resulting book, *Born Free and Equal*.

Adams was so determined to have his photos of the Manzanar incarceration experience preserved for posterity that he donated the photos to the Library of Congress. More telling, he placed no restrictions on the use or duplication of his photos by the public.

While Adams’ uplifting portraits of Manzanar internees border on heroic, another giant of mid-20th century documentary photography, Dorothea Lange, captured the harsh reality, blatant racism and emotional anguish of the internment era. Lange’s photos, which she took as a U.S. government-sponsored photographer, are also available through the Library of Congress.

The official U.S. apology for the unjust imprisonment of about 120,000 Japanese Americans during WWII is included

“We don’t use ‘overlogging’ or ‘overmining’ or ‘overdrilling’ to describe environmental degradation.”

in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which also paid reparations to the remaining camp survivors. The act states unequivocally that the incarceration was the direct result of “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

As William Faulkner noted, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Jon Klusmire
Bishop, California

A DEEP BREAK

I loved your “Deep Time in the West” issue (January 2026). I admired the creative presentation of Wyoming geology by Marcia Bjornerud, enjoyed my friend David Williams’ take on exploring building-stone geology as a means of getting a geology fix in the city, and gained clarification on just what “time immemorial” means to many Indigenous communities in the article by B. “Toastie” Oaster. But it was Melissa Sevigny’s piece on Tanya Atwater that brought me back to my 1977 senior-level undergraduate class in geology. Also, the issue was a nice break from the nation and the world’s horrific news.

Mary Moran
Moab, Utah

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the special January issue, “Deep Time in the West.” Thinking about Earth’s history starting over 4 billion years ago puts today’s issues into a new perspective. I found great comfort in Emilene Ostlund’s article about the pronghorn (“Lessons from an ice age survivor”): “Perhaps the lesson from pronghorn is not to yearn for the past or worry over the unknown future, but to face the day with attention and quiet care.”

Lynda Roberts
Sausalito, California



REPORTAGE

NEPA changes could sideline tribes

Trump's 'energy dominance' comes at the expense of tribal consultation.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

LAST FALL, CONSTRUCTION on the Velvet-Wood uranium mine broke ground in the sandstone deposits of San Juan County, Utah. It's the first mine that the federal government has permitted under a new expedited "emergency" process that allows projects to go through the environmental review required by the National Environmental

Policy Act (NEPA) in just 14 days, a process that previously took months or even years. Tribal governments were given just seven days to offer feedback, and the standard public comment period was eliminated owing to the project's "emergency" status. In the past, both tribes and the public had at least 30 days give input.

The mine is located in an area already deeply scarred by uranium mining, where the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe has long opposed the White Mesa Uranium Mill, which abuts the community. During the weeklong tribal comment period, six nations shared their concerns with the Bureau of Land Management, citing the expedited process and possible water

contamination from the mine's activities. No changes were made to the project, however.

Earlier this year, in addition to mandating expedited "emergency" processes for NEPA reviews, the Trump administration finalized its proposed elimination of standards — including public comment periods — for how federal

The Mexican Hat uranium tailings repository on the Navajo Nation holds contaminated waste from uranium mills in Utah and Arizona. The Navajo Nation has raised concerns about its proximity to the San Juan River, a source of drinking water.

Russel Albert Daniels / HCN



agencies carry out NEPA environmental reviews for large-scale projects on public lands. The changes came without consultation with tribal nations and despite their strong opposition.

“The announce-and-defend method of developing federal Indian policy is an inappropriate, paternalistic, unjustified, and historically inefficient method of decision-making,” the National Congress of American Indians and National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers said in a joint letter. Eliminating previous standards “ignores federal trust and treaty responsibilities, impinges on roles and sovereignty of Tribal Nations, and flouts longstanding policy and practice by failing to consult with Tribal Nations.”

The federal government is legally required to consult with tribal nations on rules and policies that affect them, but so far the Trump administration has regularly bypassed consultation requirements or sped through them in order to accomplish its “energy dominance” agenda on tribal nations’ ancestral lands. Altogether, the changes represent a shift in the way that tribal nations — and the public — are able to have a say in how land in the Western U.S. is managed.

FROM THE START, agencies under Trump have changed or revoked rules and policies to prioritize extraction, citing the so-called energy “emergency.” The BLM and the Forest Service rescinded the Public Lands Rule

and the Roadless Rule without tribal consultation, even though both decisions have major implications for tribes’ ability to protect natural and cultural resources on public land. Meanwhile, the administration is seeking to “streamline” Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, one of the most useful tools tribal nations have for ensuring government consultation. Changes are also proposed for Section 401 of the Clean Water Act, which enables tribes to review the impacts of extractive projects within reservation borders before a federal agency permits the project.

“It’s all predicated on something that isn’t true: We don’t have an energy emergency,” said Gussie Lord, managing attorney at Earthjustice’s Tribal Partnerships Programs. Chipping away at public input and tribal consultation will only exacerbate issues that tribal nations face, Lord said. “A lot of their resources, their cultural and environmental resources often are one and the same. The existing laws and regulations that we have are already insufficiently protective of tribal rights and resources.”

The administration’s changes to the NEPA review process took effect immediately last year, also without consultation. Under the Biden administration, the Council on Environmental Quality spent three and a half years updating the implementation regulations by consulting with tribal nations and the public, incorporating provisions requiring agencies

Water towers in White Mesa, Utah. The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe has long opposed the neighboring White Mesa Uranium Mill. Six tribal nations warned the Bureau of Land Management about possible water contamination from the new Velvet-Wood uranium mine, but no changes were made to the project. **Russel Albert Daniels / HCN**

The federal government has bought stakes in mining companies, including the company behind the Thacker Pass lithium mine in Nevada, which is opposed by some tribal nations and Indigenous communities. **Major King**

to consider climate change and environmental justice impacts when reviewing projects. NEPA applies to all federal agencies, meaning that each agency has to come up with its own implementation guidelines. Tribes and experts worry that, under the new guidelines, agencies may not be compelled to work with tribes.

According to University of Arizona professor of law Justin Pidot, who previously served as general counsel for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, the resulting uncertainty could have serious consequences. “One is the agencies don’t know how to work together. The second is that there’s litigation risk. The third is that project sponsors don’t know what they’re supposed to do,” Pidot said. The removal of those standards “creates lots of complexity for the public, for tribes, for states, for local governments, for nonprofits.”

Under the Interior Department’s new interim set of standards, for example, reviews for something like a mining project will take 28 days. When the “emergency” declaration is added, it could take just 14 days, as it did with the Velvet-Wood mine. Past reviews could take up to four years. “It substantially limits the degree of information flowing from the federal government to the public about big projects, including to tribes,” Pidot said. “What is surprising about this particular decision of theirs is that having a common set of rules makes sense for everyone.”

In comments to the Council on Environmental Quality about the elimination of the NEPA standards, many tribal nations expressed similar concerns. (See sidebar.) Tribes said they were not consulted, and that while dealing with numerous agencies and their different processes was burdensome, the removal of the

regulations weakens the whole purpose of NEPA. The National Congress of American Indians and other organizations noted that some streamlining and deregulating could prove useful—but not when tribal perspectives were excluded from the process.

Last year’s federal budget cuts and mass layoffs further complicate matters, affecting agencies’ ability to carry out their work. Meanwhile, congressional budget cuts impacted funding for, among other things, tribal historic preservation officers, which are key to carrying out government-to-government consultation. The idea seems to be to “drown people in an avalanche while providing them with no resources to meet the moment, and call that consultation and collaboration,” Pidot said.

At the same time that the federal government has moved to reduce public and tribal input, it has also been buying stakes in mining companies, including the two companies behind controversial projects opposed by some tribal nations and Indigenous communities: the Thacker Pass lithium mine in Nevada and the Ambler Road project in Alaska. “It’ll be interesting to see if their approval processes for mines in which the federal government has a stake is quicker than it otherwise would have been,” Lord said.

Pidot summed it up this way: “The big theme is that anything and anyone that stands in the way of the kinds of projects that this administration wants to do is an obstacle to progress that they’re going to overrun.” ✨

Anna V. Smith is an associate editor of High Country News. She writes and edits stories on tribal sovereignty and environmental justice for the Indigenous Affairs desk from Oregon.

TRIBES’ PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGES TO NEPA IMPLEMENTATION

SHOSHONE-BANNOCK TRIBES, IDAHO

“On the Fort Hall Reservation are environmentally hazardous sites created prior to modern-day NEPA protections. ... By stripping away NEPA’s provisions for public participation and environmental review, the federal government would further entrench long-standing historic inequities that have disadvantaged Tribal communities.”

CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES, MONTANA

“CEQ (Council on Environmental Quality) states that it does not need to consult with Tribes. ... This is a tortured and disingenuous reading of EO 13175, in part because it focuses almost exclusively on a federal view of economic impacts on Tribal governments rather than the universe of environmental impacts.”

SUSANVILLE INDIAN RANCHERIA, CALIFORNIA

“The proposed removal of these regulations represents a significant step backward in our nation’s commitment to environmental protection and tribal sovereignty.”

CHEYENNE RIVER SIOUX TRIBE, SOUTH DAKOTA

“CEQ is ignoring its established policy of including indigenous traditional ecological knowledge in environmental reviews under NEPA. These issues that have been part and parcel of the implementation of NEPA for decades, such as the consideration of impacts to environmental justice communities, the cumulative effects of projects, and climate change, are being arbitrarily cast aside in contravention of explicit statutory language.”

BISHOP PAIUTE TRIBE, CALIFORNIA

“Our traditional and ancestral lands extend far beyond the exterior boundaries of our reservation, and the natural resources on these lands are not merely commodities to be exploited. They are vital to the cultural, spiritual, and economic fabric of all Tribal communities, sustaining traditions that have endured for generations.”

TULALIP TRIBES, WASHINGTON

“The lack of consultation exacerbates the already existing power imbalances, further diminishing the ability of tribes to exercise meaningful sovereignty and protect their interests.”

NEZ PERCE TRIBE, IDAHO

“The Tribe strongly objects to CEQ’s Proposed Rule, which eviscerates the framework that has been relied upon since CEQ first issued NEPA regulations in 1978.”

BIG PINE PAIUTE TRIBE, CALIFORNIA

“The interim final rule sidesteps NEPA ... as it endorses Donald Trump’s personal agenda. The USA is a country of laws, not a place where one’s personal agenda may supersede the law.”



Gay Mine, a former phosphate mine and current Superfund site on Fort Hall Reservation, in 1948. P1972-201-101 Courtesy of Idaho State Archives



REPORTAGE

Scorched and poisonous soil

How wildfires can turn a common component of rocks into a carcinogen.

BY KYLIE MOHR

SOIL AND ROCKS throughout the West naturally contain chromium-3, a harmless trace element also found in animals and plants — and even included in dietary supplements. “You could dig a hole outside, wherever you are right now, and you’re going to find some amount of chromium-3,” said Matthew Polizzotto, professor of earth sciences at the University of Oregon.

But researchers are

learning that wildfires change the element’s chemical composition, turning it from a nutrient into a poison. Heat from burning soils and plants, combined with oxygen, triggers a process that converts chromium-3 into chromium-6, a carcinogen linked to lung, nasal and sinus cancers. It can also cause asthma, skin irritation and kidney and liver damage.

Chromium-6, or hexavalent chromium, can become



An area burned by the Rough Fire in Sequoia National Forest, California, in 2015. **Max Whittaker**

airborne in smoke during a blaze or be stirred up in dust after the fire is out, contaminating the air. It can also loiter in a burn scar for years, leaching into groundwater. Firefighters breathing in toxic ash and rural residents who drink contaminated well water are at risk,

“Breathing in any of that material would be especially dangerous.”

along with anyone else who encounters chromium-6.

Researchers have known since at least 2008 that wildfires can create chromium-6, but a new study, published in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology* in November, is the first to report details such as how long it might persist in groundwater.

Chromium-6 can linger in groundwater at unsafe levels for up to two years post-wildfire, according to the research. Lead author Chelsea Obeidy, now an assistant professor of soil science at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, worked with Polizzotto on the study as a Ph.D. student. Obeidy burned soil samples in a lab, then simulated rainfall by pumping water through the scorched soil. Though the lab results should be investigated on a landscape scale, Obeidy said, they “rang a bell for me.”

Obeidy’s team also found that fires that burn between 750 and 1,110 degrees Fahrenheit, considered high severity, created the most chromium-6. Increasingly hot climate change-driven wildfires across the West are killing trees and incinerating forest soil, subjecting more areas to this element-altering heat. Areas rich in serpentine rock, like the mixed chaparral forests of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest in southern Oregon and Northern California, are especially prone to high concentrations of chromium. The Rocky

Mountains, the Coast Ranges of California, the Northern Sierras and the Cascade Range in the Pacific Northwest also all feature serpentine soil deposits.

The amount of chromium-6 in soil varies wildly after a fire, though Obeidy’s results show that soil samples from higher elevations, where rocks are more weathered, have the highest levels. Lower-intensity fire, the kind carefully controlled during cultural and prescribed burns, does not appear to significantly activate chromium-6, according to Obeidy’s initial research.

ANYONE WALKING through a burn scar — a firefighting crew making sure a blaze is fully extinguished, homeowners checking on properties — can stir up ash and dust, sending chromium-6 into the air. “Breathing in any of that material would be especially dangerous,” Polizzotto said. Winds can also whip up chromium-6-laced dust and sweep it into neighboring communities, expanding the number of people at risk of inhaling it.

The danger extends hundreds or even thousands of miles. Canadian wildfires in 2024 and 2025 burned across areas high in chromium, said Scott Fendorf, a professor of earth system science at Stanford University who has studied the airborne effects of chromium-6 and wasn’t involved in Obeidy’s study. Some of that chromium would have oxidized into chromium-6 and then traveled via smoke and settled over

millions of people living in the Northern and Eastern U.S.

There’s no easy fix: The only real solution is to get a handle on the wildfire crisis through climate action and ramping up prescribed and cultural burning. In the meantime, wearing an N95 mask can help reduce exposure, Fendorf said. And while the technology exists to remove some chromium-6 from soil contaminated by industries like cement and steel manufacturing, these methods — using chemicals to leach it out or reduce it to its less toxic form — don’t work on a large scale, Polizzotto said.

Natural processes can help, however: Given enough organic material in the soil and enough time — days, weeks or years, depending on conditions — chromium-6 can convert back to chromium-3. And if a burned area gets heavy rains — around an inch in 24 hours, Fendorf said — that’s enough to dilute chromium-6 to non-toxic levels in soil or runoff.

The new details on the emergence of chromium-6 post-fire underscore the environmental health hazards wildfires leave behind, and how little we still understand them. We know that the dangerous legacy of wildfire extends far beyond the initial sparks and smoke. What we don’t yet know, and may never know, is the full extent of the risks. ☼

Kylie Mohr is a correspondent and contributing editor for High Country News writing from Montana.

