

OUTDOOR INDUSTRY V. UTAH | HARRY REID EXITS | TRICKING ELK

# High Country News

For people who care about the West

## Overdosed

After an opioid crackdown  
in rural Colorado,  
heroin fills the void

By Paige Blankenbuehler





Craig, Colorado, resident Josh Flaharty fixes French toast amid his cache of prescription pills to treat ADHD, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and other conditions. Flaharty, an addict who says he's trying to get clean, has abused painkillers, marijuana, cocaine, crystal meth and heroin. BROOKE WARREN

## On the cover

An addict burns heroin in a spoon. The narcotic can be smoked, sniffed, or dissolved in water and then heated and injected, producing sensations of warmth, calmness and drowsiness at a price cheaper than prescription painkillers.

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## Editor's note

### A hidden epidemic

America is in the grips of a drug epidemic, and no community is immune. The abuse of opioid painkillers, which can lead to heroin use, is to blame.



The latest data from the Centers for Disease Control are hardly encouraging. Overdose deaths nationwide tripled between 1999 and 2014; in 2014, 61 percent of more than 47,000 such deaths involved an opioid. And the numbers aren't improving. From 2014 to 2015, opioid-caused deaths increased more than 70 percent, while deaths from heroin increased 20 percent.

It would be easy to get a misleading picture here, of heroin use raging in cities while painkiller abuse runs rampant in Appalachia, as seen in film and television. But the West is caught up in the epidemic as well. Of the 10 states with the most overdose deaths in 2015, the latest statistics available, two are in the West: New Mexico and Utah. Meanwhile, in Alaska, overdose deaths spiked 16 percent between 2014 and 2015. Nevada saw a nearly identical increase in that time.

For this issue's cover story, Assistant Editor Paige Blankenbuehler spent nearly a year reporting on how this epidemic has affected one rural town in the West, Craig, Colorado. She uncovered a community battling an epidemic that started when a so-called "pill mill" opened there in 2006 and encouraged the mismanagement of pain. Stronger laws for monitoring and crackdowns led to the closure of the facility in 2012, but didn't solve the problem. Craig was already grappling with painkillers and methamphetamines. Now, it has heroin, too.

Craig, a small coal town on the steppes of northwest Colorado, is struggling in part because of its rural nature. Local law enforcement is ill-equipped to deal with the problem, and few support facilities exist. And because there is not a steady supply of any particular drug, addicts have begun mixing and misusing any drugs they can find. High school students start by stealing the drugs of their parents, and police report breaking up "Skittles parties," where all manner of pills are plopped into a bowl for consumption.

There are reasons for hope, however. The West has the lowest number of deaths per 100,000 people in the U.S., according to 2015 CDC data, and the region saw an overall drop of 2.6 percent in the overdose death rate between 2014 and 2015. New Mexico and Utah are slowly getting a handle on their problems. But the battle is far from over, and the front lines are in places like Craig. We can't turn the tide unless we understand the nature of the epidemic. In this issue, we have sought to do that. It is a long story, and a heartbreaking one, but we believe it is important — and well worth your time.

—Brian Calvert, managing editor





Flames from a flaring pit near a well in the Bakken oil field. ORJAN F. ELLINGVAG/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

## The contradictory fight over methane rules

Using the Congressional Review Act, the U.S. House voted to repeal the Bureau of Land Management's methane emissions rules in February. As of press time, the fate of the rules remained up to the Senate. If repealed, the BLM will be barred not only from implementing its current rules, but from crafting similar policies. The move is perplexing: Methane rules developed locally, even when they're similar to those written by the BLM, were broadly supported. But implementing those policies on a national scale has been elusive. The battle over the

methane rules is an example of the curious ways in which the politics of environmental regulation change when the federal government gets involved. In the end, the blowback seems to be less about the particulars of the rules than resistance to the expansion of federal regulation. Unfortunately, the trouble with leaving methane regulations up to states is that the problems created by excessive greenhouse gas emissions and wasted resources aren't bound by state lines. **CALLY CARSWELL** MORE: [hcne.ws/methane-fight](http://hcne.ws/methane-fight)

## One in? Two out

President Donald Trump mandated in an executive order in early February that two existing regulations be eliminated for every new regulation issued. He dictated that the costs of any new rule be offset by savings from the regulations that are repealed. The president's action, while monumental in scope, presents practical challenges. Most rules aren't written at agencies' discretion but are mandated by Congress or the courts. And even if a regulation is not protected by legislation, an agency may not just simply strike it from the books: It must go through a lengthy new rulemaking process required by the Administrative Procedure Act to undo regulations, including seeking public comment. The idea of streamlining regulations is not new, but Trump's executive order goes further, requiring that agencies examine only costs, without accounting for benefits that health and environmental regulations have for society.

**ELIZABETH SHOGREN** MORE: [hcne.ws/trump-cuts](http://hcne.ws/trump-cuts)

*"(Republicans') only thought is: We need less government and this is how we'll get it.' They'll find the job of governance requires regulations."*

—Holly Doremus, UC Berkeley Law School professor

## Trending

### Lands near Chaco leased for drilling

In January, the Bureau of Land Management leased nearly 850 acres of land for oil and gas development in New Mexico near Chaco Culture National Historical Park, netting close to \$3 million. While Chaco Canyon and its ruins are protected from development, as is a 10-mile buffer around the park, surrounding areas are not. That land bears remnants of Ancestral Puebloan civilization and is sacred to Navajo, Hopi, Zuni and other Pueblo Indians. Nonetheless, about 90 percent of the Greater Chaco Area has already been leased for oil and gas development. Native Americans and environmental groups have fought to exclude the remaining areas, and parcels won't be released to the winning bidders until several protests have been resolved. **JODI PETERSON**

## You say

**MIKE MCCOWAN:** "This is BLM par for the course in (New Mexico)! The thing is, this place is so remote, there's no local community ... to voice any objection."

**JIM VANCE:** "Any increase in seismic activity (due to drilling) will simply not be a good thing for the continued longevity of those stacked-rock walls."

**JULIE MEANEY ROSS:** "The BLM needs a serious overhaul and new management. They have been doing a lot of idiotic things that taxpayers do not like. They have forgotten they work for us."

MORE: [hcne.ws/chaco-lease](http://hcne.ws/chaco-lease) and [Facebook.com/highcountrynews](https://www.facebook.com/highcountrynews)

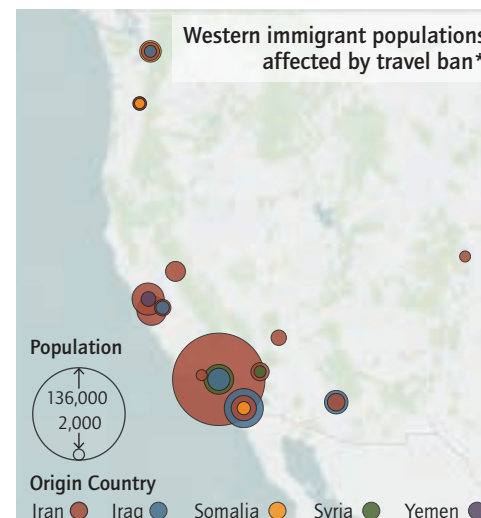
## "Healthy democracy depends on the ability of a free press to deliver accurate, factual information to the public."

—Kate Schimel, deputy editor-digital, outlining the new secure protocols in place for readers and sources to contact *High Country News* in the wake of a new administration and Congress that "appear hostile to a free press." MORE: [hcne.ws/secure-tips](http://hcne.ws/secure-tips)

## Western states react to Trump's tenuous immigrant ban

In late January, President Donald Trump ordered a temporary ban on travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Libya. The order prevented entry of immigrants for 90 days, refugees for 120 days and suspended entry of refugees from Syria entirely. Westerners reacted to the ban with protests at international airports in Seattle, Denver and San Francisco. Both Democratic and Republican members of Congress spoke out against it. California, which took in the most refugees in 2016, has filed a lawsuit in opposition to the ban. Lawsuits have cropped up in Colorado and Washington. In early February, the order was blocked. As of press time it had not been reinstated, even though the Trump administration has argued that it needs to be implemented for national security reasons. Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., compared the ban to the West's racist treatment of Japanese immigrants and citizens in the 1940s: "If you are silent today, you would have been silent then."