In December 2025, the state of Arizona moved to dissolve the organization due to required paperwork not having been filed. Frustrated forensic practitioners across the Borderlands are wondering: Is there hope for bringing the database back — or is it gone for good?

AS BORDER enforcement escalated during the 1990s, migration routes were pushed into the vast and blistering Sonoran Desert, with deadly consequences. Starting in the early 2000s, Tucson's Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, which serves three of the state's four border counties, began receiving the skeletal remains of people presumed to have died while crossing the border. Then, families started calling, looking for their relatives. Forensic anthropologist Bruce Anderson began taking down missing-persons reports. Humanitarian organizations were fielding similar calls. In 2006, cultural anthropologist Robin Reineke began helping Anderson organize these reports into a database. They called it the Missing Migrant Project.

By 2013, when Reineke and co-founder William Masson, who works in software development, incorporated the project as a 501(c)3, there were hundreds of reports. In 2016, now operating as the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, they began using DNA for identification. They hired Mirza Monterroso, a forensic anthropologist from Guatemala, to manage the DNA program.

Colibrí held events in cities with large immigrant populations, where the relatives of missing migrants could give cheek swabs for DNA reference samples. To protect the families' identities, employees created unique codes for each sample that could only be decrypted

using the database. The anonymized swabs were sent to Bode, a private forensics laboratory in Virginia. As funding allowed, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner also sent unidentified bone samples to Bode.

The two sets of DNA were periodically compared. When there was a match, Bode contacted Colibrí, whose staff would de-anonymize the sample, determine to whom it corresponded and contact their family members. By 2022, Colibrí had assisted in approximately 500 identifications.

The program was successful, but there were challenges behind the scenes. Reineke stepped down as director in July 2019. The stress was affecting her life: "I was making mistakes. I got in a car accident. I was a wreck," she said. The organization went through two interim directors, and, by 2021, faced serious financial setbacks. The board decided to merge Colibrí with the Undocumented Migration Project, a nonprofit organization founded by Jason De León, who was also Colibrí's board chair.

De León seemed like an ideal candidate to lead Colibrí's work. An anthropologist, he had joined the board in 2017 at Reineke's invitation. His 2015 book *The Land of Open Graves* described the role U.S. border policy played in migrant deaths and Colibrí and other organizations' responses. He had created the Undocumented Migration Project to support both his academic research and a traveling art exhibition called "Hostile Terrain 94."

Colibrí's staff and board felt optimistic. "The board saw a really good opportunity to have a bigger, more established and stronger organization (take over)," said Monterroso. From

De León's perspective, he was Colibrí's last chance. "The organization was going to go under and so I took it on in hopes that I could save it," he said in an interview last spring.

De León became Colibrí's executive director in 2022. Monterroso said she quickly clashed with him over protocols and ethics. She raised concerns about a graduate student who used the database to identify interviewees for her research and the presence of a documentary filmmaker at DNA collection events, and said that DNA was not promptly being sent in for processing. Shortly after she shared her concerns with Masson, she and a colleague were fired. Masson declined to comment for this article.

The terminations troubled Colibrí's partner organizations. "The staff at Colibrí that we had built trust with had been fired with no explanation. This was alarming to us," said anthropologist Kate Spradley, a professor at Texas State University and the director of Operation Identification, which conducts migrant identification work in South Texas. After the firings, she said, she struggled to communicate with De León about the database's usage and management.

In October 2024, De León sent Colibrí's board a letter of resignation. "I wanted to get as

far away from this as humanly possible," he told *HCN* and *The Border Chronicle*. "The biggest regret of my professional career was trying to save this organization," he added, decrying the "constant harassment and defamation that I have had to endure because of people who had been once associated with the organization who now blame me for many things."

Within a week of De León's letter, Colibrí's longstanding partners along the border lost access to the database. When they attempted to visit its web address, a message said the site was no longer being hosted. Without database access and Colibrí's cooperation to de-anonymize samples, there was no way to make many DNA matches.

"The family DNA is ... just sitting there and not being compared to any of our unidentified human remains," said Spradley. "If nothing happens, we lose the complete possibility of being able to identify some individuals."

At the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office, Bruce Anderson's team faced similar problems. "There's a dozen or more cases that can't be identified, and families can't be told," he said. "We think that these (identifications) will be resolved if we can just get access to those data and to those results."

"If the families don't know that the DNA is not actually being sent (for processing), then that's directly coercive."

The families, too, were concerned. The database was “something we trusted in that was going to help us search for our family,” said Carrillo Nevares in an interview in Spanish. “They betrayed my trust.”

Some of Colibrí’s partner organizations made repeated efforts to contact De León and some members of the board but did not receive a reply, they said. It was unclear who held responsibility for the database since the merger had apparently taken place. In reality, the documents to complete the merger were never filed with the Arizona Corporation Commission, the state agency that oversees companies and nonprofit organizations. Legally, Colibrí and the Undocumented Migration Project have continued to exist as two separate entities, registered in different states with distinct tax identification numbers.

In October 2025, as their concern transformed into despair, Spradley, Anderson, Reineke and seven others sent a letter to De León, the boards of Colibrí and the Undocumented Migration Project, and the director of the UCLA Department of Anthropology, where De León was employed, seeking answers.

“We find ourselves at a critical impasse,” they wrote. “(We) are writing to ask for your help in finding a way for thousands of missing person reports and genetic samples from families of missing migrants to be used in the manner promised to families at the time of collection.”

As of press time, Reineke said, no one had responded. “I did not (respond) because I have no knowledge of the database,” De León told *HCN* and *The Border Chronicle* in February 2026. “I have no idea what (the board is) doing, what they’ve done, where the database is.”

SO, WHERE DID the database go? Under federal law, responsibility for a nonprofit organization’s assets lies with its board. According to Arizona Corporation Commission filings, Colibrí’s most recent board members were Masson, De León, David Newstone and Yolanda Magallanes. De León disputes his status, telling *HCN* and *The Border Chronicle* that he left the board upon becoming executive director of the organization in 2022 and cut all ties in 2024. However, the organization’s legal filings still listed him, through the most recent filing in August 2025. “That’s just a mistake,” he said.

Meanwhile, Colibrí is currently considered “inactive” by the Arizona Corporation Commission due to an improper filing of its annual report. Despite a warning, Colibrí’s board did not correct the error, and, on Dec. 31, 2025, the agency moved to administratively dissolve the organization. Reached by phone, board member David Newstone told *HCN* and *The Border Chronicle* that Colibrí has “shut down.”

Newstone also said the database may be gone. “I think it’s already been destroyed,” he said. Magallanes stated, “I don’t have to answer any of those questions” about the status of the database. Colibrí’s board members did not respond to subsequent requests for comment.

If the database has indeed been destroyed, this may not have been in compliance with federal nonprofit law, which states that a tax-exempt organization’s assets — including data and intellectual property — “must be permanently dedicated to an exempt purpose,” and that in the case of dissolution, they must be distributed to another 501(c)(3) or to a state or local

“If nothing happens, we lose the complete possibility of being able to identify some individuals.”

government. Colibrí’s articles of incorporation align with this law; additionally, the consent form that families signed when providing their DNA samples states that should the program cease, Colibrí “will notify all families whose samples still reside at Bode and provide them with available options at the time.” (Carrillo Nevares said she received no such notification.)

Given current state and federal regulatory environments, legal experts interviewed for this article said it is unlikely that a government agency would step in. Any accountability would likely need to stem from a third party seeking legal intervention by filing a formal request, called a Petition for Instructions, with the Pima County Superior Court.

If the database still exists, the forensic anthropologists and migrant advocates who sent the October letter say they are prepared to assume responsibility for it. “There are a half dozen organizations ... that can take over the work of managing, protecting, and using this data the way it was intended to be used,” they wrote. All they need is the board’s permission.

The loss of the data would be devastating, they said. “(Colibrí) has a moral obligation and ethical responsibility to make sure that these data ... are accessible,”

said Dan Martínez, a sociologist at the Binational Migration Institute and one of the letter’s signatories. “By not providing that access, you’re actively impeding the identification of these decedents and the reunification of the remains with their loved ones.”

For families still searching for their missing relatives, Colibrí’s disappearance dims their hopes for closure.

“All the families saw (the DNA samples) as a door to a hope of being able to find our children — and what wouldn’t you do to find them?” said Carrillo Nevares. “The objective of a humanitarian organization is to serve the community, not to say ... ‘I changed my interests and I’m not even going to give you a reason why.’ That’s not right, humanly speaking.” ✨

Gabb Schivone is a writer and investigative journalist from Tucson, Arizona. Subscribe to their work at patreon.com/GabbSchivone.

Caroline Tracey is a reporter for The Border Chronicle and the author of Salt Lakes: An Unnatural History (W.W. Norton, 2026).

This article is a collaboration with The Border Chronicle.

■ DEAR FRIENDS

How *HCN* is helping fill a growing need for local news

LOCAL NEWS IS IN CRISIS: More than a third of the nation's local newspapers have folded in the last 20 years, and the Western U.S. has been especially hard-hit. Utah, for example, has lost more than a third of its local papers since 2004, while nearly a quarter of New Mexico's have gone out of business. Add recent cuts to public media funding, and rural and tribal communities are suffering from a serious lack of information and insight. And when reporting jobs get cut, the environment is often the first beat to go.

That's why *High Country News* is teaming up with local and national partners to create a West-wide corps of environmental reporters to work in local newsrooms: the Western Environmental Reporting Collaborative, or WERC. We're delighted to announce our first four partners, in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and Arizona.

Each partner will host a WERC reporter starting this July. They include:

Montana Free Press/Mountain Journal: Founded in 2016, *Montana Free Press* is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public-powered news organization dedicated to serving the information needs of all Montanans. The WERC reporter will be stationed at *Mountain Journal*, which covers the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem from its home base in Bozeman.

Wyoming Public Media: Based at the University of Wyoming, this NPR affiliate broadcasts to more than 90% of the state and maintains a robust online presence. Its new WERC reporter will cover lightning-rod species — think grizzly bears, wolves and wild horses — as well as the state's growing recreation economy and the increasing water stresses on ranchers, farmers and Indigenous communities.

Ouray County Plaindealer: This locally owned western Colorado publication has a mantra we proudly concur with: "Even small places deserve quality journalism." Led by two veteran journalists, the *Plaindealer* has a

reputation for fearless reporting and punching above its weight. Its WERC reporter will cover drought, wildfire risk and endangered species, including wolves, which are due to be released in the county soon.

Arizona Luminaria: Co-founded in 2022 by three veteran Arizona journalists, *AZ Luminaria* is an independent, nonprofit, community-centered news organization that publishes in English and Spanish. Its WERC reporter will focus on the crisis on the Colorado River, where decisions made at the interstate and federal levels will have massive impacts on farmers, low-income neighborhoods and Indigenous communities.

It's a stellar group, and we're honored to be collaborating with them. (If you don't know their work, look them up!) Our goal is to add four more partners in 2027 and another four in 2028, thereby giving the collaborative a reporter in every Western state.

WERC reporters will spend roughly three-quarters of their time writing for their home news organizations and the rest with *HCN* on stories of regional and national interest, as well as collaborations between newsrooms. All stories produced by WERC reporters will be available for publication by every newsroom in the collaborative.

With help from *HCN*, our national partner, Report for America, will provide 50% of the reporters' salaries during their first year on the job, 35% in Year 2 and 20% in Year 3. It will also provide additional training opportunities and fundraising/business development support for our partner news organizations, with the goal of making these positions permanent.

Our deepest thanks to the *HCN* readers who have contributed the funds we needed to get this partnership off the ground. We welcome additional support, both for *HCN* and our new partners. (All but the *Plaindealer* are nonprofits. Support for the *Plaindealer* can go through *HCN*.)

— Greg Hanscom,
executive director & publisher



Brooke Larsen speaks with a farmer in Green River, Utah, for a story she reported during her *HCN* fellowship. Under the 2026 WERC program, *HCN* will have reporters in four newsrooms around the West. **Luna Anna Archey / *HCN***

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DEFUNDING THE GREATER YELLOWSTONE

The impact of multiple rounds of budget cuts and mass firings on a beloved region.

By **CHRISTINE PETERSON** | *Photos by* **NATALIE BEHRING**



TONE

A TANGLED MESS OF TWIGS, LIMBS and trunks covered the trail intersection so thoroughly that we weren't even sure we'd reached it. Weary from an uphill climb in mid-August heat, our group — four adults, three kids, four llamas and two panting dogs — stopped in a nearby clearing. My husband set off to scout the best path forward.

We'd expected to encounter downed trees during our annual llama packing trip into the Bridger-Teton National Forest in western Wyoming. Even when the forest is fully staffed, crews can't clear all the timber from all the trails in its more than 1.3 million acres of wilderness. And we knew that, in the summer of 2025, the Forest Service was far from fully staffed.

We found our route but advanced only a few hundred yards before encountering an impassable logjam. The dense forests on either side

meant that we couldn't go around it, only through. One of our group searched the panniers carried by an unimpressed-looking llama named Professor Tricia and fished out two handsaws. While the kids snacked, the adults took turns sawing — back and forth, back and forth.

A grand adventure, we agreed. After about 20 minutes, we reopened the path, celebrating with jubilant high-fives.

Forty yards later, though, we encountered a similar mess — only these trees were even bigger. The adults in our group each had decades of experience in Wyoming's mountains, but the condition of this trail was unlike anything we'd ever seen.

Our trip, we feared, was becoming yet another casualty of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which President Donald Trump had established, with soon-to-be trillionaire Elon Musk at its head, in January 2025. As of last summer, Musk had haphazardly fired and forced out at least 5,860 Forest Service employees.

"Should we send Elon a bill?" one of our group joked as he sawed his way through a massive lodgepole pine. It was well past noon, and the night's camp was still 7 or 8 miles — and who knew how many hours of sawing — away.

It seemed like a fitting metaphor for the time and place.

The Bridger-Teton, one of the six national forests that surround Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, is part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, a term coined by grizzly bear researchers Frank and John Craighead in the 1970s. Encompassing more than 30,000 square miles of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, the ecosystem lies within the ancestral territories of the Shoshone, Arapaho, Crow, Blackfeet, Nez Perce and Bannock tribes and includes the nation's first national park, the first national forest, the seventh-largest reservation, three national wildlife refuges and nearly a dozen sprawling wilderness areas. Forests, grasslands and sagebrush steppe on public, private and tribal land support the world's longest documented mule deer migration, the second-largest population of grizzly bears in the Lower 48, and one of the first two populations of gray wolves reintroduced in the United States.

These habitats are under intense pressure from climate change, development and millions of annual visitors. But the federal scientists and land managers in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem have long received more funding than their counterparts elsewhere. As a result, the region's large mammals are among the world's best-studied; its parks are better staffed than most others; and it has, at least historically, benefited

A mother bison and her calf in Yellowstone National Park.

from an unprecedented level of interagency collaboration. If any ecosystem can survive multiple rounds of budget cuts and mass firings, it's this one.

Since my trip to the Bridger-Teton, however, I've asked dozens of people who live and work in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem what the future holds for this landscape, and for the rest of the West's public lands. What happens to an ecosystem when its best-resourced stewards — in this case, the federal agencies — are taken out at the knees?

"It's hard to say that in one season everything has fallen apart. So many partner groups have stepped in, and outfitters have stepped up," said Peggie dePasquale, who worked as a wilderness ranger in the Bridger-Teton National Forest before DOGE fired her last year. "But what we're looking at is a long-term deterioration of what we love. And once we lose it, and the degradation happens, it will be hard to reverse."

MANY FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

suspected that life would be more difficult in the second Trump administration than during the first. But none fully anticipated what came to be known as the Valentine's Day Massacre.

On Feb. 14, 2025, thousands of probationary employees at the Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and other agencies were notified by email that they had been terminated, effective immediately. The cuts continued sporadically for the next few months. By the end of September, the Forest Service had lost 16% of its workforce through buyouts and firings. The National Park Service lost at least 24% of its permanent staff, even at flagship parks like Grand Teton. The Bureau of Land Management lost more than 32%.

By May 2025, Scott Jackson,

the leader of the Forest Service's National Carnivore Program, knew his meso-carnivore monitoring project was doomed. The Trump administration had deprioritized the agency's research, shifting its focus toward logging and extraction. Officials in the agency's Northern Region office in Missoula, Montana, told Jackson that their 2025 budget lacked money for the project and that it would need to be shut down. So, bit by bit, Jackson and his team got rid of everything: the refurbished snowmobiles they used to track wolverines and lynx in the high mountain snow, the avalanche beacons and shovels that kept researchers safe, and the DNA kits used to assess populations of elusive carnivores. For the first time in years, Jackson didn't post job announcements for winter technician positions. In early August, Jackson said goodbye to the project's leader, whose annual contract hadn't been renewed.

The project, a decade-long effort to understand how the Rockies' lynx, wolverine, fishers and other carnivores were faring in the face of climate and forest changes, had always run on a shoestring.

By fall 2025, it wasn't running at all.

Jackson retired at the end of August, earlier than he'd planned. After a 40-year career, he said, he was no longer willing to endure the frustration and uncertainty created by the Trump administration. While he hopes that a future administration will revive the project, he knows that restarting it will be expensive, and he worries that without concerted monitoring, the lesser-known carnivores he studied will simply fade from public view.

"It's sad, and it's enough to really piss a lot of people off, myself included," he said.

A fallen sign marks the border of the Bridger Wilderness in western Wyoming.
Christine Peterson



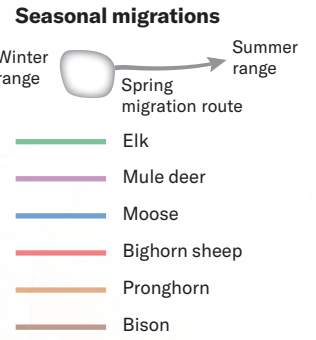
*“What we’re
looking at is
a long-term
deterioration of
what we love. And
**ONCE WE
LOSE IT,**
and the
degradation
happens,
**IT WILL BE
HARD TO
REVERSE.”***



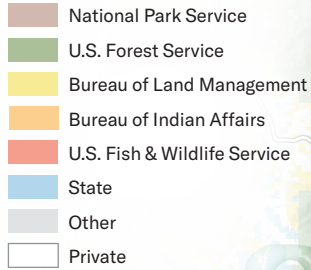
Peggie dePasquale, who worked as a wilderness ranger in the Bridger-Teton National Forest before DOGE fired her last year.



Pressures on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem



Land managed by:



51%

Amount of federal public land in the 20 counties in the ecosystem.

PROPERTY VALUES

Home prices have shot up in nearly every county in the Greater Yellowstone area over the last decade. With housing out of their reach, most workers are forced to commute long distances, thereby increasing air pollution and wildlife roadkill. Super-high home prices — the median sales price in Teton County is

\$3.8 million

— incentivize homebuilding and encourage ranchers to sell to residential developers.

POPULATION GROWTH

The combined population of the counties in and adjacent to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem more than doubled between 1970 and 2024, with Teton County's population ballooning almost fivefold. That means more development, more people in the backcountry and more human pressure on wildlife and ecosystems.

OLIGARCHS

Teton County has gained fame and notoriety as the nation's richest county, with a per capita income of

\$532,903

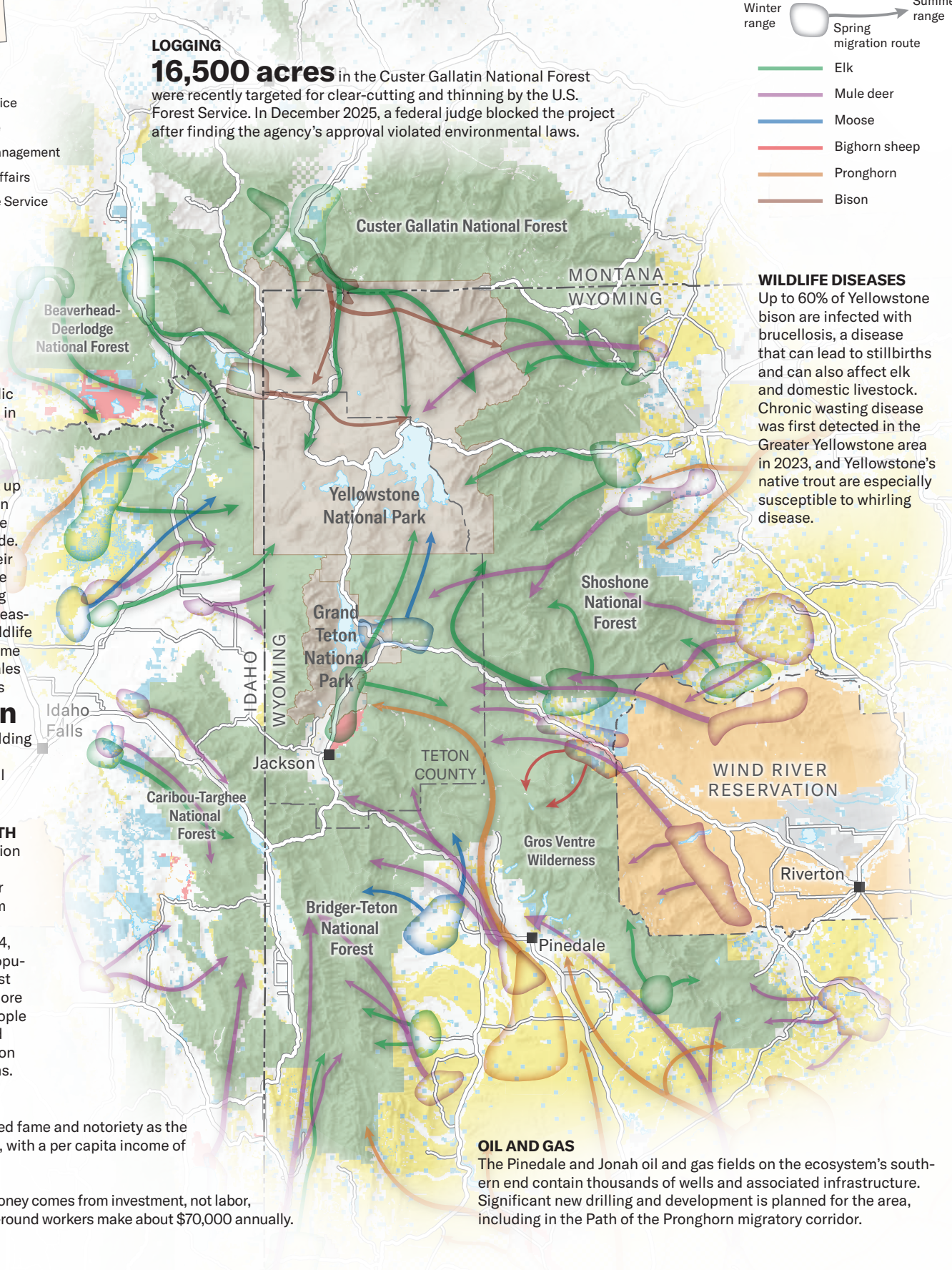
in 2024. Most of that money comes from investment, not labor, however; full-time year-round workers make about \$70,000 annually.

LOGGING

16,500 acres in the Custer Gallatin National Forest were recently targeted for clear-cutting and thinning by the U.S. Forest Service. In December 2025, a federal judge blocked the project after finding the agency's approval violated environmental laws.

WILDLIFE DISEASES

Up to 60% of Yellowstone bison are infected with brucellosis, a disease that can lead to stillbirths and can also affect elk and domestic livestock. Chronic wasting disease was first detected in the Greater Yellowstone area in 2023, and Yellowstone's native trout are especially susceptible to whirling disease.



Over the past year, status updates on federal research projects in the Yellowstone region and much of the West have read like so many obituaries.

The U.S. Geological Survey's Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Unit, housed at the University of Wyoming, connects wildlife managers at Wyoming's Game and Fish Department with university wildlife researchers. Graduate students and research scientists funded by the unit have helped map big game migrations across the West, including the epic mule deer migration that pulses in and out of the Yellowstone region and the elk migrations that sustain the large carnivores critical to the ecosystem. The unit also oversees research on sagebrush songbirds, prairie fish, and other species that depend on Yellowstone habitats.

The co-op unit at the University of Wyoming is one of 44 units in universities across the country, a research network popular in blue and red states alike. So when the Trump administration proposed cutting all funding for the agency's Ecosystems Mission Area, which includes the co-op units, Congress pushed back.

The White House Office of Management and Budget backed off on the proposed cuts, then required unit researchers to get its approval before spending money on anything other than USGS employee salaries. But well over a year later, money already appropriated by Congress was still waiting for White House approval to be spent, said Jerod Merkle, a University of Wyoming professor who frequently partners with the university's co-op unit on wildlife projects. That meant no USGS money was available for the helicopters used to capture and study mule deer, the collars that monitor their movements, or the graduate students and research scientists who analyze the data collected on migration and disease transmission. Though Merkle and his colleagues pieced together enough state and nonprofit funding to continue much of their work, some projects stalled.

While existing projects have suffered, planned projects have never gotten off the ground.

In October 2024, just before finishing his Ph.D., Niall Clancy accepted a position with the University of Idaho to create a nongame fisheries program for the state's Fish and Game Department. He saw it as an opportunity to protect native fish throughout the state, including those that live in the drainages sustained by the Yellowstone region's snowpack. "If we're taking care of the whole ecosystem, which is supposed to be the point here, and you're only focusing on the game species, you're missing half that mission," Clancy said. State-level research on nongame fish should have bipartisan support, he added, since it can both benefit biodiversity and reduce the need for federal threatened and endangered species listings.

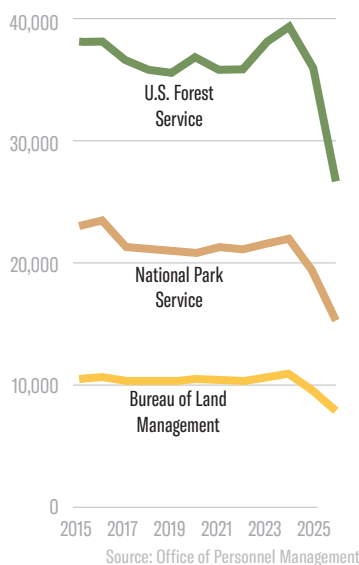
But in early 2025, the funding that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service routinely allocates to states for wildlife conservation was held up by the administration. The state responded to the shortfall by placing many new programs on hold, including Clancy's.

Clancy spent much of 2025 working as a fisheries technician for the University of Wyoming, hoping that the federal money would come through and free up state funds for his Idaho position. In December, he began teaching fisheries classes at Salish Kootenai College, a tribal college in Montana. (USDA grants to tribal colleges were also in DOGE's crosshairs even after years of inadequate funding.)

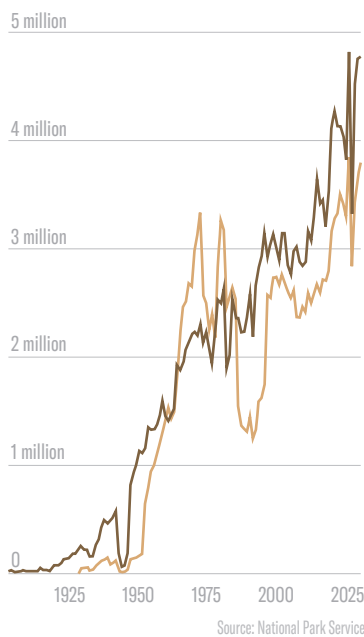
"Nobody can plan anything, because no one knows if the funding will still be there," said Clancy, who is not Indigenous.

The federal civilian workforce, 2015-2025

The Trump administration's DOGE and reductions in force took a major toll on the federal land-management agencies, especially the U.S. Forest Service.



Visits to Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks since their openings



Map sources: *Wild Migrations*, University of Wyoming and University of Oregon, published by Oregon State University Press; U.S. Census Bureau; Redfin; U.S. Forest Service; Headwaters Economics; ESRI; U.S. Geological Survey. **Mapping by Ian Freeman / Wyoming Migration Initiative**

For decades, the Forest Service convened biologists, managers, tribal representatives, conservationists and politicians from around the Western U.S. for a week of discussions in the Lamar Valley, a place famous for its plentiful wolves, bears, bison and elk. The gathering, which included a range of agencies and research disciplines, addressed issues as broad as climate change and visitor management and as targeted as grizzly bear conflict resolution, highway crossings and private-land development. It was a point of pride for many in the Forest Service, including Jackson, who saw it as a way to strengthen the relationship between science and management in Yellowstone and beyond. After a five-year hiatus during the pandemic, the event was revived in 2024, shortly before the administration changed hands.

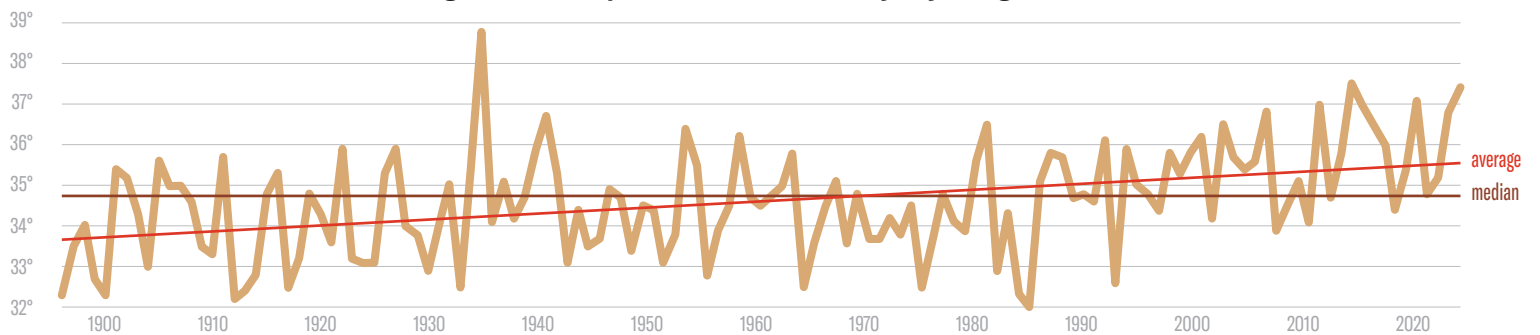
By early 2025, as funding freezes and cuts trickled down to regional offices, the Lamar Valley gathering went the way of Jackson's snowmobiles.