**ANNA V. SMITH** MORE: [hcne.ws/immigrant-ban](http://hcne.ws/immigrant-ban)



\*Data shows only immigrants from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Yemen, which were included in the recent executive order travel ban. There is no data available for immigrant populations from Sudan and Libya, which were also included in the ban.

SOURCE: MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE (MPI) DATA HUB [HTTP://MIGRATIONPOLICY.ORG/PROGRAMS/ DATA-HUB](http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub)

VISUALIZATION BY PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER AND BROOKE WARREN, HIGH COUNTRY NEWS.



A firefighter stands amid the flames in the Gila National Forest, New Mexico.

## Federal hiring freeze hits Western land agencies

President Trump signed an executive order that eliminated vacant federal positions and froze all federal hiring to eventually reduce the number of government employees. But in late January, the administration released a memo to clarify exemptions for the U.S. Postal Service, military and CIA — and allowances for seasonal hires, such as wildland firefighters in the Forest Service or rangers in the National Park Service.

**ANNA V. SMITH** MORE: [hcne.ws/hiring-freeze](http://hcne.ws/hiring-freeze)



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## HIT 'EM WHERE IT HURTS

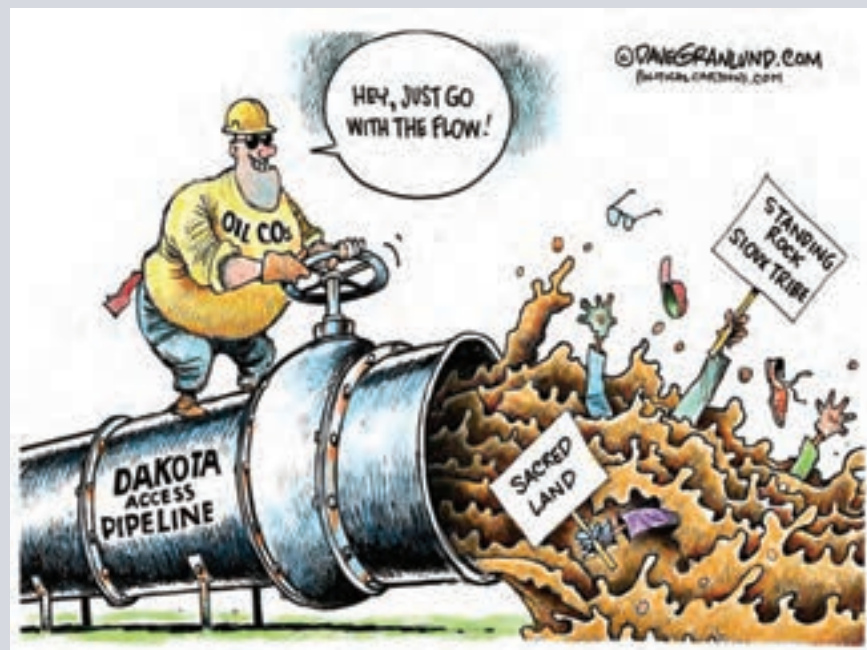
The article “Bears Ears National Monument is a go” shows how, even with compromise, Utah lawmakers continue to attack this newest national monument using, as President Donald Trump’s spokeswoman Kellyanne Conway would say, “alternative facts” (HCN, 01/23/17).

There is one potentially strong economic benefit behind the monument that wasn’t mentioned in the article. The Outdoor Industry Association holds its Outdoor Retailer show in Salt Lake City, Utah, every January and August. Peter Metcalf, founder of Black Diamond Equipment, and Yvon Chouinard, owner of Patagonia, came out strongly in writing against Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, the Utah attorney general, and other Utah lawmakers who are trying to negate the Bears Ears and suspend the Antiquities Act of 1906. Metcalf and Chouinard both support taking the Outdoor Retailer show out of Utah if Utah’s lawmakers keep attacking the public lands. Economically, this would remove several million dollars from Utah, thereby taking away jobs and free publicity, and affecting recreational users and the money they spend. In addition, at least 98 other outdoor companies have signed an open letter in support of keeping federal public lands public, not turning them over to the states. Maybe hitting the Republican lawmakers in Utah with a threat of losing millions of dollars in economic benefits is the only way they will listen to the “facts.”

*Jon Wesley Sering*  
Montrose, Colorado

## A CAUTIONARY TALE

Jonathan Thompson’s Jan. 23 article on the Bears Ears National Monument, in a paragraph concerning Utah lawmakers’ pledge to urge Trump to overturn the designation, states that “no president has ever tried to abolish a monument; it’s not clear that it’s even possible.” Right, insofar as current presidential powers. But Congress can, and has, delisted national monuments, one of which stands to this day as a testament to the wrongheadedness of turning federal lands over to local government. After 38 years under the protection of the National Park Service, Shoshone Cavern National Monument in Wyoming, “amid great fanfare” according to wyohistory.org, was delisted in 1954, given to the city of Cody and renamed Spirit Mountain Caverns. After years of vandalism and neglect, and of being unable to make it profitable from tourism,



the Cody city government returned the site to the federal government in 1977. Now known as Spirit Mountain Cave, it remains sealed by a padlock, though experienced cavers may gain access by application to the Cody office of the Bureau of Land Management.

*Chris Williams*  
Green River, Wyoming

## DIG DEEPER INTO DAPL

I appreciate learning about the perspectives and feelings of people participating in the “Showdown at Standing Rock” (HCN, 1/23/17). Much of this has been lacking in the news. What I would find useful now are investigative articles that address a number of questions:

- I do wonder how this pipeline and its route came about, and what its effect would be on reducing truck and rail transport of oil out of the region. I have read that the local tribes did not get involved in the routing until 2014, years after the planning started. Did no one from the tribes or their agencies attend early scoping hearings or read legal notices?

- I understand some of the archaeological surveys did not reach out to the local tribes. Was this done deliberately by Energy Transfer Partners’ contractors?

- I understand that the route goes near the reservation and through the traditional lands of the tribes; however, legal standing for fighting the route depends on treaties that were broken long ago. Is there precedent for success in such a fight?

- The protests revolve around pro-

tecting water resources from oil spills. What is the record of spillage in the Northern Plains from pipelines of what age, versus truck and rail transport?

Feelings, good intentions, outrage, and plans for future protests are fine to learn about. However, I also appreciate HCN for enlightening facts and analysis.

*Larry N. Smith*  
Butte, Montana

## WORDS MATTER

I write in response to Elizabeth Shogren’s excellent article on regulations (“As Trump takes power, the White House targets regulations,” HCN, 1/19/17).

I highly recommend that your writers understand and follow the advice of George Lakoff, who studies human behavior. Even for those capable of critical thinking, 90 percent of our processing is below our consciousness. One consequence is that words matter.

For example, stop referencing “regulations.” Regulations are protections. Consider the article with every instance (except perhaps initially, where an explanation is provided) of the word “regulation” replaced with “protection.” For example, “the House plans to begin undoing Obama administration protections” and “make it easier to repeal Obama’s recent protections, including one aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions. ...”

Highlighting the positive side of this or any issue is not manipulative propaganda — it is the truth.

*Anne Wilson*  
Boulder, Colorado

High  
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# Outdoor rec industry defends public lands

*Utah's delegation tries to roll back protections, riling a conservation-minded outdoors cohort*

BY TAY WILES

**W**hile the Bundy family's exploits in Nevada and Oregon have drawn new attention recently as trials proceed, the Sagebrush Rebellion has been advancing steadily on another front in Utah. Over the past few years, the state's congressional representatives have spent over \$500,000 studying the viability of transferring federal lands to state control, promoted a \$14 million lawsuit to try to force transfer, and introduced a slew of bills to gut federal oversight and protections of public lands. Now, a battle is brewing between two of the state's most powerful forces: its conservative political leadership, which harbors a century-old distrust of federal land agencies, and its massive outdoor recreation industry, which depends on those same public lands for its survival.