CUTS AT THE FOREST SERVICE and other agencies left land managers shorthanded, too. The neglected trails we encountered during our llama-packing trip were no exception: An internal Forest Service memo leaked to *The Washington Post* and *RE:PUBLIC* late last year reported that the number of trail miles maintained in 2025 was 22% below average — the lowest in 15 years.

Some ranger districts lost their entire trail staff. The Bridger-Teton lost its three-person wilderness crew, including ranger Peggie dePasquale. For two years, dePasquale worked from mid-spring through mid-fall, checking on outfitters and other groups in the backcountry and digging drainages to protect trails from erosion. Despite having a



Average annual temperature in Teton County, Wyoming, 1895-2025



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

master's degree and years of experience with environmental nonprofits and in environmental education, she accepted the \$18-per-hour position, she said, because she wanted nothing more than to be outside and to help the public understand wilderness stewardship. She wanted people to fall in love with the region, like she had, and to care about it as much as she did.

In 2024, the Biden administration moved dePasquale and more than a thousand other seasonal Forest Service employees into permanent roles, which enabled them to return to work each year without reapplying, though it also froze hiring for many more seasonal employees. The move gave these workers more security, but when Trump began his second term, they still had "probationary" status because they had been permanent employees less than a year. On Feb. 14, 2025, these former seasonals along with most other probationary federal employees were abruptly fired.

The layoffs left trails covered in fallen logs, while toilets remained locked or overflowing. And some recreationists took advantage of the turmoil to ignore the rules.

One Bridger-Teton ranger told me, speaking anonymously because they were still employed, that they wrote more citations last summer than ever before. One night in July, they ticketed five groups for lighting campfires during a fire ban.

"People weren't quite as respectful as they've been in the past," the ranger said. "Do I personally believe the way the administration handled things led to that? Yeah, I do."

While Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks faced fewer layoffs than some of their smaller, lesser-known counterparts, Grand Teton, which normally runs around a 6% to 8% vacancy rate, is now missing a quarter of its permanent staff, said Park Superintendent Chip Jenkins, citing the deferred resignations and retirements spurred by DOGE. Under Trump's Executive Order 14210, which dictates that most federal agencies can hire no more than "one employee for every four employees that depart," Jenkins must leave most of these permanent positions unfilled.

Visitors to the park this summer may not notice any difference; Jenkins expects to have a full complement of seasonals to maintain trails and toilets, staff visitor centers and collect entrance fees. But over time, said Jenkins, the shortage of administrative support, construction and restoration project managers and IT specialists could lead to communication system failures among emergency responders; delayed or stalled maintenance projects for wastewater treatment systems or roads; and more people pulled out of the field to help with administrative functions.

The layoffs and budget cuts at other agencies affect the parks, too, said Jenkins. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem has a 60-year history of cooperation through the Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee, which includes scientists and managers from the Park Service, Forest Service, BLM and Fish and Wildlife Service. Committee members work across boundaries to prevent or slow the spread of invasive species, track wildlife health and conserve riparian habitat. More recently, the committee has expanded to include representatives from state wildlife agencies, a move led by former Wyoming Game and Fish Director Brian Nesvik, now director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

This regionwide coordination "takes time and energy from

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Trail-cam photos, clockwise from top left: A coyote passes by a trail camera in Plummer Canyon in the Jeddediah Smith Wilderness, Caribou-Targhee National Forest, Wyoming. An elk is seen on a trail camera in the Gros Ventre Range, Wyoming. A grizzly bear on a trail popular with horsemen near Togwotee Pass east of Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks. Mule deer in Plummer Canyon.

people," said Jenkins. "As you have turnover, if you don't make it a priority, it won't happen."

The dramatic reductions in agency personnel and funding over the past year have been chaotic and damaging, but most people I spoke with emphasized the fact that the Forest Service and BLM in particular were already struggling, forced to operate on smaller and smaller budgets and with fewer and fewer employees for decades. National wildlife refuges, for example, have a third fewer staff than they did in 2010. Only seven of Wyoming's 13 wilderness areas had rangers in 2024; now, rangers patrol just two, said dePasquale.

"We were already bare bones before these terminations and forced retirements," said dePasquale, now the national forest wildlands director for the Wyoming Wilderness Association. "This is not 'one morning we woke up and this was gone.' This has been a systematic defunding of public lands for years and years."

ON A CHILLY DAY in late November, the mid-morning sun illuminated buffalo grass and the dried pods of last season's milkweed. Bison reluctantly moved out of the way as our truck groaned slowly down a dirt road on the edge of a plateau. In the driver's seat, Wes Martel said a quick prayer to a golden eagle as it glided into the valley below.

Martel and I were driving through the Eastern Shoshone buffalo herd, which the tribe established in 2016 on the Wind River Reservation in central Wyoming. The Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho share the reservation, a 2.2-million-acre expanse of mountains and plains roughly the size of Yellowstone National Park. Martel likes to say the reservation has everything Yellowstone National Park has

except Old Faithful. Then he laughs. Martel laughs a lot; he says it gets him through the hard times.

The reservation, which lies southeast of Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks and borders the Bridger-Teton and Shoshone national forests, is home to 265 lakes and more than 1,000 miles of rivers and streams. In the 1930s, three decades before Congress passed the Wilderness Act, the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho declared that 138,000 acres of the Wind River Range would remain roadless. This roadless land, along with the rest of the reservation, provides crucial habitat for many of the species that migrate in and out of the parks and forests, from mule deer and pronghorn to wolves and grizzly bears.

“We are protecting our cultural and spiritual attachment to Mother Earth, our second mother,” he said. This landscape is “where we feel most comfortable and blessed. It’s life itself.”

The reservation is also full of monuments to the federal government’s broken promises. Given this history, the current administration’s actions came as no surprise to the tribes, said Martel, an enrolled member of the Shoshone Tribe who works as the senior Wind River conservation associate for the nonprofit Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

The Eastern Shoshone’s first treaty with the U.S. government, signed by Shoshone Chief Washakie in 1863, reserved some 44 million acres for the tribe, which retained its right to “hunt on the unoccupied lands of the United States.” The treaty “wasn’t a grant of rights to us, it was a grant of rights from us,” said Martel, who served on the Eastern Shoshone Business Council and as the chairman of the tribal Fish and Game Committee for 20 years.

“They’ve been
**STEALING
INDIAN
LAND AND
WATER
for so long,
THEY
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RIGHT
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TO DO.”**

Wes Martel at the Wind River Buffalo Initiative office in Kinneer, Wyoming.

“But it only took them five years to violate the 1863 treaty,” Martel said, and shrink the reservation to 3.2 million acres. In 1875, the government carved another 700,000 acres out of the southern end of the reservation so that incoming prospectors could mine for gold in the South Pass area. Soon afterward, the Reclamation Act opened tribal land to homesteading by non-Native settlers.

About 13 miles west of the Wind River Tribal Buffalo Initiative headquarters is Diversion Dam, built by the federal government in the early 1920s and paid for with money that Congress had already appropriated to the tribes. Instead of benefiting the tribes, though, the dam and its associated canals divert water from the Big Wind River to the Midvale Irrigation District, a nearby community of non-Native ranchers and farmers. Today, the Bureau of Reclamation has cut flows until the river below the dam barely runs at all.

Back toward the buffalo herd is Pilot Butte Power Plant, a hydro-power station built by the Bureau of Reclamation to provide power to the irrigation district. Though the plant sits on tribal land, Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, R, sponsored legislation in 2023 that would give the power plant and the land underneath it to the Midvale Irrigation District, arguing that it would help allay electricity costs for nontribal irrigators. Wyoming Rep. Harriet Hageman, R, proposed a companion bill in 2023 that passed the House. Though Reclamation is legally required to consult with tribes about changes on tribal land, Martel said that neither proposal involved tribal consultation.

In March 2025, DOGE tried to close the Fish and Wildlife Service office in nearby Lander. The two-person office, one of the few that primarily serves a tribal nation, provides the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho with scientific and technical support in managing the reservation’s fish and wildlife. Over the past two decades, the office has helped the tribes restore tens of thousands of acres of sagebrush steppe, almost 2,000 acres of wetlands and 26 miles of rivers and streams.

It wasn’t the first time: The federal government had repeatedly tried and failed to close the office in the past. Once again, though, the tribes managed to keep it open. Still, Martel said, they shouldn’t have to constantly fight to maintain their relationship with the agency.

Though the federal government is bound by treaty to ensure that tribal lands benefit tribes and is legally required to act as a nation-to-nation partner with tribal governments, “most of the trust relationship we’re talking about doesn’t exist, especially now, with MAGA,” said Martel. “They’ve been stealing Indian land and water for so long, they think it’s the right thing to do.”

By October 2025, Reclamation had released so much water from Bull Lake, above the Diversion Dam, for the irrigation district, that the reservoir was dangerously low, said Richard Baldes, an Eastern Shoshone tribal member and the second Fish and Wildlife biologist serving the Wind River Reservation. The lake’s population of burbot — a native fish that is an important traditional food source for the tribes — is at all-time low because its spawning habitat, along with that of all of the forage fish the species eats to survive, has been left “high and dry.”

But despite its trust responsibility to the tribe, said Baldes, the Fish and Wildlife Service won’t speak up for the burbot fishery. No federal agency will.

“In a sense, I can’t blame the Fish and Wildlife Service — they

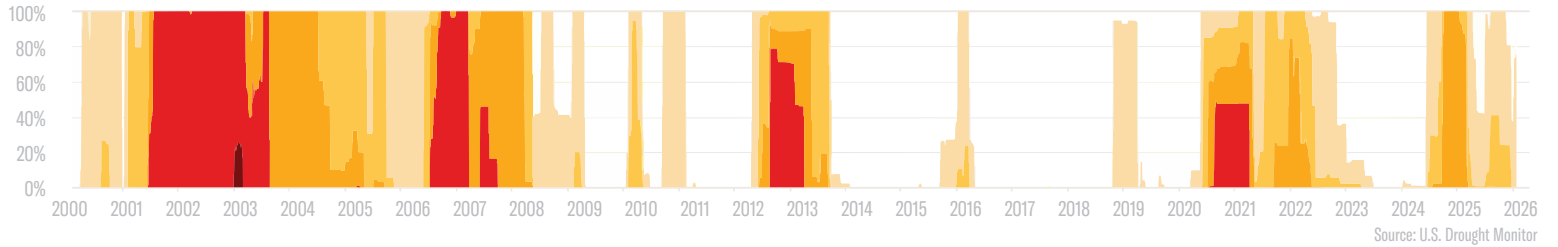
are probably afraid to stand up and say ‘boo,’” he said, referring to the threats to federal workers from DOGE and the administration. “But that fishery is going to hell in a handbasket fast.”

So the tribes are doing what the tribes have always done when faced with injustice: They’re working on a solution of their own. The Eastern Shoshone buffalo herd is providing tribal members with food, giving people access to an animal that has guided and inspired them since time immemorial. Thanks to tribal land protections and tribally

led stewardship, Martel said, much of the wildlife that depends on reservation land is thriving.

Tribal leaders are also looking ahead. The Greater Yellowstone Coalition, in collaboration with tribal government officials, elders, local school leaders and others, has been holding workshops on current threats to water, air quality, wildlife and food security. At the meetings, tribal members learn how tribal resources, governance and sovereignty can be used to strengthen their families and communities.

Percentage of the Wind River Reservation abnormally dry or in moderate, severe, extreme and exceptional drought since 2000





Understanding tribal authority and jurisdiction, Martel said, is the first step to regaining tribal rights, even if the federal agencies that should be supporting the tribes are too unwilling — or too scared, as Baldes said — to step up.

“We’re going to show our people how to fight back in a positive and powerful way, using the blood and spirit of our ancestors,” he said. “*Hahou*,” he added, directing the Arapaho expression toward his ancestors. “Thanks for that.”

WHILE PUBLIC LANDS MAY lie at the heart of the Greater Yellowstone area, the big chunks of tribal and privately owned land keep the region’s blood flowing, said Arthur Middleton, a University of California, Berkeley professor who has spent his career studying Wyoming’s wildlife. Private lands account for about 30% of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, or about 6 million acres.

To support the region’s wildlife, the federal government needs to play as significant a role in private-land conservation as it has in the past — especially given the region’s land values, which are sky-high and rising, said Chet Work, executive director of the Gallatin Valley Land Trust.

“I feel like the private lands are more in jeopardy right now than public, at least in terms of ownership,” Work said. “These big ranches on the margins of public lands are selling for more and more each year.”

Landowners who want to keep their land together sometimes turn to land trusts, which can help them establish conservation easements that prevent future development. While some landowners donate permanent conservation easements as tax breaks, others sell them in order to pay off debts from tractors or new barns, or as an alternative to selling off all or part of the land itself.

Permanent easements — which stipulate that the land can never be subdivided — generally only pay landowners 15% of the land’s fair market value. But as land values shoot up, so does the cost of easements.

“When I started (more than 20 years ago), most easements were a quarter of a million dollars,” Work said. “And now I can’t remember when there was one less than \$1 million.”

The Biden administration, spearheaded in part by Middleton during his time as a senior wildlife advisor with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, created the Migratory Big Game Initiative in 2022. The USDA program offered tens of millions of dollars in assistance to private landowners for projects like conservation easements and weed control. For more than a decade, the department has also supported private-land conservation through the Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program, which pays landowners to graze livestock in a wildlife-friendly way and to pledge not to develop their land for a set period of time.

These programs, like so many others, have been disrupted by the Trump administration.



Montana alone had \$75 million in federal conservation easement grants canceled in 2025, Work said. One-third of that money would have supported private-land conservation in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Land trusts have been able to replace some of those funds with private donations, he added, but the cancellations mean “less families we can support and keep on the ground.” Once a relatively undeveloped piece of rangeland has been sold to a developer and sliced and diced with fences and roads, its value as habitat for large migratory mammals has been lost forever.

While Congress initially authorized at least \$13 per acre per year for the Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program, the new administration dropped those payments to as little as \$1 per acre in many counties, said Lesli Allison, CEO of the Western Landowners Alliance.

“Landowner interest was strong, particularly in places like Wyoming, where the program helps sustain both working lands and migratory big game,” Allison said. The lower amount, however, “renders the program meaningless in those places.” The USDA is continuing to evaluate the program, and Allison hopes to see payment rates restored.

Jim Hellyer, who ranches on both private and public land in the southern Wind River Range just east of Lander, Wyoming, is halfway through a 10-year enrollment in the Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program. He said that the \$13 per acre he receives barely covers the

cost of implementing the grazing plan the program requires. But \$1 an acre would be much worse, providing little incentive for landowners to prioritize conservation.