In the past six weeks, the Utah delegation has proposed legislation to roll back public-lands protections in unprecedented ways, rattling the conservation community nationwide. On Dec. 29, the day after President Barack Obama announced the designation of Bears Ears National Monument under the 1906 Antiquities Act, U.S. Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, said he would do everything in his power to "undo" the decision. Lee didn't stop there: "I am then going to do what I can to repeal the Antiquities Act so that future President Obamas can not do this to rural communities ever again," he wrote in a blog post. In January, Republican state representatives also went after national monuments — Gregory Hughes introduced a resolution to rescind Bears Ears, and Mike Noel proposed shrinking Grand Staircase-Escalante, which former President Bill Clinton created in 1996.

On its first day back in session this year, the House passed a package of rules with a provision spearheaded by Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, that makes it easier to transfer federal lands to state control. Later in January, Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, introduced a bill to do away with the law enforcement arms of both the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service and require the Interior Department to provide grants to state and local government agencies to enforce federal laws themselves. To top it off, Noel, R-Kanab, is reportedly angling to become head of the BLM. Noel advocates defunding large parts of the agency and has long

derided it for putting too much emphasis on conservation.

Outdoor industry leaders have joined conservationists nationwide who see this series of events as an all-out attack on public lands. But whether the outdoor industry can help tilt the scales toward federal lands protections, especially given the Utah delegation's stance, may be a major test of its emerging political clout. "We've struggled for a long time to be heard in Washington," says Alex Boian, vice president of government affairs for the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), a major trade group based in Boulder, Colorado, and Washington, D.C. "When I first started (13 years ago), we'd go to town, meet with an intern in the hallway, they'd dutifully write down our issues and they'd get filed away. Now, we are meeting with senior advisors to the president and members of Congress."

**O**ne of the ongoing signs of the industry's current pushback in Utah is its threat to move the renowned Outdoor Retailer trade show out of the state. The show, held twice yearly in Salt Lake City, is a gearhead's wonderland, where buyers and outdoors fanatics ogle the latest products. The largest gathering of outdoor manufacturers and retailers in the country, it brings tens of millions of dollars to Utah annually. Industry luminary Peter Metcalf, founder of Salt Lake-based gear company Black Diamond Equipment, recently renewed his call for the trade show to be moved to another state.

The first time Metcalf suggested moving the OR show was in 2003, when then-Gov. Mike Leavitt made a deal with then-Interior Secretary Gale Norton to remove 2.6 million acres of the state's public lands from consideration for wilderness protections. Leavitt also pushed a plan to give counties control over thousands of miles of roads through wild areas. After meeting with Metcalf, though, Leavitt walked back his roads plan — and OR stayed.

Since the threat of yanking the trade show hasn't yet been fulfilled, "there's an unfortunate belief by many in the state that this is just a charade," Metcalf told *High Country News*. But the only reason he and others didn't follow through on the first or second attempt, he said, was that they managed to find common ground with the governor's office and other representatives. In 2013, Utah Gov. Gary Herbert created the nation's first state



Office of Outdoor Recreation to help the state plan development of activities like hiking, mountain biking and skiing. (Colorado has since formed a similar office, and other states have taken steps to do so.)

This time around, no one knows how responsive Utah leadership will be. Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard recently penned his own angry critique of Utah's public-lands direction. "Politicians in the state don't seem to get that the outdoor industry — and their own state economy — depend on access to public lands for recreation," Chouinard wrote. As of press time, Patagonia had announced that it was pulling out of the OR show in response to Gov. Herbert's signing of the resolution to overturn Bears Ears. Arc'teryx, a Canadian outdoor clothing company, and Polartec, a textile company, followed suit, while Vermont-based Ibex Outdoor Clothing announced it would reduce its presence at the show in protest. Kevin Boyle, co-founder of outdoor clothing company KÜHL, also says he'll consider pulling out of the trade show as a way to make a stand on public lands.

"Whenever somebody like a Peter Metcalf or Yvon Chouinard expresses their values, we pay attention," says Boian. The Outdoor Industry Association helped sponsor a full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post* in January criticizing the attack on Western public lands, signed by 100 leaders of outdoor-gear companies. On Feb. 6, Outdoor Retailer announced it will look for a new location for the show after its Salt Lake City contract ends in 2018, in a state that "upholds our industry's core values around the importance of America's public lands system." (Politicians in both Colorado and New Mexico have informally volunteered to host it.) For now, Boian says the association is working through other channels — lobbying politicians and supporting pro-public lands campaigns — to get its message across.

**Black Diamond Equipment founder Peter Metcalf speaks during a rally to demonstrate opposition to efforts by some Western states to seize control of federal lands, at the Utah State Capitol in Salt Lake City. Metcalf says the world's largest outdoor retail show should leave Utah after two decades because of what he calls an assault on public lands by the state's top political leaders.**

RICK BOWMER/AP PHOTO





Crowds check out the latest gear and technology in the outdoor recreation industry at the Outdoor Retailer show in Salt Lake City, Utah.  
GEORGE FREY/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Much of the outdoor recreation industry's growing influence stems from its economic impact. According to a 2012 Outdoor Industry Association report, Utah's outdoor recreation companies employed 122,000 people and brought \$12 billion into the state each year. Nationwide, the industry generates \$646 billion in consumer spending each year, plus 6.1 million jobs. In December, Congress unanimously passed a law to finally require the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis to measure outdoor recreation's contribution to the national gross domestic product.

In recent years, recreation interests

have gotten a seat at the table for legislation, such as with the 2016 Public Lands Initiative, a failed proposal for the future of eastern Utah led by Reps. Bishop and Chaffetz, Boian says. The industry association marked up a draft of the initiative, criticizing a provision that could have prohibited presidents from using the Antiquities Act to create national monuments in several Utah counties. In the later proposal, that part had been removed — though it popped up in a separate bill introduced at the same time. In early 2016, outdoor representatives were also part of the creation of the BLM's master leasing plan to manage 800,000 acres near Moab. Brad Petersen, the first director of Utah's Office of Outdoor Recreation, was invited to scrutinize the state's response to the BLM. "It was the first time that recreational interests had been officially requested and included in a legal response by a state agency," Petersen says. "The initial rhetoric and tone of the state's legal response went from being ... energy-development-centric to neutral, with increased support for the benefits of Utah's recreation economy."

But despite the industry's growing political muscle, Petersen and Metcalf say the Office of Outdoor Recreation still isn't effective enough in giving it a voice on public policy. "Ultimately, the Office of Outdoor Recreation works for the governor," Petersen says. And while Utah's governor has been known to compromise on public lands to a greater degree than most of the state's congressional delegation, he

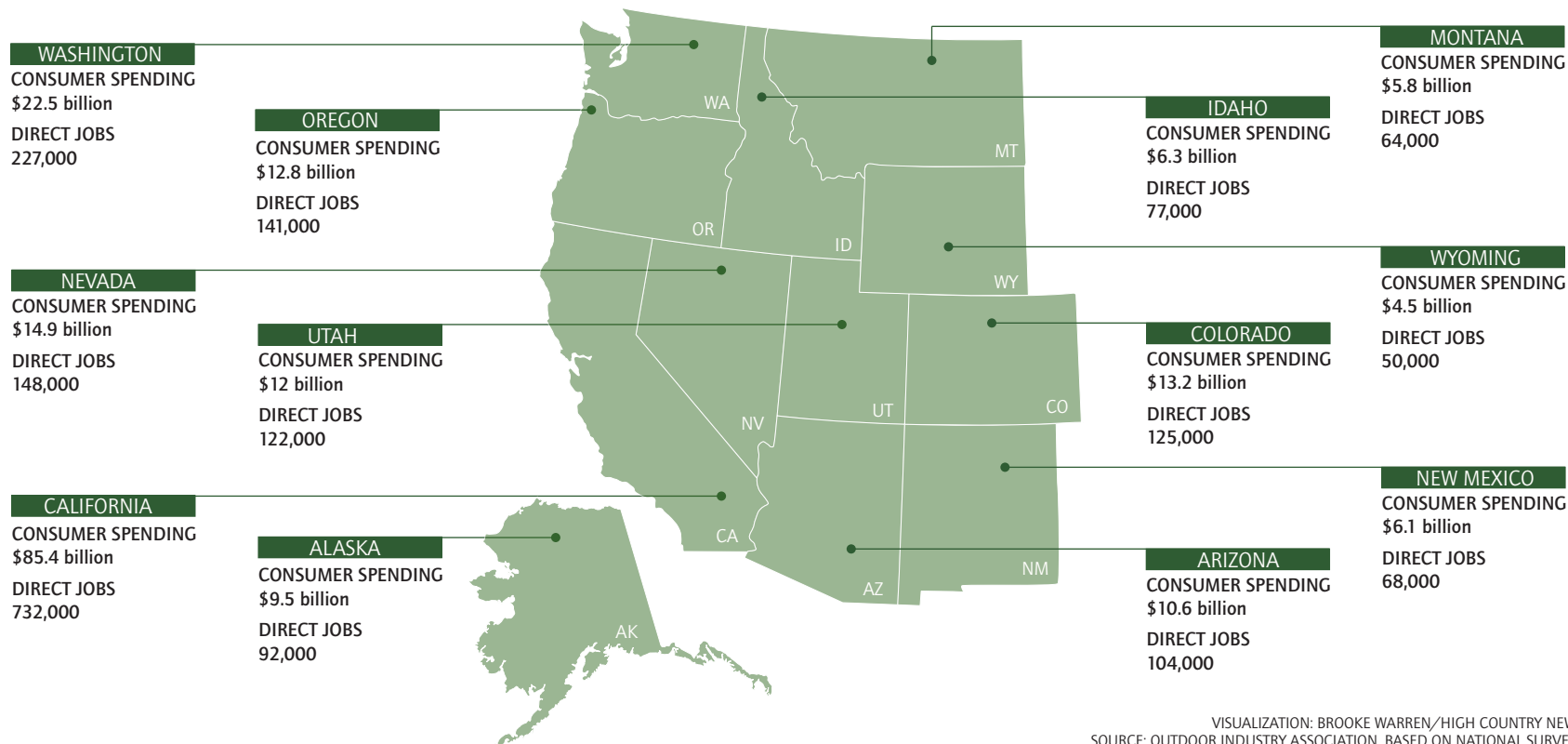
signed the Transfer of Public Lands Act in 2012 and now supports rescinding Bears Ears National Monument.

It's unclear how far Utah's delegation can take its anti-federal lands vision; reversing major monument designations doesn't have much of a precedent. And Rep. Chaffetz recently withdrew a bill to transfer 3.3 million acres of Western public land to state control, after his proposal received harsh criticism from constituents. An in-depth report endorsed by 11 Western attorneys general last year concluded that Utah's legal arguments for a large-scale land transfer are deeply flawed. (Neither Bishop or Chaffetz would respond to HCN's requests for comment on this story.)

As its next step, Metcalf said, the outdoor recreation industry should become more heavily involved with state elections — making public lands an issue on which voters base their choice of candidates at all levels. "We need to make (public lands) a high-profile binary issue," he said.

In 2015, Metcalf stepped down from his CEO role at Black Diamond. Today, as CEO-emeritus, his focus is on advocacy through groups like the Conservation Alliance, which gives grants to environmental organizations. Recently, he's been reading up on how the National Rifle Association and conservative pro-life groups gained the powerful political influence they have. Could the outdoor industry do the same? "You can make a difference in an off-year election," he says. "We can prove whether we can affect an election in two years." □

#### ANNUAL CONSUMER SPENDING AND JOBS GENERATED BY THE OUTDOOR INDUSTRY



VISUALIZATION: BROOKE WARREN/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS  
SOURCE: OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION, BASED ON NATIONAL SURVEYS OF OUTDOOR RECREATION CONDUCTED FOR OIA IN 2011 AND 2012.

# ‘A song in a meadow is a song in a city’

*Urban (wild) life in the music of East Los Angeles’ Quetzal*

BY GEORGE B. SÁNCHEZ-TELLO

As a child, Quetzal Flores used to cut through Ascot Hills after school. On those walks through the 100-acre park, instead of railroad tracks, warehouses and chemical plants, Flores saw coyotes and hawks. That green refuge in dense, urban East Los Angeles County left a profound mark on the boy. “This is one of the last open spaces — the last spaces for animals: a refuge,” says Flores, now 43.

It’s a refuge for people as well, one of the area’s few safe open spaces. Los Angeles lags behind all the other major West Coast cities in terms of acres of park per resident, and East L.A. is especially park-poor; its largest open space is a 137-acre cemetery.

As a Grammy-Award winning musician, Flores celebrates the open space of East L.A. and its urban animals with his Chicano rock band, Quetzal, and the songs on their 2014 concept record *Quetzanimales*.

Flores, Quetzal’s music director and guitarist, sprang from what has become known as the East Los Angeles Renaissance, an early-’90s blossoming of politically engaged musicians and artists, including Grammy Award-winner Ozomatli. These were multicultural groups led by the daughters and sons of Mexican immigrants and first-generation Mexican-Americans, who inherited both the gains and the ongoing struggles of a civil rights movement.

Quetzal captures the sounds of Los Angeles — rock, soul and classical as well as salsa, *cumbia*, *boleros* and *rancheras*. Band members are proud of their role as community musicians, a role that Flores describes as taking an active part in preserving and protecting people and places through a dedicated commitment to craft. The musician, he says, is not the soundtrack to the movement, but part of its fabric.

As the band began to write *Quetzanimales*, they drew inspiration from a genre nearly five centuries old: *Son Jarocho*, traditional music from the rural villages of Mexico’s Gulf Coast. Many of *Son Jarocho*’s lyrics focus on the lives of animals — woodpeckers, doves, iguanas, rabbits and bulls — as metaphors for people: lovers, dancers, the curious and the proud. Quetzal’s members focused on the urban animals in their lives — the coyotes of

Ascot Hills, the geese of Hollenbeck Park and the rooster of Mariachi Plaza — meditating on the conditions in which urban wildlife thrives, beneath bridges, in storm channels and otherwise hidden in plain sight. The urban animals became symbols of the people of those places: street vendors whose livelihood is illegal, community organizers returning to work after crushing defeat; resilient immigrants upholding their culture and language.

Flores also finds inspiration in the perseverance of Hollenbeck Park, one of Los Angeles’ oldest. Once the green jewel of Boyle Heights, the park was severed by the Golden State Freeway more than 50 years ago. As the park lost its prominence, residents took on maintenance work neglected by the city. Today, those residents hail from Mexico and Central America; 100 years ago, they came from Russia, Germany, Eastern Europe and Japan. The commitment to communal space over generations and across culture and language awes Flores. “There’s something telling about that. Something so profound and beautiful,” he says. “Boyle Heights is a great lesson for humanity.”

A sense of place has always been central to Quetzal’s music. And with that place come collaborations that are part of the band’s legacy. In 1997, the band

helped organize an *encuentro*, or gathering, of Chicana and Chicano artists and Zapatista rebels in Southern Mexico. The proliferation of *Son Jarocho* within West Coast Chicana communities is partially due to Quetzal’s work with musicians from Mexico’s Gulf Coast. For the past few years, the band has worked with Japanese and Japanese American musicians in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo to create FandangObon, a participatory festival fusing Japanese, African and Mexican traditions. Locally, the band mentors young musicians, and Flores is part of a group of artists working with California prisoners.

The legacy of nearly a quarter century of work continues with the release this spring of Quetzal’s latest album, *The Eternal Getdown*. Much like *Quetzanimales*, *The Eternal Getdown* is inspired by the people the group has met as well as the places they come from.