Overtea at a Lander, Wyoming, coffee shop in November, I asked Hellyer about his and his neighbors’ experiences with the cuts to federal offices and programs over the past year. He paused, considering the question, then said: “The only practical, on-the-ground answer I can give you is that I couldn’t get hold of (agency representatives) when I had a question.”

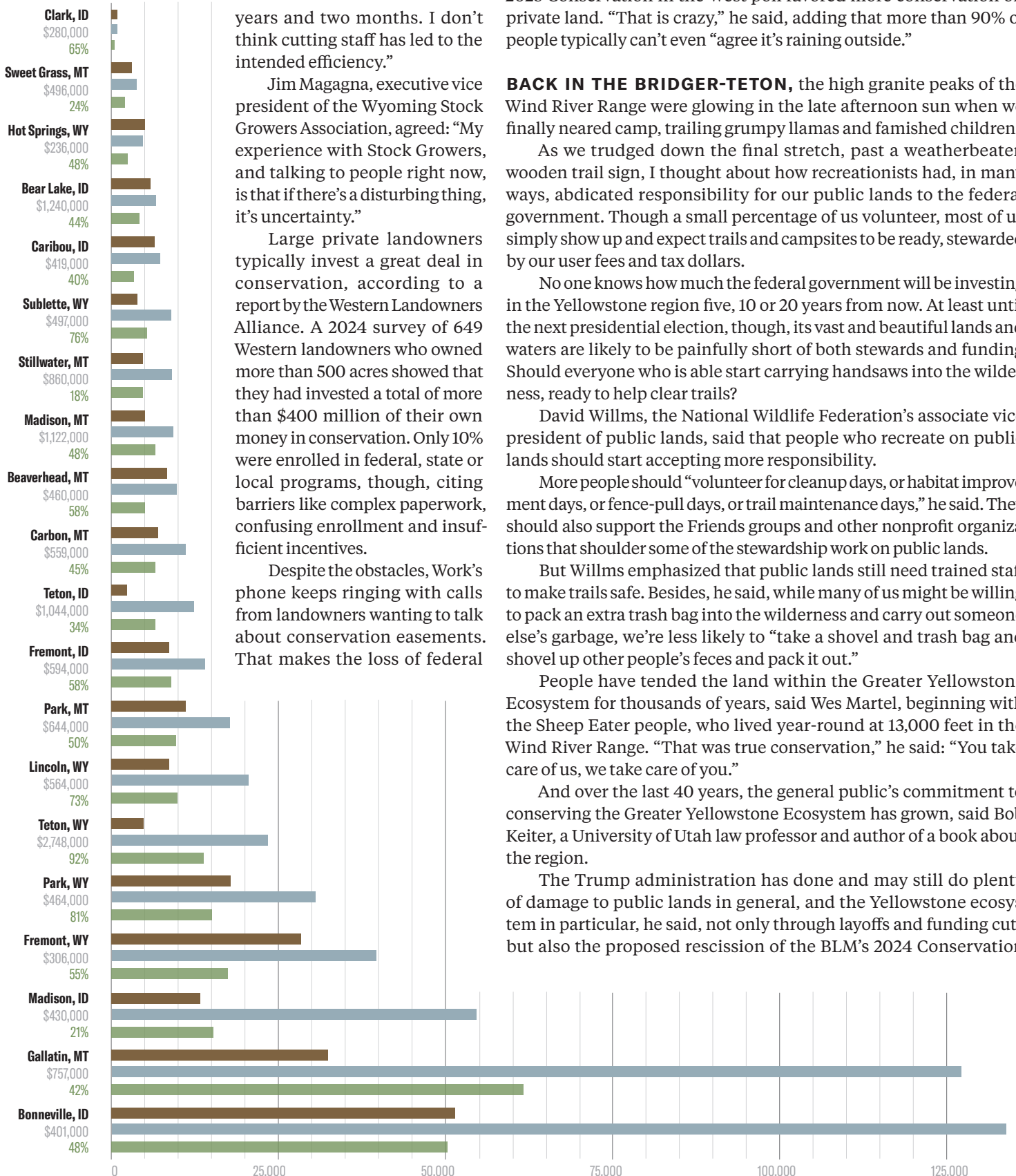
The changes are just making government bureaucracy even more frustrating to deal with. “Everyone is so used to it taking so long,” Hellyer said. “Now, instead of it taking four years to permit a (water) well, it will take four

Volunteer Patti Harris-Baldes (Arapaho) feeds a yearling buffalo from the Wind River herd in Kinneer, Wyoming. The yearling is a twin and was rejected by her mother (*left*).

Cattle at Jim Hellyer’s ranch in Lander, Wyoming (*above*).

County municipality
Median home price, 2025
Percentage of federal land

County populations in 1970 and 2024 and housing units in 2024.



years and two months. I don't think cutting staff has led to the intended efficiency."

Jim Magagna, executive vice president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, agreed: "My experience with Stock Growers, and talking to people right now, is that if there's a disturbing thing, it's uncertainty."

Large private landowners typically invest a great deal in conservation, according to a report by the Western Landowners Alliance. A 2024 survey of 649 Western landowners who owned more than 500 acres showed that they had invested a total of more than \$400 million of their own money in conservation. Only 10% were enrolled in federal, state or local programs, though, citing barriers like complex paperwork, confusing enrollment and insufficient incentives.

Despite the obstacles, Work's phone keeps ringing with calls from landowners wanting to talk about conservation easements. That makes the loss of federal

funding and capacity even more galling, he said. After all, the support was bipartisan: More than 90% of respondents in Colorado College's 2025 Conservation in the West poll favored more conservation on private land. "That is crazy," he said, adding that more than 90% of people typically can't even "agree it's raining outside."

BACK IN THE BRIDGER-TETON, the high granite peaks of the Wind River Range were glowing in the late afternoon sun when we finally neared camp, trailing grumpy llamas and famished children.

As we trudged down the final stretch, past a weatherbeaten wooden trail sign, I thought about how recreationists had, in many ways, abdicated responsibility for our public lands to the federal government. Though a small percentage of us volunteer, most of us simply show up and expect trails and campsites to be ready, stewarded by our user fees and tax dollars.

No one knows how much the federal government will be investing in the Yellowstone region five, 10 or 20 years from now. At least until the next presidential election, though, its vast and beautiful lands and waters are likely to be painfully short of both stewards and funding. Should everyone who is able start carrying handsaws into the wilderness, ready to help clear trails?

David Willms, the National Wildlife Federation's associate vice president of public lands, said that people who recreate on public lands should start accepting more responsibility.

More people should "volunteer for cleanup days, or habitat improvement days, or fence-pull days, or trail maintenance days," he said. They should also support the Friends groups and other nonprofit organizations that shoulder some of the stewardship work on public lands.

But Willms emphasized that public lands still need trained staff to make trails safe. Besides, he said, while many of us might be willing to pack an extra trash bag into the wilderness and carry out someone else's garbage, we're less likely to "take a shovel and trash bag and shovel up other people's feces and pack it out."

People have tended the land within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem for thousands of years, said Wes Martel, beginning with the Sheep Eater people, who lived year-round at 13,000 feet in the Wind River Range. "That was true conservation," he said: "You take care of us, we take care of you."

And over the last 40 years, the general public's commitment to conserving the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem has grown, said Bob Keiter, a University of Utah law professor and author of a book about the region.

The Trump administration has done and may still do plenty of damage to public lands in general, and the Yellowstone ecosystem in particular, he said, not only through layoffs and funding cuts but also the proposed rescission of the BLM's 2024 Conservation

and Landscape Health Rule and the Forest Service's 2001 Roadless Rule, along with the continued implementation of Project 2025. But after spending decades studying the history and resilience of the Yellowstone region and its people, Keiter thinks the public's support for public lands will ultimately prevail.

Last year, congressional proposals that would have permitted the sale of millions of acres of public land failed in the face of bipartisan public pushback. This year's Conservation in the West poll, released by Colorado College in February, showed that 86% of voters in eight Western states, including 75% of MAGA supporters, were worried about cuts to public-land agencies, while 76% of respondents — the highest in the poll's history — want their members of Congress to “place more emphasis on conservation and recreation” over “maximizing energy production.”

Maybe, after a year of the Trump administration's persistent attacks on public lands, the public will say enough is enough. Maybe it already has, said Jacob Malcom, former director of the Interior Department's Office of Policy Analysis and executive director of Next Interior, a group he founded to help the department navigate a post-Trump future.

“I have a feeling this is an opportunity,” Malcom said. “Let's go through reconstruction ... go through what works well and what doesn't, and reconstruct what will work well.”

So maybe the news from the Yellowstone region over the past year isn't like an obituary. Maybe it's more like a series of distress signals,

punctuated by stories of researchers and managers scraping by, tribes finding their own solutions, volunteers and donors stepping up, and the public standing up for federal workers and the public lands.


Last August, as we perched on our camp chairs to eat dinner, I thought about the chaos unfolding around our bone-tired group in a landscape we all loved so deeply. The danger, in the years to come, is that the public will tire of the bad news and the uncertainty around public lands — that with fewer people studying and managing the West's landscapes, problems will go unrecognized, and that we won't know what we've lost until it's gone.

Maybe, I worry, that's the point. ✨

HCN Correspondent Christine Peterson lives in Laramie, Wyoming, and has covered science, the environment and outdoor recreation in Wyoming and across the West for more than a decade. Her work has appeared in National Geographic, Outdoor Life and Vox, among other publications.

HCN Correspondent Jonathan Thompson researched and reported the graphic facts and figures in this story. Graphics design by Luna Anna Archey, HCN associate visuals editor.

This story is part of High Country News' Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.



Snow covers pine trees near the Moose Creek trailhead in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest near Victor, Idaho.

THE WAR WITHIN

What a Las Vegas bombing reveals about domestic terrorism.

By Leah Sottile | Illustrations by Adam Maida





T WAS MORNING, AND THE WIDE LAS VEGAS STRIP was empty. Neon signs glittered quietly as Matthew Livelsberger cruised a silver Tesla Cybertruck down the palm tree-lined boulevard. It was around 8 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2025.

In a convenience store parking lot, he backed into a spot and got out. A square-jawed 37-year-old, he wore jeans and a yellow T-shirt under a brown leather jacket. A security camera filmed him popping the tailgate and calmly dousing piles of fireworks and birdshot in the bed with a fuel can. Then he slid back into the driver's seat and pulled away.

A line of fuel drips traced his path past the Sphere and the Palazzo and the Wynn, down Fashion Show Drive and up the gentle slope into the Trump International Hotel's valet parking area, where chandeliers hung like upside-down wedding cakes. The Cybertruck stopped in front of the building's gleaming gold and glass doors.

At 8:39 a.m., it exploded. A fireball rocketed upward from its bed, a force so powerful that the 6,800-pound vehicle's tires jumped off the ground. Hunks of shrapnel flew, the fireworks crackled and spiraled and ricocheted, then came a series of bellowing booms and pops. Flames shot out through the truck, and when the smoke finally cleared, it was a blackened husk. Livelsberger's body sat in the front seat, dead from a single gunshot. Six other people were injured.

Ryan Martinez, a jeweler, was driving to work when it happened. He dialed 911 from across the street as his black BMW was pelted with bits of metal.

"Someone just attacked Trump Tower with a monster amount of fireworks," Martinez told the dispatcher. In the background, a loud *BANG* echoed. "Oh, my God, my heart is beating. ... It's an attack for sure," he said. "Oh, my God. Ma'am, this is the craziest thing I've ever seen — and I work on the Strip."

In the following hours and days, investigators learned

that Livelsberger was a decorated active-duty Green Beret, part of the U.S. Army's Special Forces, which specialize in guerilla warfare. In writings found on his phone, he called on troops to forcibly remove Democrats from office and rally around Donald Trump, who had just been elected president for a second term in an electoral sweep that placed Republicans in control of the federal government. "This was not a terrorist attack, it was a wake-up call," Livelsberger wrote. "Americans only pay attention to spectacles and violence."

The explosion in Nevada started a bloody year. While studies showed that violent crime rates fell nationwide in 2025, experts found that political violence — assassinations, threats and aggressive immigration enforcement — sharply increased. According to studies by Princeton University and the Brennan Center for Justice, threats, stalking and physical attacks on state and local lawmakers rose. Meanwhile, mass shootings killed 405 people across the country.

Trump never spoke publicly about the bombing — a rare silence for a voluble president. But in his first year back in the White House, Trump released National Security Presidential Memorandum/NSPM-7, which identified anti-fascism, anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism and anti-Christianity as domestic terror priorities, along with anyone who feels "hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on family, religion and morality." The Department of Justice had a list of people it considered domestic terrorists, and FBI Director Kash Patel issued a proclamation vowing to investigate left-wing activists.

Meanwhile, the bomb at Trump Hotel, which was

Matthew Livelsberger, a 37-year-old Green Beret, blew up a Cybertruck in front of Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas on Jan. 1, 2025 (previous).

motivated by right-wing ideology, faded from the news, drowned out by America's usual violence. People debated whether it should be considered terrorism. But I kept wondering: If that wasn't terrorism, what is?



THE TESLA SUPERCHARGER IN KINGMAN, Arizona, was a row of white obelisks next to a Carl's Jr. on a busy corner of Route 66.

I'd been driving for close to 1,100 miles, retracing part of the journey Livelsberger took to Las Vegas from Colorado Springs, along with the routes that other violent men had taken. For the last decade, I've crisscrossed the Western U.S. to report on domestic extremism. On occasion, that means writing about men who went on long drives before doing something terrible — shooting someone, blowing up a building.

I write about the fringier, more violent and extreme parts of the West. Even so, I was having a hard time grappling with how bloody and horrible 2025 was. I thought if I retraced the steps of people who'd committed acts of violence, maybe I could get a little closer to understanding their motivation.

Of course, there's not much to see in a Carl's Jr. parking lot: a family in the back of their minivan with the sliding door open, eating lunch; Tesla drivers backed up to the chargers, plugged in and scrolling on phones. Traffic passed; birds chirped in a nearby tree. The eye of the desert sun never blinked.

After the bombing, Tesla provided authorities with a map of all the places Livelsberger charged the Cybertruck — a strange path that wound from Colorado Springs south through New Mexico, then west across Arizona, through Kingman, past Lake Mead to the Las Vegas Strip.

The fact that Livelsberger stopped in Kingman caught my attention. Twice before, I'd written about veterans who detonated bombs on American soil; both had spent some time beforehand in Kingman.

In July 2016, Glenn Franklin Jones — who served 11 years in the Army and National Guard in Colorado before becoming a nurse — built bombs in a Kingman RV park, intending to blow up a Bureau of Land Management office. Instead, he drove 300 miles to a former colleague's house in Panaca, Nevada, and blew himself to pieces, flattening the house and blanketing the 1,000-person town in shrapnel. Somehow no one else was hurt.