At his office in Boyle Heights, Flores often encounters the rooster of Mariachi Plaza, which stalks the sidewalk daily, its feathers a mix of deep red with hues of orange and a black tail with a blue sheen. Despite the congested streets, the bird safely roams up and down driveways, onto porches and through fences around the neighborhood. “Everybody knows that rooster,” Flores explains. “He’s part of the cultural web of Boyle Heights.”

Flores and the rooster squawk at one another. They follow one another. They play. The relationship, Flores says, is crucial to understanding our humanity and sense of place in one of Los Angeles’ most dense urban neighborhoods.

The rooster is given the first words of *Quetzanimales*. Flores says it is a direct call to action: “Wake up, everybody!” □

## Uncommon Westerner

**Band name** Quetzal

### Hometown

East Los Angeles

### First live performance

In 1993 at Troy Café, a Chicano café in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo

### Latest album

*The Eternal Getdown* (2017), a Chicano rock album set to beats ranging from classic rock to Cuban batá

### “Activism”

Band founder Quetzal Flores also helped start Activist Entertainment in 2014, an independent entertainment company representing artists who seek to inspire social change

### Family affair

Flores and percussionist/vocalist Martha González, who met when she began singing for Quetzal, are married; their son, Sandino, sings on 2012’s Grammy-winning *Imaginaries* and duets with González on *The Eternal Getdown*



Quetzal Flores teaches a guitar class for prisoners at the Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga, California. The music his band plays is meant to inspire social change.

PETER MERTS

George Sánchez-Tello lives in East Los Angeles.



# Harry Reid exits the ring

*In an era of political polarization and gridlock, Congress and the West lose a leader who knew how to get things done*

BY JOSHUA ZAFFOS

**R**oger Scholl first met Harry Reid in 1983, the year Reid began his first term in Congress, representing a Las Vegas House district. Scholl, now the state chair of Friends of Nevada Wilderness, had worked for years to develop a sweeping 2.2-million-acre wilderness proposal for U.S. Forest Service lands in Nevada. Reid agreed to support a wilderness bill, with one stipulation: He wouldn't protect a place he hadn't seen himself.

So in July 1985, Scholl took Reid and a group of politicians and government officials on a weeklong tour of the state. Traveling in a twin-engine helicopter, they dropped into staggering landscapes, including high-country lakes set amid towering peaks — the lush yet rugged corners of Nevada that few even knew existed. “It had a kind of religious conversion effect

ness consideration for a number of years.

Reid retired in December at age 77, after an accident left him mostly blind in one eye. He is leaving an impressive public-lands legacy, forged through these sorts of compromises. During his five terms in Congress, Nevada went from having fewer than 67,000 acres of federal wilderness to nearly 3.4 million acres, plus new national parks and conservation areas. “And every piece of legislation was mine,” says Reid. “It hurt my political career in some places, but it was worth it because it was good for the state.”

Reid traces his own environmental awareness to his youthful visits to Piute Springs, a Mojave Desert oasis a day's bumpy drive from the remote mining town of Searchlight, where he grew up. When he returned home as an adult to show his wife his beloved refuge, the springs and a nearby old military fort had been trashed. “Since that day, I have done everything I can to preserve the environment,” Reid says, including helping to create the Mojave Natural Preserve, which protected the springs.

A Mormon convert and one-time boxer, Reid paired a commitment to Nevada and the environment with a pragmatic but stubborn tenacity. Representing a state with minimal, albeit growing, political influence, Reid became the Democrats' ranking Senate leader. He jockeyed Obamacare and the 2009 stimulus package through a polarized Congress. He fended off plans to locate a high-level nuclear waste dump in Nevada, and helped develop his state's renewable energy industry. And while his environmental record isn't spotless, his accomplishments serve as proof of his ability to flat-out get things done in Washington.

“He's never been a politician who tried to play it safe,” says Scholl.

**N**o issue better demonstrates Reid's political muscle than Yucca Mountain, the proposed nuclear-waste repository in Nevada's southwestern corner. When Reid ran for the Senate in 1986, he campaigned on fighting the site. He won the race, but the next year Congress passed what Nevadans call the “Screw Nevada” bill, which removed other sites from consideration, making Yucca Mountain the de facto choice. Reid took the decision personally, fiercely denouncing other politicians who wanted to use Nevada as the country's nuclear waste dump. Reid complained that Yucca Mountain wasn't selected because

scientists considered it the best site, but because the Nevada delegation lacked the power to stop it in Congress. “When they ... jammed it down Nevada's throat, I opposed it for basic unfairness,” Reid says.

For the next 15 years, Reid blocked studies and funds for anything related to Yucca, while raising concerns about the safety of transporting nuclear waste and the risks of earthquakes and groundwater contamination at the site. After President George W. Bush's Energy Department recommended moving forward with plans to store waste there in 2002, Reid wielded his power as Senate minority leader. He held up several Bush appointments to force a deal that landed his own energy advisor a spot on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which is responsible for licensing nuclear storage facilities.

When the Democrats took control of the Senate in 2006, Reid, now majority leader, basically buried the project. He blocked votes on Yucca, and during budget talks stripped more than \$200 million intended for the licensing process. Finally, in 2009, the Obama administration decided that Yucca Mountain would no longer be considered for nuclear-waste storage. (It could, however, be revived under President Donald Trump.)

“But for Harry Reid, we'd have nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain,” says Debbie Sease, the Sierra Club's lobbying director in Washington. Sease recalls a press conference outside the Capitol, where lawmakers and environmentalists gathered to oppose the latest study or funding plans for Yucca Mountain. Reid took the podium, flanked by a semicircle of supporters, including Sease.

“Maybe he was just sweating into the sunlight, but it looked like he was almost tearing up,” Sease says. He spoke of standing up for future generations, and stepped back from the podium. “He just reached back and momentarily squeezed our hands. It was one of those moments where you see a politician not just as a politician but as somebody who has a huge weight of responsibility sitting on his shoulders.”

**O**ver the years, Reid waded into the kind of “no-win” policy quagmires that most politicians avoid. “He was uniquely credible, convening conservatives and liberals,” says John Wallin of the Conservation Lands Foundation. “It's likely we will never see a senator like Sen. Reid again from a state like Nevada.”

In the early '90s, he brokered the Truckee River Accord to resolve a century-long water war between California and Nevada cities, Indian tribes and irrigators who were collectively overusing the river, which runs from Lake Tahoe into Pyramid Lake. The agreement allocated tens of millions of federal dollars to im-

Harry Reid at the National Clean Energy Summit in 2010. He has helped develop both Nevada's and the nation's renewable energy industry.

GERI KODEY/UNLV



on a lot of people,” Scholl recalls. In 1989, Reid, then a U.S. senator, sponsored the Nevada Wilderness Protection Act, which protected 13 new wilderness areas and 733,400 acres.

It was the first new wilderness designated in Nevada since the Wilderness Act passed in 1964, and it happened because Reid struck a shrewd compromise. The bill made concessions to potential developers and Republicans by “releasing” all other roadless Forest Service lands in Nevada — roughly 3 million acres — from wilder-

Correspondent Joshua Zaffos writes from Fort Collins, Colorado. [@jzaffos](#)





Harry Reid checks out a solar panel at the Rob's Ridge Solar Project in Las Vegas, Nevada, during a National Clean Energy Jobs Tour in 2009.

CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS ACTION FUND

prove the Truckee's water quality and to better store and manage flows, while also enabling the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe to restore the lake's fisheries.

Reid has said that negotiating the water deal was even tougher than passing Obamacare. "I was hanged in effigy, and people were really very, very negative," Reid says. "But I was right and they were wrong."

Similarly, he sponsored a run of county-level wilderness bills that incensed rural Nevadans, even though the bills included concessions to transfer or sell off other federal lands around Las Vegas and in rural Nevada. Eastern Nevadans and Republicans also blasted his support for closing local coal-fired power plants and developing more solar energy.

On the other hand, Reid's opposition to reforming the archaic 1872 General Mining Law, which lacks environmental protections and prevents taxpayers from earning royalties from hardrock mines on federal lands, ticked off environmentalists. And his support for a proposed 300-mile pipeline that would move groundwater from remote valleys surrounding Great Basin National Park to Las Vegas enraged both environmentalists and rural conservatives, who see it as a destructive and pricey water grab. Reid, however, argues that the project includes protections to limit groundwater losses and that irrigation reductions would mostly affect alfalfa farming in northern Nevada.

"He doesn't always go through a filter of, 'Is this good for me politically?'" says Kai Anderson, a former advisor. "He would make choices based on what he thought was right and then he would work to make the politics of it work."

After winning re-election in 1998 by just over 400 votes, Reid developed a formidable state network to buoy himself and other Democrats. Nevada Republicans have since been "completely overwhelmed" by what pundits dubbed "the Reid machine," says Chuck Muth, the former executive director of the Nevada Republican Party. Last fall, in addition to winning the state for Hillary Clinton, the network helped elect Reid's handpicked successor — Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto — to the Senate. Another Reid acolyte, Ruben Kihuen, grabbed a U.S. House seat from the GOP.

Reid worked to consolidate power for Democrats in the Senate, too. In 2001, he was instrumental in convincing Vermont's liberal Republican Sen. Jim Jeffords to become an Independent, thereby flipping control of the Senate to the Democrats. Four years later, Reid became minority leader, and remained the most powerful Senate Democrat until his retirement. That made him the quarterback for fighting Republican actions during the Bush years and fulfilling President Obama's agenda.

"He knew how to wield power and to move the agenda forward," Muth says. "And he was willing to do what needed

to be done to get accomplished what he wanted."

Perhaps most notoriously, he triggered the so-called "nuclear option" in the Senate in 2013. Frustrated by Republican obstruction during the Obama years, Reid eliminated most filibusters on presidential nominees and cleared the way for simple majority approvals. "Any program they didn't like, they just wouldn't let us do it," Reid says, by preventing Obama and Democrats from staffing departments, boards and judgeships.

Many Democrats now rue that decision, which has robbed them of much influence over Trump's nominees. Reid, however, has no regrets: "I'm glad I did it. We approved 90 judges and scores of Cabinet officers, and we preserved the filibuster for the Supreme Court. We have a better country now because of what I did."

With Reid's retirement, Nevada's political future becomes uncertain. Many expect to see Yucca Mountain rise from the grave, along with a steep falloff in federal funding for renewable development on Nevada public lands. Others wonder if the "Reid machine" can keep humming without its namesake.

Reid, who is enjoying a break from watching C-SPAN after 34 years in D.C., wonders about that, too, and offers a characteristic view. "The organization doesn't come because you plot it out on a graph or just because people want it to happen," Reid says. "People are going to have to work hard to get it done." □

## THE LATEST

### Backstory

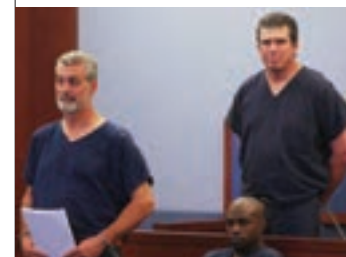
In May 2011, police in Las Vegas, Nevada, arrested Robert Coache, a recently retired state water regulator, and Michael Johnson, an employee of the Virgin Valley Water District. They were accused of **conspiring to take \$1.3 million in kickbacks from local businessman John Lonetti Jr., in exchange for brokering water rights at inflated prices** to Johnson's employer and the powerful Southern Nevada Water Authority ("The Water Hustle," *HCN*, 11/23/15).

### Followup

**In November, a jury found Coache and Johnson guilty of conspiracy, extortion, bribery and dozens of money-laundering charges.** On Jan. 18,

both men received three-to-eight-year prison sentences. Clark County Chief Deputy District Attorney Marc DiGiacomo prosecuted the five-and-a-half-year-long case. "I got one hell of an education in water rights, and an even bigger education in public fraud," says DiGiacomo, who normally handles murder cases. "Despite there being no dead victim, this was a very important case. They've been unrepentant."

MATT JENKINS



**Michael Johnson, left, and Robert Coache during their arraignment in 2011.** SAM MORRIS/LAS VEGAS SUN

# Gaming the big game

*Montana varies seasons to try to trick elk into staying on hunting grounds*

BY EVE BYRON

**C**raig Jourdonnais spots the elk herd within minutes of driving onto the MPG Ranch in the Bitterroot Valley south of Missoula, Montana. It's a blustery December morning and the fresh-fallen snow on the mountainside provides a stark contrast to the animals' two-tone tawny coats. He pauses to watch the 200-plus herd for a moment, then eases his pickup into gear to get a closer look. Elk are a familiar sight for the wildlife biologist and former game warden; he currently works for the MPG, managing the hunters the landowners allow in, as well as the elk when they're on the 10,000-acre ranch.

Elk are thriving in parts of the West, and many states have areas where the populations surpass wildlife managers' goals. Warmer-than-average winters during the past 30 years, combined with good forage and safe havens, mean that more calves survive to breeding age. In Montana, elk numbers grew from 65,000 in 1990 to 160,000 in 2015, despite the reintroduction of wolves. Hunting is the main

tool for keeping elk in check, but as large ranches once open to hunting are sold to people who may prefer watching wildlife to hunting it, this management tool is becoming less effective, while elk numbers continue to grow.

That's frustrating for Montana hunters, most of whom fail to harvest their yearly elk for a variety of reasons. It's also frustrating to longtime ranchers who allow hunting: The elk move to safer havens during the five-week big game rifle season, and then return to nibble ranchers' haystacks for the rest of the winter.

"Elk, more than any other big game animal I have ever managed, are sensitive to predation," Jourdonnais says, a wry grin crossing his tanned face. "They can find refuge from hunters, whether it's security-based, like heavily forested terrain, or on private property that offers safety."

To reduce elk numbers, in 2016, Montana wildlife managers instituted the longest and largest hunting season ever offered in the state — "shoulder seasons" running from August 2016 to February 2017, flanking the regular five-week rifle season in October and November, in about

one-third of its hunting districts. That will work, though, only if the elk are on property where they can be hunted. During the shoulder season, that's mainly private ranches. "If you have five properties and four are wide-open for hunting and one is limited, the elk will find out where that boundary is," says Jourdonnais.

**I**n the 1600s, an estimated 10 million elk roamed the North American continent. Their numbers plummeted with unregulated hunting, competition for grass from domestic livestock and habitat destruction. By the 1890s, there were fewer than 100,000 elk. Their numbers rebounded through wildlife management efforts, growing to more than 1 million by 2009.

That rebound is a success story, and yet too many elk can cause problems. In Yellowstone National Park, they damaged river bottoms by stripping away the willows, aspen and cottonwoods, until reintroduced wolves curbed their numbers. In Wyoming, burgeoning herds crowd into artificial winter feeding grounds, spreading diseases like brucellosis and chronic wasting disease.

◀ A helicopter chases elk to radio-collar them in order to help improve management in the north Sapphire Mountains and the rest of Montana. The North Sapphire Elk Research Project collected information on elk movements and habitat use, forage quality and other factors that potentially affect elk distribution and migratory behavior.

CRAIG JOURDONNAIS

► A herd of elk finds safety in pastures near Stevensville, Montana. The elk have learned to stay near towns or subdivisions where they can't be hunted, and have damaged some fences and haystacks.

PERRY BACKUS/MISSOULIAN





Elk also eat hay and grass intended for cattle. Bill Galt's family-owned 248,000-acre ranch in central Montana makes him one of the state's largest private landowners, and the ranch shelters thousands of elk. He's willing to share the land, but notes that it comes with a price. He fences pastures in a "rest and rotate" manner, grazing cattle on a pasture one year, then fencing it off the next year to give the grass a chance to grow back. But, he says, "the elk do the exact opposite, and fences don't work for elk."

Wildlife managers balance science with the cooperation of ranchers like Galt, along with hunters and the general public, in deciding how many elk should roam the landscape. It's not always easy. Ben Lamb, a longtime hunter and wildlife advocate, describes Montana's situation as "a toxic stew of private land rights, the commercialization of wildlife, public access and climate change."