Timothy McVeigh also lived in Kingman. The Gulf War veteran logged thousands of miles driving the country, but the highway always seemed to pull him back to Kingman.

In March 1993, he visited Waco, Texas, amid a broiling 51-day standoff between federal agents and the Branch Davidians, an apocalyptic religious group the government suspected of child abuse and possessing automatic

weapons. Prolonged confrontations like this have a way of drawing onlookers. McVeigh came to sell gun rights bumper stickers off the hood of his car.

That standoff ended on April 19, 1993. Bullets flew, the compound burned, 82 Branch Davidians and four agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives died. The White House admitted the government's handling of the situation was riddled with mistakes.

Two years later, on April 19, 1995, McVeigh detonated a bomb in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City as payback for Waco, killing 168 people. Afterward, federal agents and journalists descended on Kingman.

Dave Hawkins, a longtime Kingman radio and newspaper reporter, was all over the story. When I visited his house last fall, he muted a football game on TV and showed me to his kitchen table, which was covered in boxes filled with notepads and cassette tapes of his interviews after the bombing — even a letter from McVeigh. From one box, Hawkins drew out a gray T-shirt that read "I Survived the FBI Invasion of Kingman, Arizona." A local woman sold them to raise funds for the bombing victims.

He said Kingmanites were both horrified by the bombing and irritated at the presence of so many federal agents. "They pushed back, because the town was being misrepresented as this little gritty shithole where extremism lived and breathed and grew," Hawkins said. "(McVeigh's) not from here, but he spent more time here than anywhere else in the two years preceding the bombing. So how much of his hatred was sown here or grew here? We don't know."

It's something I've often wondered — how someone's roots in a particular place formed their specific brand of extremism.

"McVeigh was against the government and the status quo," Hawkins told me. "We have a community that is pro-Trump and against a lot of the status quo of government. ... But nobody is gonna give Tim McVeigh a medal or a Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year."



THE STANDOFF AT WACO FASCINATED Timothy McVeigh — and me.

I was 11. Raised in the middle-class suburbs west of Portland, Oregon, I had taken to reading the comics in the local newspaper, *The Oregonian*, at the kitchen counter after school over a bowl of Kraft macaroni and cheese. I still remember the April 20, 1993, issue: the burning building on the front page, the massive headline: "An apocalypse at Waco." A graphic broke down the final hours of the standoff: how government tanks ripped holes in the compound, the clouds of tear gas, the fires.

The Associated Press called David Koresh, the Branch

While studies showed that violent crime rates went down nationwide in 2025, experts found political violence sharply increased.

Davidian leader, “A prophet with a pistol. A lamb with an attitude.” He had multiple wives, some my age — 11- and 12-year-old girls. Reporters wrote that the compound’s children “expected doomsday to occur.”

I didn’t understand, but I was fascinated. Who was the good guy? The government? The prophet with the pistol?

Now, years later, I’ve started to see all my work on homegrown violence as a long examination of Americanism. My first taste was Waco — what it illuminated about freedom and its boundaries, reverence for God and guns, how the government plays both hero and villain.

I continue to be fascinated by how wide America’s ideological umbrella is, how willing we are to give shelter to hate-filled ideas.

Of course, hateful ideas aren’t illegal, but terrorism is. And yet, the United States’ definition of *domestic* terrorism is about as stable as a waterbed in an earthquake.

The FBI defines domestic terrorism as dangerous criminal activities within the country that “intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of the government by intimidation or coercion,” and “affect the conduct of the government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping.” The Oklahoma City bombing is widely considered the nation’s deadliest act of domestic terrorism, yet McVeigh wasn’t tried for terrorism — only murder. Domestic terrorism in itself is not a criminal charge, and proving someone is a domestic terrorist in court is extraordinarily difficult.

The Department of Homeland Security defines domestic terrorism slightly differently, as an attempt “to disrupt our way of life and weaken our country” that causes a “disruption of normal life.” But that word “normal” is subjective. Is it *normal* for children to go to schools and do active shooter drills? Is it *normal* to scope out the exits in movie theaters or shopping malls or nightclubs or churches, in case someone starts shooting? Yet perpetrators of mass shootings are rarely considered domestic terrorists by the justice system.

By that metric, the government decides what officially terrifies us. I’ve formed my own working definition of terrorism to try to account for all the fear that comes with violence — the way life stops, and happiness and comfort are put on hold in the face of terror. Which happens all the time: Since I started writing this piece, the U.S. has seen 139 mass shootings. None were deemed terrorism.

Turns out *no one* can agree on how to define terrorism. In 2023, Alex P. Schmid, a distinguished fellow with the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, authored a report on this. “Terrorism remains a contested concept as also exemplified in the well-known saying: ‘One man’s terrorist is the other man’s freedom fighter,’” he wrote.

Defining terrorism, Schmid argued, means questioning who is allowed to be violent, and why. In the late 1700s, during the Reign of Terror, the revolutionary government

of France led 17,000 people to the guillotine to suppress the aristocrats conspiring with foreign governments to restore the old regime, a monarchy. So chopping people’s heads off was both terrorism *and* a government project.

With the invention of dynamite came bombs, and bombs allowed anyone to be a terrorist. “Terrorism was considered a means of avenging a popular wrong, inspiring fear in the enemy, and also calling attention to the evil against which the act of terror was directed,” Russian American anarchist Alexander Berkman said in 1929.

Terrorists threaten or enact violence, and that violence is then publicized to a wider audience — the real target. “Violence aims at behavior modification by coercion,” Schmid said. “Propaganda aims at the same by persuasion. Terrorism can be seen as a combination of the two.”



IN 2001, I LIVED IN A RED SHAG-CARPETED basement in a ramshackle house in Spokane, Washington, a few blocks from Gonzaga University, where I attended college. On the morning of Sept. 11, the phone rang, rousing me and my four roommates, and together we watched airplanes hit the World Trade Center on TV. That night we held candles in a vigil at the center of campus.

The Spokesman-Review, the local newspaper, became a chronicle of fear — closed schools, cancelled football games, grounded flights. Life had stopped; you felt that you could be attacked anywhere, anytime.

For weeks on TV, the planes exploded, buildings falling in an endless loop, a constant reminder.

That week, *The Spokesman* featured a full-page American flag “suitable for display at home or work.”

“Our flag carries with it the idea of America,” read the back.

We clipped it with scissors and taped it in our front window.

Everyone promised to be more vigilant, as if citizens were now responsible for sniffing out hijackers. America embraced xenophobic hyper-nationalist propaganda. Tragedy opened the door to bigotry, and people invited it in, as if to say, “How can we think about equality at a time like this?” It was as if people believed a state of collective fear could shield us from further violence.

More than two decades later, in 2026, the bullet-riddled bodies of children are regularly carried out of schools and churches. Sandy Hook Promise estimates that 390,000 students in the country have experienced gun violence in school since 1999.

But life has never stopped in response — not like it did on 9/11. I’ve never seen a clear explanation for why all this subsequent carnage is not terrorism.

When the violence we experience comes from elsewhere, we pause. When the violence is ours, we act like it

I continue to be fascinated by how wide America’s ideological umbrella is, how willing we are to give shelter to hate-filled ideas.

Timothy McVeigh, an Army veteran, bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in April 1995, killing 168 people. His reason: The 1993 incident in Waco, Texas.

didn't happen. We continue to wave the flag. We are lucky to be so free.



When the violence we experience comes from elsewhere, we pause. When the violence is ours, we act like it didn't happen.

JUST HOURS BEFORE MATTHEW LIVELSBERGER'S Cybertruck bombing on Jan. 1, an Army veteran drove a truck into a crowd in New Orleans, killing 15. Inside his truck, the FBI said it found a flag associated with ISIS. The government classifies ISIS as a foreign terrorist organization, so this was considered terrorism.

The violence of New Year's Day seemed best explained as just the latest bloodshed in a country where political violence was growing more common.

During the 2024 presidential campaign, Trump survived two assassination attempts; in one, a sniper's bullet drew blood from his ear. In December 2024, Brian Thompson, CEO of the insurance company UnitedHealthcare, was shot and killed in New York City. After his accused shooter, 26-year-old Luigi Mangione, was arrested, support for Mangione spread quickly on social media. A judge slapped down efforts by prosecutors to try him as a terrorist, yet both the Trump assassination attempts and Thompson's killing were cited as terrorism in an executive order.

In May, a car bomb ripped a hole in the brick wall of a Palm Springs, California, fertility clinic. The bomber, who died, was an anti-natalist advocating for human extinction — terrorism, the FBI decided.

In June, Minnesota state Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, were murdered in their home, and Rep. John Hoffman and his wife, Yvette, were shot in theirs. Both lawmakers were pro-choice Democrats; the accused assailant, known for his anti-abortion views, has not faced terrorism charges.

On Sept. 10, conservative activist Charlie Kirk was shot while speaking to a crowd at Utah Valley University, in Orem, Utah. Charging documents said his accused killer, 22-year-old Tyler Robinson, was outraged by Kirk's political viewpoints. While White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller falsely claimed Robinson had connections to terrorist networks, Robinson faces no terrorism charges.

That same month, however, the Trump administration called protesters outside an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office in Portland "terrorists." News footage showed a man in a chicken suit and a cadre of protesters dancing in inflatable frog costumes.

Meanwhile, Matt Kriner, the executive director of the Institute for Countering Digital Extremism (ICDE), said his organization — which monitors terrorist and extremist threats — was searching for what, if any, qualities bombers, mass shooters and assassins shared that could explain their violence. ICDE found two: "The belief that there's no political solution," Kriner said. "If the system ... does not carry forward progress or options to exercise their grievance, they will find another way to exercise it."

And: "There is this growing cultural element of the Internet where consumption of hyper-violent content, regardless of where it comes from or what type, has become very normative," Kriner said.

Did those qualities apply to Livelsberger? A senior sergeant with 19 years in uniform, he enlisted in the Army in 2006, and as a Green Beret deployed twice to Afghanistan, and to Ukraine, Georgia, Tajikistan and Congo.

"With his training and experience, he could have made an unbelievably devastating explosive if he wanted to," retired undercover FBI agent Greg Rogers told me. Rogers, now an adjunct professor at Utah Valley University, helped prosecute McVeigh and formerly worked as an assistant district attorney in Texas. For someone who'd spent nearly two decades in Special Forces and knew about bombs, Livelsberger's device was peculiar: The Cybertruck was packed with fireworks, racing fuel and birdshot that he'd purchased somewhere on his trip.

"I think, had he lived, he'd have been charged under federal domestic terrorism statutes," Rogers said.

The bombing was clearly political. "We honestly thought that the use of the Cybertruck was something that was sending a message," Kriner said. "It was meant to capture the people that he was trying to speak to, not as an intimidation or threat against those that he was trying to speak out against."

In a manifesto found on his burned iPhone, Livelsberger wrote: "Fellow Servicemembers, Veterans, and all Americans, TIME TO WAKE UP!" He said to "move on DC starting now," to lock down highways and hold government buildings "until the purge is complete." The country needed to undergo a "hard reset."

"We are the United States of America, the best country people to ever exist! But right now we are terminally ill and headed toward collapse," he wrote in a longer manifesto. "We are crumbling because of a lack of self respect, morales (*sic*), and respect for others. Greed and gluttony has consumed us. The top 1% decided long ago they weren't going to bring everyone else with them. You are cattle to them."

He expressed concern over the class system, income inequality and Americans' obsession with being online, and overflowed with Trumpian talking points: Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives were "a cancer," Americans had fallen from "family values," and "masculinity is good and men must be leaders."

"I needed to cleanse my mind of the brothers I've lost and relieve myself of the burden of the lives I took." He said people should "rally around Trump, Musk, Kennedy, and ride this wave to the highest hegemony for all Americans! We are second to no one."

Livelsberger claimed this was not a terrorist attack, but it fit the exact definition laid out in 1974 by another Green Beret, Brian Michael Jenkins, who made a career out of studying terrorism. "Terrorism is aimed at the

Glenn Jones, who served in the military, detonated a bomb in a small Nevada town in 2016. His initial target had been a Bureau of Land Management office.



*How many other times you've stood
You gotta wonder, glory, waiting in
hand and heart*

*But I bet it
watching your back.*

*And
Your gonna get pun
sit you don't know when I was
I was*

“Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is theatre.”

people watching, not at the actual victims,” Jenkins wrote in a paper. “Terrorism is theatre.”

Before I left Kingman, I decided to check out where Glenn Jones lived — the man who’d built a bomb in a trailer, then exploded a house in Nevada.

What I saw surprised me: The Zuni Village RV Park was so much smaller than I pictured, trailers packed into a dusty lot on a busy road, like sardines in a can.

That closeness implied so much recklessness. Maybe it shouldn’t have shocked me — that if Jones’ bomb had exploded as he built it, it could have killed so many people.

Jones, McVeigh, now Livelsberger: Writing about them, I’ve thought about how each bomb was an infliction by a man who had decided to make his life a weapon. Why be a gun when you can be a bomb? Something that ripples out a blast wave of pain, that tears through bodies and buildings, through everyone and everything, and just keeps going.



IN THE AFTERMATH OF VIOLENCE, MEDIA outlets race to figure out who was responsible, whether that person was previously a good person and, if so, what happened to change them. Sometimes there’s a backstory: online radicalization, hateful views, an obsession with violence. But more often than not, reporters find bread-crumbs too fine to hold — a story that falls through the fingers.

Livelsberger spent most of his life in the military. None of the people I interviewed who served with him would allow me to use their name, not even to say on record how much they loved Livelsberger. One called him “an absolutely wonderful human being.” Another said he was “exceptional” in every aspect: as a soldier, a leader, a teammate, a friend. They told stories of goodwill: Livelsberger collecting toys for Afghan children, helping an interpreter and his family get American citizenship, furnishing their home, driving them to appointments.

So what accounts for his last act? People could only speculate. One person sent me screenshots from Instagram showing that Livelsberger posted racist comments about Black Lives Matter and police shootings of Black Americans. Military friends said PTSD alone didn’t explain what Livelsberger did; they cited “operator syndrome” — a term University of Hawai’i professor and clinical psychologist Chris Frueh defines as “a constellation of interrelated conditions common to military special operators” caused by brain injuries and the grueling demands of the job. “Wish he’d been able to get help,” Frueh told me after reading the manifestos. “It’s just sad.”

Kristofer Goldsmith, an Iraq war veteran who is now president of Task Force Butler Institute, which researches extremism in the military, offered yet another view: When someone enlists for a specific reason, and those reasons shift, they’re destabilized, reminded their body is simply

a tool in a game played by others.

“I signed my contract, joined the Army, went to Iraq, and just before getting the order was told, ‘Oh, actually, stand down, don’t look for weapons of mass destruction. But you’re still going to war anyway,’” he said. “That was my moment that made me vulnerable to things like manipulation and adopting conspiracy theories.”

Still, Goldsmith was clear about Livelsberger’s bombing: “That was fucking terrorism,” he said. “It was just coming from a man who was white and aligned with the president instead of ISIS.”