He ticks off the issues on his fingers. Family ranches are sold to out-of-state corporations, so hunters no longer develop trusting relationships with ranch owners, and fewer hunters are allowed on the land without paying for the privilege. But if private lands are opened only to paying hunters, it puts a monetary value on elk, essentially privatizing the public wildlife. Meanwhile, hotter, drier summers lead to more intense wildfires, which change forage conditions on public lands, limit food and drive animals to

means the state's elk population needs to be reduced by about 29,000. As in other Western states, says Kelly Proffitt, a biologist and wildlife researcher with Fish, Wildlife and Parks, "hunting is essentially the tool the agency uses to move populations up or down to reach those objective levels."

But 85 percent of Montana hunters with elk tags don't fill them; the elk may be on private land where they can't be shot, or the hunters may be using all-terrain vehicles, which tend to spook the animals, rather than hiking into the backcountry. Even in the best situations, getting an elk isn't easy. "Elk are smart. They're an intelligent game animal that knows the country," says John Vore, Montana's game management bureau chief.

In 2015, wildlife managers tried a new "shoulder season" plan in five hunting districts where populations were too high. It was considered a success, with an additional 643 elk taken during the extra season and the dispersal of large herds. In 2016, wildlife managers increased the number of hunting districts participating to 43 of the state's 138.

Montana's shoulder-season hunts are mainly on private property where landowners already have allowed some type of public access during the regular season. Those landowners can set limits on who can hunt on their property and how many elk they can harvest. The rub is that for the shoulder season to work, the

On the MPG, as on many of the state's large ranches, elk wander on and off the unfenced property at will — and they seem to know when hunters are after them, says Jourdonnais. Radio collaring, used in a Fish, Wildlife and Parks study a few years ago, showed that the night before the general big game rifle-hunting season opened, the elk moved from the MPG Ranch to a neighboring one, where little, if any, hunting takes place. Elk experts theorize the increase in humans gearing up for hunting season — scouting game trails, setting up camps, sighting in rifles — alerts the animals to the upcoming danger, prompting their move to safe havens.

Elk, like humans, are incredibly adaptive, and they often respond differently to similar situations; Proffitt says the elk appear to perform a risk analysis. A study in the mid-2000s in south-central Montana's Madison Valley revealed that elk stayed on public lands there during archery season. Yet in the nearby Paradise Valley, archery season triggered the movement of elk to private lands where they can't be pursued. It's hard to make broad generalizations about the reasons behind the different behavior, notes Proffitt. "Some herds don't have refuge areas as an option. Bulls just hole up somewhere and are less tied to forage (than cows with young). Weather is a big driving factor also in elk."

The shoulder season is meant to add a bit of unpredictability. Vore says it's too soon to know the results; the hunters won't be surveyed until after the season ends Feb. 15. Anecdotally, though, he's hearing that this winter's deep snow made it difficult for hunters to reach any elk, and some landowners have not been cooperating.

Jourdonnais' assessment in early February is more blunt: The shoulder season was a bust, thanks mainly to bad weather. "We had 50 to 60 elk hunters out in the deep snow at 22 below zero. It was tough to be out there."

Plus, most of the elk left the MPG Ranch during the shoulder season; they seemed to have learned that if they move near towns and subdivisions, they won't be shot.

As Jourdonnais descended the mountainside on the MPG Ranch back in early December, he noticed what proved to be an omen — something had spooked the elk herd, which moved like an undulating wave up and over the ridgetop, headed toward someone else's property. He notes that unless elk population issues are addressed at a landscape level — not just ranch by ranch — even the shoulder season won't be enough, because the elk will still figure out safe havens. "The key, to me, in elk management is all about not being predictable. You have to keep them guessing; if you establish a pattern, you're done." □



private irrigated fields. And politicians who lack wildlife-management experience institute laws that tie biologists' hands.

One such political action in Montana in 2003 required wildlife managers to meet elk population goals in each hunting district. They tried a variety of tactics, including special hunts, but the population continued to rise. Today, that

elk have to stay on those properties. But landowners can't use artificial means, like salt blocks or fences, to encourage elk to stay. So managers try to trick the elk by hunting in one area but not another, then switching it up. Hunt some days, and not on others; make the elk think the season is over, when it's not. "The best way to hunt elk is with the least amount of pressure," Galt says.



**A Youth Conservation Corps team builds a bridge in the Willamette National Forest, a project funded by the Secure Rural Schools Act.**

U.S. FOREST SERVICE

## THE LATEST

### Backstory

The Secure Rural Schools Act was enacted in 2000 to compensate rural counties — most of them in the 11 Western states — for lost timber revenues after federal-lands logging dropped in the 1990s. The program has received bipartisan support, but its funding expires every few years, and **if Congress fails to reauthorize payments, schools, road projects and public safety in timber country get left in the lurch** ("Seeking balance in Oregon's timber country," *HCN*, 5/6/13).

### Followup

The Secure Rural Schools Act expired again in 2015, with the last payments made in March 2016. Now, a group of 29 senators, led by Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Idaho Republicans Jim Risch and Mike Crapo, is working to reauthorize the act. Until then, **starting in mid-February, states will receive severely reduced funds**. Oregon, which obtains the most federal money, will go from \$86.4 million to \$7 million — a 92 percent cut — if the act is not renewed.

ANNA V. SMITH

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In memory of Ted Smith & Emily Jackson

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### EARTH FORMS

By Stephen Strom.

96 pages, hardcover: \$45.

Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2009.

Winding its way through the red dirt of a canyon floor, a muddy creek carves a path between leafless cottonwoods in Arizona. The image is one of 46 photographs by Stephen Strom collected in *Earth Forms*, a visual celebration of the deserts of the Southwest.

Strom has been a student of light and landscape for decades, both as a professional astronomer studying the origins of our sun and solar system and as a photographer. From the golden, rolling hillsides of California to a spare, shrub-dotted expanse in New Mexico's Capulin Volcano National Monument, the desert landscapes gathered here capture the abstract, rhythmic patterns of nature. As Gregory McNamee writes in one of two accompanying texts, Strom's photographs "speak to the wonder that we experience when we are able to attain a glimpse of something that we know but have never quite seen in the same way before." EMILY BENSON

**Cottonwoods and desert floor, viewed from the Mummy Cave Overlook, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona.** STEPHEN STROM

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## Saying goodbye

We don't get many visitors to the office here in Paonia, Colorado, over the cold winter months, but one reader made the trek in January. **Grace Woods** dropped by when she passed through town on her quest to find a friendly community to settle down and enjoy the bounty of local farms and orchards. We wish you good luck on your search, Grace.

Lately we've been catching up with readers and donors: In late January, Executive Director **Paul Larmer** went to Boulder, Utah, to visit Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, created by former President Bill Clinton in 1996. The last time he was there, in 1997, he got an earful from anti-monument locals and wrote a story about the impending shift of the local economy from ranching and timber to recreation and tourism. This time, Paul saw several longtime *HCN* readers, including **Dave Mock**, who owns the Boulder Mountain Lodge, **Tom** and **Caroline Hoyt** (Tom serves on the board of the Grand Staircase-Escalante Partners, the monument's official support organization), and **Keith Watts**, owner and operator of Earth Tours. The amenity-based economy in Garfield and Kane counties strengthens every year, they say — tour buses and rental cars are now staples on State Highway 12 from March through November, and a new hotel is under construction in nearby Escalante. Yet the old resentments haven't gone away entirely, and some people still hold grudges.

Major gifts officer **Alyssa Pinkerton** caught up with former intern **Jacob Forman** (1991), who

is now a screenwriter. Alyssa and Development Director **Laurie Milford** also met **Mary Gifford**, a retired environmental scientist, who now writes and records music in Denver and is still reading *HCN* after three decades. Thanks, all, for your ideas and support.