My long study of extremism makes me see the West differently than other people, overlaying the region with a map of terrible attractions — people, places, tragic events. On my recent road trip, I sped across the I-15 overpass in Bunkerville, Nevada, where, in 2014, armed militiamen shut down the freeway so they could aim sniper rifles at the federal agents trying to impound cattle in the gravelly wash below. I passed the exit that would take me toward the two flagpoles commemorating that standoff, which many people see as a victory: “We The,” reads one. “People,” reads another. I didn’t stop; I’d been there years ago.

I spent the night in St. George, Utah, where I went by Charlie Kirk’s accused assassin’s apartment on my way to get dinner and drove down the quiet street where he grew up. Outside his family’s home, a group of boys threw a football in the street in the pink early evening light. They waved as I passed.

In Colorado Springs, where Livelsberger had visited his wife and daughter just before driving to Las Vegas, my confusion about him only grew. The writings he left behind showed his grief — his sense that the country was hopelessly lost, sliding into some immoral abyss, and that the way to fix it was to adopt his positions on family, gender roles and race.

At a gas station where he stopped, the clerk handed me my receipt and said, “Have a blessed day!” Bumper stickers in midday traffic had crosses, the names of local churches. I passed by Focus on the Family — the conservative Christian juggernaut with notoriously anti-LGBTQ views.

In Colorado Springs, I saw the world Livelsberger wanted. How had he not seen that it already existed?

Eleven months after the explosion, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department released a 78-page after-action report on the bombing. It did not address whether it was terrorism, and a spokesperson declined to respond to my multiple requests for information.

In the report, Jennifer Davis, Livelsberger’s wife, told investigators he’d had an affair. She confronted him about it, and he left. Days later, she texted him, asking about a bill for a hotel in Denver. “She said that he had been testing her to see whether she was watching him,” the report read. Livelsberger then locked her out of their bank account.

When I read about that, I started to wonder if misogyny played more of a role in what happened than I’d been

willing to admit. Misogyny is, quite frankly, an occupational hazard of this work on extremism — so common that, perversely, it can become difficult to see.

In 2025, Cynthia Miller-Idriss, a global extremism expert, published *Man Up: The New Misogyny and the Rise of Violent Extremism*. “The most common — and least discussed — feature of mass shooters and violent terrorists is their manhood,” she wrote.

“It is something that we desperately need to look at and get to the bottom of,” Lydia Bates, a senior program manager at the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project, told me one day over Zoom.

Bates and her colleague Rachael Fugardi, a senior research analyst, study male supremacist violence, which the SPLC defines as the “belief that cisgender men are naturally, biologically and genetically superior” to all other genders. In Livelsberger’s writings, they saw hints of this: his talk of “family values” and belief that “masculinity is good and men must be leaders.”

“I didn’t see any headlines that talked about that,” Bates said.

Fugardi said that male supremacist beliefs are often overlooked in media coverage. “There is a degree to which misogyny is not considered extremism,” Fugardi said. “It is just like a normal baseline. ... Sometimes that blinds us, maybe, to seeing the radicalization pathways.”

In fact, many of the ideas detailed in Livelsberger’s manifestos echoed what many American men already thought.

Last year, *Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice*, a research organization dedicated to gender equality, released a report called *State of American Men 2025*. Of the 2,400 men surveyed, half expressed a belief that for one group to succeed, another has to lose, while more than 60% defined feminism as “favoring women over men.”

The study was like a codebreaker for Livelsberger’s writings: It found that 52% of American men said they felt safer under Trump, and 55% “support Trump’s effort to dismantle DEI.”

“We have to humanize and understand what makes people vulnerable to these ideologies,” Bates said, because “male supremacist facets in other extremist ideologies” were being harnessed to recruit veterans. “They’re playing to that power, control, toxic masculinity, violence as protection.”

On the road, every time I saw a Cybertruck, it felt like an omen.

Through Colorado and Utah, Nevada and Arizona, I wound through curving passes where signs warned of falling rocks. One might break away at any moment, the result of a gradual, inevitable process. And when that happens, it could smash a window, crush a car.

As I drove, I thought about how Livelsberger and his fellow extremists fell away, too, smashing themselves

through society, part of a gradual process of violence and victimization. It only seems inevitable because we let such violence continue. It’s a way to keep power over everyone.

Defining terrorism is an exertion of power, too: It tells people who the heroes and villains are. And in early 2026, as a large-scale deportation campaign sent masked Border Patrol and ICE agents flooding into cities across the country, that was on full display.

One day in January, in Minneapolis, a 37-year-old poet named Renée Good dropped her child off at school. She and her wife were driving home when they saw ICE agents.

Video footage showed Good’s car at an awkward angle, blocking a street where other people had assembled to blow whistles and warn about the agents. She tried to navigate around the agents, but one of them grabbed her doorhandle, told her to get out. Good drove away — and the agent, Jonathan Ross, shot her.

“Fucking bitch,” Ross said as Good’s car crashed.

Within hours, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem stood at a lectern, stumbling through a script. Good, Noem said, made “an attempt to kill or cause bodily harm to agents — an act of domestic terrorism.”

Protests swelled nationwide.

Two weeks later, a Minneapolis ICU nurse filming federal agents with a smartphone was executed by ICE agents.

Resisting ICE in any way was “the definition of domestic terrorism,” Noem said afterward.

One bright afternoon in February, a “family-friendly” march took place in Portland, where I still live. It was a cross section of the city: elderly folks waving signs, children holding hands with parents, people with dogs on leashes. They all marched to the ICE building in the South Waterfront district, and within minutes were bathed in so much tear gas that roads in the area had to be shut down. People scattered, babies cried; everyone struggled to breathe. In one video, a little girl in a pink butterfly sweatshirt rubbed her eyes as street medics in gas masks tried to help her.

It was, by then, becoming easy to recognize the cycle of violence and propaganda. Even as Trump and Noem (who was ousted from her position in March) tried to define terrorism for us, the many Americans who took to the streets made one thing clear: We can define violence and terrorism just fine on our own. ☀

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HOLIDAY RIVER EXPEDITIONS



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The unsung beauty of flies

A writer discovers there is much to learn from the often-reviled and overlooked fly.

BY KATE SIBER

ILLUSTRATION BY ARMANDO VEVE

TO LEARN TO LOVE FLIES, you must make annoyance your teacher.

Years ago, on a hot summer afternoon, I was sitting on my front porch when a housefly took a liking to me. I swatted, but it kept returning, landing on my arm, my leg, my face, my knee. I simmered with agitation and eventually retreated inside. Somehow the fly managed to accompany me and continued to circle and alight on my skin. In a moment of rage, I slapped my arm — and the fly upon it. And, amazingly, I got it.

The fly lay on the floor, gossamer wings flattened, delicate legs upturned. I paused in horror. It dawned on me, for the first time, that this was a living being, one that, like me, saw, sensed, breathed and, on some level, wanted to live. I was struck by its lost grace and appalled that I could experience rage strong enough to kill.

Afterward, I felt genuinely curious about these ubiquitous insects, wondering who they were beyond our disdain for them. Perhaps there was something I could learn from examining my own relationship to them.

In my house, backyard and beyond, I observed them more closely. With their transparent wings, filament legs and shimmering bodies, flies began to take on a strange beauty. About 125,000 species have been described. Some migrate long distances — they have even been discovered far out at sea — and many pollinate crops and flowers

that humans care about. The males of some species serenade their mates with complex songs made by vibrating wings.

Last year, while researching a children's book on what we can learn from wildlife, I interviewed Michael Dickinson, a fly biologist at Caltech, who opened my eyes to flies' almost miraculous nature. Dickinson, who studies their movement patterns, told me that they have the most sophisticated flight of any creature on the planet. Some beat their wings as fast as 1,000 times per second, and they have some of the most powerful muscle tissue, ounce for ounce, of any organism on Earth.

Much of their acrobatic prowess comes from their halteres, pronounced like *tall deer* — unique, lollipop-like structures that sprout from their backs and evolved from a second set of wings. They function like gyroscopes and metronomes, helping flies keep time as they flap, stay balanced and sense where they are in space. In mere milliseconds — faster than a human eyeblink — a fly can change direction by 90 or even 120 degrees. And their vision is at least 10 times faster than ours; to them, a movie would resemble a slideshow. Flies have some of the powers — like flight and extraordinary vision — that we vest in superheroes. Why don't we respect them more?

Our relationship with these buzzy insects has often been conflicted: Flies carry disease, contaminate food, sometimes bite, and tend to make sound in frequencies we find irksome. Across many cultures, they symbolize death and decay; European Renaissance artists incorporated them into paintings as eerie reminders of the transience of life. But not all cultures revile them. Ancient Egyptians associated flies with courage, and soldiers received necklaces depicting flies as recognition for valor in battle. According to some Diné storytelling traditions, Big Fly, or Do'tsoh, serves as a mentor to supernatural beings and mortals and a benevolent messenger between worlds.

The more I've learned, the more I embrace a live-and-let-live attitude toward flies. I try not to let them land on my food or bite me; I gently brush them off my skin, but otherwise we peacefully coexist. Flies are an important part of the whole: They offer their service in the form of pollination, pest control and decomposition. As unpleasant as it may be, we can't do without decay.

Over time, an even more unexpected shift in my thinking emerged: I began to wonder what my relationship to flies could show me about my own mind.

I spend a lot of hours practicing meditation outdoors in the mountains near my home in southwest Colorado. When you sit still for long periods in the wilderness, you become part of the landscape, just another rock or tree. Deer come up beside you to graze; mice forage nearby. Birds no longer fear you, and bugs land on you with abandon.

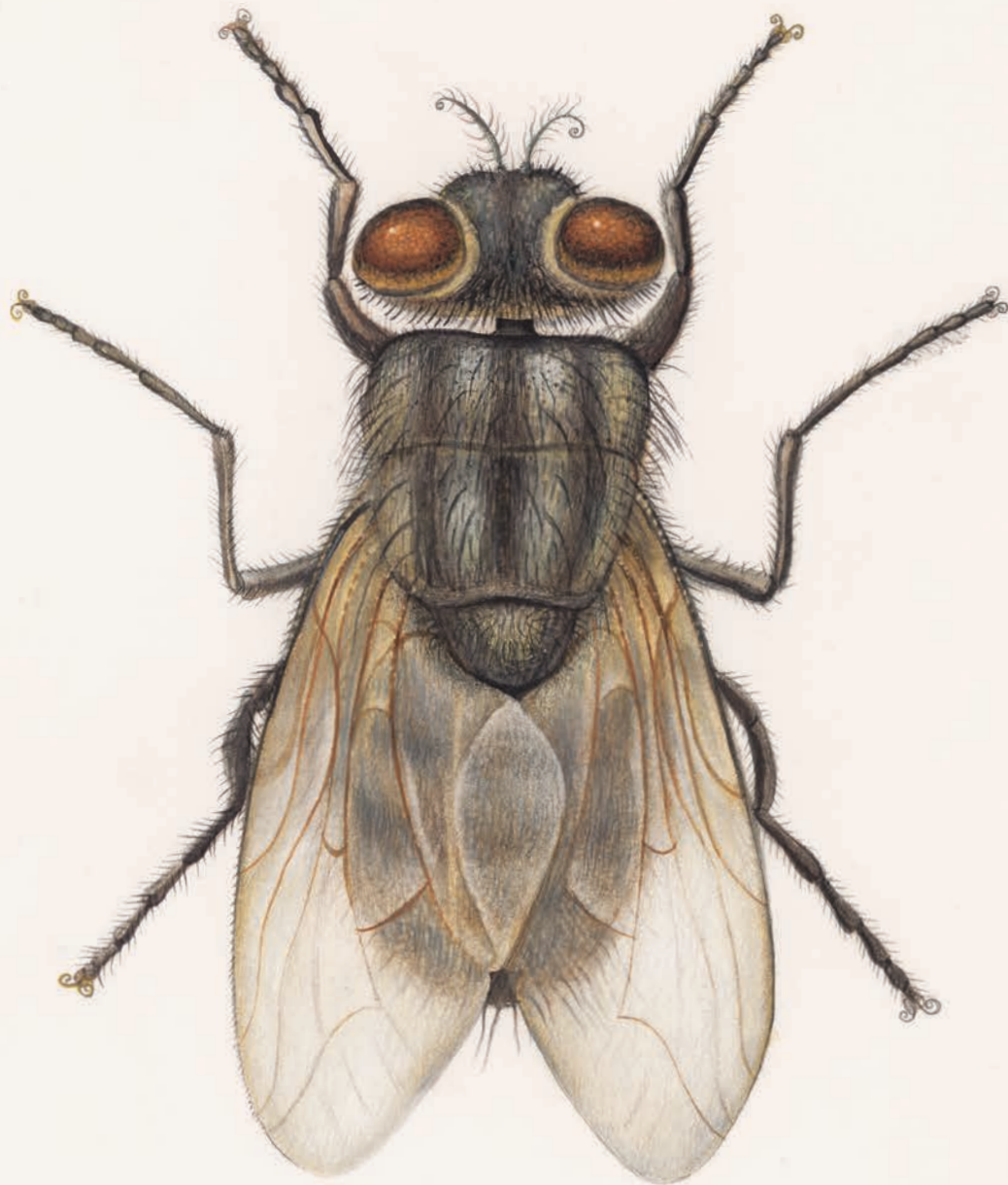
Last summer, on one particularly warm day in northern New Mexico, I sat meditating and counted eight flies crawling on me all at once. Swatting was pointless — they just kept coming. I knew they wouldn't bite and I wasn't worried about disease, but the tickling sensations were almost unbearable. I dripped sweat in the windless heat. But the longer I sat unmoving, the more I realized my irritation was just a perspective.

To the flies, I was simply another patch of earth. The land doesn't flinch and complain when a fly lands on it. I surrendered and felt myself dissolving into the land itself. A sense of effortless belonging arose when I quit pushing away the natural world — the beautiful and the ugly; pleasant and unpleasant; the flies, flowers, sun and breeze. I was learning patience: Raging against flies would accomplish nothing but disturbance within my own mind.

Last year, a study documented a 72.4% decline in insect populations between 2004 and 2024 in a meadow not far from my home. It's more important than ever to understand all parts of the natural world, even the unpleasant ones. Maybe it's even more imperative not to vilify any part of nature.

Not only is there so much we don't know about the natural world; there's so much we don't know about ourselves. As I finished this story in a coffeeshop, a single fly crawled up a windowpane. No one noticed but me. I didn't feel disgust or irritation, just a sense of peaceful coexistence, even wonder. It turns out that dwelling in respect rather than rage is a much more enjoyable way to live — for me and, I imagine, for those around me, too, including these masters of decay and flight. ✨

Kate Siber is a freelance writer and bestselling children's book author based in Durango, Colorado. Her most recent book is The Hidden Wisdom of Animals.



Musca domestica

Transition point

How I found trans joy in backcountry splitboarding.

BY OLLIE HANCOCK

AS I SKIN up a slope somewhere off Fremont Pass, I'm uncomfortably aware of Colorado's record-breaking winter — or lack of it. I feel it in the pitiful snowpack underfoot, sugary under a fragile sun crust, sharky rocks and brush poking through. The mountain peaks look skeletal, their rocky ribs jarringly exposed for February.

These past two seasons, I have felt as if all the ways I love my body are at risk: legislative attacks on trans rights, dwindling winters with shrinking snowpacks, an administration eager to strip public-lands protections. I moved back home to Colorado in early 2025, uneasy about the state of trans rights in the U.S. What felt like vague anxiety then keeps me awake at night now. Since I moved, thousands of anti-trans bills have been introduced across the country. I'm lucky to live in a state that protects my rights, but that doesn't mean I don't feel the tension; my body is a constant subject of national debate, while federal pressure chips away at state protections for trans youth.

I shake off the gloom and remind myself that I go into the backcountry to love myself. Every vertical foot I gain is a reclamation, and, on this tour,

I'm resisting both gravity and government.

My body complains as I head uphill from 11,100 feet, but it's nice to hear it talk. Burning lungs paired with burning quads, cold-bitten toes squeezed into tight boots: I meditate on all the microfeelings in my body, rather than how other people see me.

The mountain's quiet is interrupted by *"shuush-clack,"* the dry, abrasive whisper made by skins sliding against snow. At the top of my climb, I take in the view. The mountains across the way are wearing the kind of snow I'd expect to see late in the season, after the year's last snowfall, not now in what should be midwinter.

This part of the climb is also called a "transition": My gear changes from one thing to another. I reassemble my snowboard, unsticking the skins, removing my bindings and reuniting the board's halves. I quite literally transition at this transition each week: Before I click in and start my descent, I sit on my board and pull out a syringe, needle and vial of testosterone. I go splitboarding for the same reasons I transitioned: They make me proud of the person I am.

I think society expects me to

have a complicated relationship with my body. To get gender-affirming care, I need to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria — a distress related to the mismatch between my gender identity and physical aspects of my body. But the thing is, I am not unhappy or distressed about my body. I love my body, I love what it can do; my body takes me up mountains. I don't feel that my gender is defined by what feels wrong. I've just always known that something else felt even more right.

Having a hand in creating myself is beautiful. I have known the distress of dysphoria. As a kid, the sight of myself in my Easter dress in the mirror brought on tears and fits. I couldn't wait to ditch the dress for a bright blue snowsuit and go ride my board through the aspens. It wasn't discomfort with myself; it was discomfort with how people saw me. Even now, I feel eyes tracking me through grocery stores, at gas stations and post offices. Perhaps people can't help gawking a little. It's hard to tell if they're trying to figure out my gender, or hoping to ward me off with a glare. I don't know how my community feels about me. I do know I've never minded the aspen's eyes, gentle observers offering no scrutiny as I serpentine through them on my board.

I believe the best way to love your body is to use your body. Through movement, I'm aware of how beautiful my body really is. I've been snowboarding for 20 years now, and sometimes I feel like I'm better at sliding sideways than walking. I can feel the nuances of the snow through my edges and base. In open terrain, I flow across the slope, dive over knolls and leave precise lines in the snow. In tighter terrain, I weave through trees, my mind

always ahead of my body, trusting it will do the work. I especially love pumping up and down the walls of little gullies, bouncing off the banks, my whole body activated in a dance with gravity. To me, backcountry snowboarding is trans joy. It is liberation. I use my body to express exactly what I feel.

And in this trans joy, I find resilience. And while, yes, bathroom bans, health-care bans, athlete bans, public-lands sell-offs and warmer winters loom in my mind, I choose to believe I won't lose access to this.

The warming of our winters, the privatization of public lands, the policing of trans bodies — none of those are separate battles. They are all battles in the same war against the pursuit of happiness. Public lands offer respite in a world that demands profit, productivity and conformity from our bodies. In the backcountry, I find relief from the world's expectations.

As I come down the ridge and through the trees, back down the skin track and skate into the trailhead, I'm once again out of my backcountry sanctuary. The view on the trip home is jarred by rare earth mining, gnawing the range away. Once I'm back within range of service, my phone pings with a dozen new headlines about attacks on trans rights or the new historic low record for this year's snowpack. Still, I'll continue going out, climbing mountains, snow-sliding, laughing and loving. I use sport and movement to clear my mind and live in the body that I love.

In that way, the land offers me my own special kind of gender-affirming care. ✨

Ollie Hancock lives in Leadville, Colorado, where they are a community organizer, writer and snowslider.



Clockwise from left: The author skinning up a trail near the base of Mount Arkansas. In the background, bare rock can be seen in the peaks of Colorado's Mosquito Range, a sign of the year's unusually low snowpack.

The author draws up their weekly dose of testosterone on a ridge of Mount Arkansas.

Smiling into the camera, the author finishes their injection before beginning their descent of Gold Hill. **Wren Gober**



I go splitboarding for the same reason I transitioned: They make me proud of the person I am.

TOWNSHIP AND RANGE

Exploring the intersection of race and family in the interior rural West.



A time to rest

Opting out could be the thing that sets you free.

BY NINA MCCONIGLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA ANAND

MY DAUGHTER MARIGOLD, who recently turned 4, informs me that she is done with naps.

“I’m a big kid now,” she says solemnly. “And big kids don’t sleep.”

She also now fights bedtime. Once we’ve brushed her teeth and read books, I lie down with her. Her sister, who is two years older, falls asleep immediately. But Marigold likes to talk: She tells me she is an elf and that, late at night, she travels to the North Pole but is back by morning. She tells me what each shadow in her room looks like and makes bunny ears with her fingers. She asks if we can have a midnight feast. She takes sips of water. And eventually, usually long after I am half asleep, her eyes close. She finally rests.

Rest feels elusive for me. I have two young children, a full-time job, and I often travel for speaking engagements. Between a new novel and my stage play, I have barely been home for two weeks out of the past two months. The digital world makes me feel constantly “on call.” My phone is always in my hand as I answer emails and read updates from daycare. Recently, I found myself home and in bed during the middle of the day. My mother, who was visiting, asked me what I was doing. “Resting,” I replied guiltily. How could I explain that I was so tired that all I could do was stare at the wall? It was the best way I knew to help myself relax. And it was the only way I could get up later to do laundry and make dinner.

Last fall, the University of Colorado retired its mascot, a bison, Ralphie VI, because of an “indifference to running.” Born in 2020 as Ember, she was the sixth “Ralphie,” introduced to the public in 2021 as a 15-month-old 500-pound bison calf. Her job was simple: She needed to stir up the crowd for the second half of the game by running a lap around the field before kickoff. But most games, she hardly made it past the 50-yard line, and when she did, her gait was closer to a saunter. Her last official appearance was during the 2024 Alamo Bowl, where her disinterest in running led to jokes about her “opting out” of the game.

A university press release noted that she lacked the “juice or desire to run at full speed, often displaying apathy towards the, at times, 1,300-lb animal’s primary job.” Her predecessor, Ralphie V, was known for running too fast and getting too excited. “With past Ralphies, as they aged, their speed typically decreased; with Ralphie V, she has been so excited to

run that she was actually running too fast, which created safety concerns for her and her handlers,” the school said when she retired.

Ember and Ralphie V (i.e., Blackout) are now cohabitants on a bison ranch, the location of which remains undisclosed due to the 1970 kidnapping of Ralphie I. In a recent press release, Steve Hurlbert, director of strategic communications for the university, stated, “Due to an indifference to running, typical of many mammals both four-legged and two-legged, it was determined that it was in Ember’s best interest, based on her disposition, to focus on relaxing strolls on the pasture, which is her favorite hobby.” Ember was being put out to pasture, literally.

*To fight for the things that
matter the most to us, we
have to remain whole
— and that means not
always running.*

Now she gets to live on her terms.

A friend called Ember an embodiment of the West. She is an unconventional and independent spirit impervious to being influenced by others. Even in captivity, she displayed rugged individualism, freedom and self-reliance. She wasn’t ready for the constraints of convention. CU may have lost a mascot, but I gained one. Like Ember, I am OK with moving at my own speed and going against the grain. The world feels so weary; everyone seems to have an opinion on how to live, what books to read and how something should be known. It’s exhausting. Ember just said no. Like Melville’s *Bartleby*, she just preferred not to.

I, too, wish that at times we could hit pause.

I have always lived life at more of a walking pace. In high school, we had two choices for physical education. What we called Jocks PE and Regular PE. I was no athlete, but if you took Regular PE, you had to do a semester of swimming, and I hated being in the water. To pass Jocks PE, you had to run two

miles in 18 minutes. I was determined to do it. When the day came, I laced up my shoes and followed the other girls around the track. My lungs burned, but I kept going. The thought of having to go to biology with wet hair kept me running fast. I made it with two seconds to spare and promptly threw up. As I got older, running took on new forms: going to college, graduate school, marriage, jobs, promotions, publishing books.

To rest is radical. To fight for the things that matter the most to us, we have to remain whole — and that means not always running. Last fall, for the first time in my life, my university offered a seminar called “Rest Is Resistance.” They brought a group of us faculty into a room and told us that productivity doesn’t equal success. For all of us sitting there, it was the first time a workplace had told us to take breaks: to not answer emails at top speed or work on our phones until midnight. I went home confused. But when I started telling my students that I wouldn’t answer any emails after 5 p.m., that I would check again first thing in the morning, a funny thing happened: I was happier. When I took the weekends to put work aside, I rested.

One of the most popular phrases from the “Code of the West,” which hangs in classrooms and diners across the West, is *Ride for the brand*. It’s a cowboy-rooted saying that signifies absolute loyalty, dedication and truth toward one’s employer or team. I like the idea of this. But I also like saying, *I am my own person*. We don’t all need to run just because a group is on the football field telling us to. I like to think about Ember in her pasture, resting and looking up at the sky.

Last weekend, on the way home from playing in the park, Marigold told me that when we got home, she was going to take a little rest. “Just a little one, mama.” I told her it was good to rest her body, so that when she woke up, she would be ready for whatever comes next. I don’t want to steer her toward convention for its own sake. I want her to know how to choose what she needs and what feels right for her. I don’t doubt that someday she, too, will have a phone in her hand. I just want her to know that she can put it down. She can close her eyes and press pause. ✨

Nina McConigley is a writer and professor at Colorado State University and the author of How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder.

CALIFORNIA

Leo, a 3-year-old female sulcata tortoise, became an overnight TikTok sensation after her owner posted a surveillance video of the reptile trundling herself away from her burning home in Fullerton, California, abc7.com reported. The harrowing incident took place on Feb. 8, while Leo's owner, Hyeri Tom, was at a Superbowl party and Leo was tucked away in her backyard enclosure, warm and cozy with a heat lamp. Until the lamp tipped over, and the shed erupted in flames. Apparently, tortoises aren't always slowpokes, they just need the proper motivation to get moving; Tom described the shell-shocked tortoise's miraculously speedy escape as "kicking into sports mode." The TikTok video has amassed millions of views and can be seen on Leo's account, @leothehomesstort. We're happy to report that Leo is recovering from smoke inhalation and is doing a great job serving (unofficially) as a spokes-tortoise for heat lamp safety.

COLORADO

Not all the West's fire- and death-defying stunts involve tortoises: A human being was caught on police drone footage juggling flaming torches while balancing on a unicycle and impeding traffic near the intersection of U.S. 85 and 60th Avenue in Commerce City, Colorado, 9News.com reported. The Commerce City Police received multiple calls from bewildered motorists who apparently aren't used to this sort of thing on their daily commute. "We don't often get reports like this anymore ... well to be fair ... we have NEVER gotten a report like this one," the Commerce City Police noted on Facebook, adding that the intersection wasn't "the Las Vegas Strip ... or was it?" The police let the unidentified unicyclist off



Heard Around the West

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

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

with a warning, adding politely that he was clearly very talented but please don't do this again.

OREGON

Thanks to Columbia Sportswear and Breakside Brewery, the proverbial question "does a bear shit in the woods?" has taken on fresh relevance. The Portland, Oregon, companies have teamed up to produce a rather, um, unique new brew — a limited-edition beer aptly named "Nature Calls," described as "a crisp lager infused with a special substance during the brewing process": *Ursi cacas*, or, as it's more commonly known, bear poop, KGW8 reported. It's all part of Columbia's "Engineered for Whatever" brand campaign, which apparently wants to prepare

folks for "absolutely anything — even 'nature's most unexpected ingredient.'" We don't know about "unexpected" — we expect a certain amount of excreta from mammals, being of mammalian ilk ourselves — but this is certainly a new way of exploiting it. And if you're wondering, "Is it safe to drink?" its makers say absolutely, 100%. In addition to its, you might say, "wild ingredients," the beer itself is brewed under the same strict standards as any other Breakside beer, using malted grains sourced from the Pacific Northwest along with honey and huckleberry. The wild ingredients are collected separately, from all-natural free-range black bears in Montana. Joe Boyle, Columbia Sportswear's brand president,

put it best: "From the inside of a bear to your mouth, we're making nature's crap easier to swallow." Now *there's* a slogan! What's next? One Moosefart Margarita, please, and a shot of Buffalochip Bourbon.

OREGON

There's a surprising amount of information to be gleaned from 12,000-year-old clothing, even if you didn't find it under your kid's bed. In 1958, amateur archaeologist John Cowles excavated some artifacts from Cougar Mountain Cave and Paisley Caves in central Oregon. After his death, they were stored at the Favell Museum in Klamath Falls and only recently became available for analysis. Anthropologist Richie Rosencrance, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno and research affiliate with the University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History, is leading the team. The 12,000-year-old materials, which were dated using radiocarbon testing, were made in the Late Pleistocene, near the end of the last ice age, and include "braided cords, bone needles, projectile points and wooden artifacts," all of which provide glimpses into the traditional ecological knowledge of the era, *Smithsonian Magazine* reported, as well as proof that the people living there back then were darn good at sewing and used methods still practiced today. The items mark the world's oldest known evidence of sewing: Two fragments of elk hide sewn together with cord made from plant fiber and animal hair. Their original function is undetermined, but they're believed to have been part of a piece of clothing, moccasin, bag or shelter. Rosencrance told NPR: "It really underscores what Native people have been telling scientists forever, which is that they have always been here." ☀

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#IAM THE WEST

ROBERT EUGENE CARTER
(HE/HIM/THEY/THEM)

**Maricopa Bird Alliance board member
and field trips chair, dietitian and diabetes
education specialist
Phoenix, Arizona**

Paying attention to birds — and doing so in whatever way is accessible to people — supports a person's health. Moving around in nature tends to correlate with lower levels of stress. You're not only moving around, but you're listening; you're noticing signs of birds, you're enhancing your cognitive flexibility. When you notice birds, you might also notice the kind of developments that could pollute the area around you, and you might advocate against those things. And when enough people advocate against those things and stop them from happening, that improves not only the health of the birder, but the health of their community. People who live in healthier communities have stronger, more robust social networks, which are also associated with better health. Just noticing birds improves your health — and your community.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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