On Feb. 17, we'll be saying a heartfelt goodbye to our circulation manager, **Tammy York**, who has spent almost nine years here at *HCN*. Tammy is one of the friendly people behind the scenes handling customer service, managing subscriptions and helping organize *HCN* events. She says keeping up with rapid subscription growth has been a tremendous challenge, especially for digital subscriptions, as *HCN's* web presence expands. On top of all that, she's been a constant warm, smiling presence in the office, and a joy to work with. Tammy says she'll miss the customers she has gotten to know over the years, but also can't wait to spend her time outside the office, hiking in the fresh air. We'll miss you so much, Tammy!

And, a correction: In a recent issue, we incorrectly identified where most jaguars live; most are found in South and Central America, not Mexico ("The Latest," *HCN*, 2/6/16). In the same issue in "Malheur Revisited," we incorrectly used an old number for the National Wildlife Refuge System's acreage. Additions since 2014 have expanded the system to 850 million acres, up from 150 million. We regret the errors.

—Anna V. Smith,  
for the staff



After nine years with *HCN*, Tammy York is taking a break to spend more time outside and with family. BROOKE WARREN

# Overdosed

*After an opioid crackdown in rural Colorado,  
heroin fills the void*

FEATURE BY PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER



On a brisk, sunny day in mid-October, I drove through the affluent suburbs of Craig, Colorado, to a cottage-style house, where I'd been invited to breakfast. Josh Flaharty, a dark-haired 29-year-old with a thick goatee, tattooed arms and a slight potbelly, answered the door and welcomed me inside.

Flaharty, whom I'd met the night before, had been out of prison two months and was staying here, at his parents' house, while he got back on his feet. He led me through the warmly lit home, down a narrow hallway, past woodcarvings of grizzly bears and into the kitchen, where he was making French toast and listening to rap music on a large PC tablet. We spoke briefly about his parents, who were at work, and about his former business building car stereos, which he called Audio Pollution. Before long, though, we were talking about his drug habit and his days as a dealer. Percocet was the easiest drug to find back then, he told me, and selling pills was less risky than heroin. He'd had plenty of practice breaking down opiate painkillers.

"They have a coating on them and gel up," he said. "So what you do is scrape the coating off, cut it into like fourths or eights, put it on a piece of foil, put it in a toaster oven on 400 for about 20 minutes, until it turns into goo, and then put it in

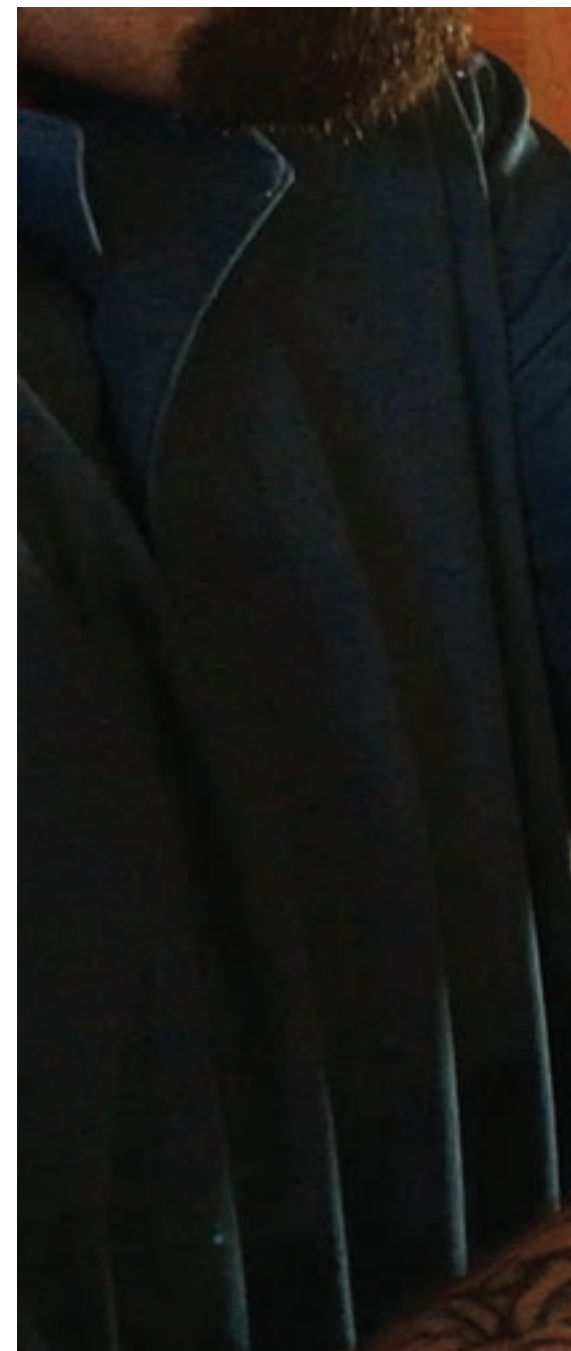
the freezer for a second and then throw it in your spoon and heat it up with water." His hand shook as he dropped a dollop of butter into a sizzling pan. "And it's exactly like heroin."

Flaharty started using heroin a few years ago, he explained, drenching his French toast in syrup, but now he was looking to get clean, to be free of the painkillers, the marijuana, the cocaine, the crystal meth and the heroin, all the drugs he'd been using to one degree or another, prior to the assault that put him in prison four months earlier. Like other addicts in Craig, a small town on the sagebrush steppes of northwest Colorado's coal country, Flaharty found himself in a self-destructive cycle, caught up in a drug epidemic that started with prescription pills and led to heroin. He found, too, that his small town was ill-equipped to help addicts like him deal with their problems. Since he started abusing drugs after high school, at least 60 people had overdosed in Moffat County, 13 of them fatally, according to the best available county-level estimates from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "If I keep doing it —" he stammered, then paused. "I don't want to. I know it doesn't lead anywhere good."

Before he finished his breakfast, Flaharty, who had begun pacing back and forth from the kitchen to the table, disappeared down a hallway, emerging a few

moments later with a red plastic canister. He pulled off its black lid and removed half a dozen syringes, some so worn that the measurements on them had disappeared. Out, too, came a bent spoon, a wad of cotton and a hypodermic needle. From one of the dozen prescription bottles on the counter, he tapped out two orange pills — Adderall. "Have you ever seen anyone slam something before?" he asked, almost boastfully. "Do you mind?"

He crushed the pills with the spoon and mixed the powder with cold water. Then he placed a cotton ball on the spoon and plunged the needle into the cloudy, orange solution. His hands shook as he withdrew the plunger. He took a moment to steady himself. At last he filled the syringe, slid the needle into the crook of his elbow, and pushed the plunger. As the needle entered the vein, a small cloud of blood billowed into the syringe. Flaharty cleared his throat and looked up at me. "You can feel it in your heart and everything."







▲ Josh Flaharty uses a syringe to inject Adderall, for which he has a prescription. While the medication comes in pills, “slamming” it produces a more immediate effect.

PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER

◀ Some of Flaharty’s many prescriptions line the counter top at the home of his parents in Craig, Colorado, where he’s been staying since he got out of jail. BROOKE WARREN

◀ ◀ Inset, facing page: An enlarged 40 mg OxyContin pill, an opioid that has a street value of \$40.

DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION





▲ Steam rises from the Craig Station, a coal-fired power plant that sits above the northwest Colorado town of Craig.  
 ► Yampa Avenue in downtown Craig, where many businesses closed after a downturn in its coal-mining economy, and where Dr. Joel Miller opened his pain clinic in 2006.  
 BROOKE WARREN







## PAIN AND ITS TREATMENT

I first traveled to Craig in March 2016, drawn by reports of the opioid crisis unfolding there. Craig is a conservative community of about 9,000 people, a rundown extractive town past its peak. Along the main drag are two pizza restaurants, a feed store, a barbershop and a liquor store. Shuttered storefronts offer glimpses of yesteryear. Craig exists in an economic purgatory, unable to grow, unable to adapt to new economic realities.

Like other coal towns, Craig has seen a sharp downturn in its mining-based economy. Federal regulations and the low cost of natural gas have combined to create the worst economic climate for coal in decades. Craig's mining wages declined 24 percent between 2010 and 2014, according to a 2015 analysis by Headwaters Economics. Real estate values dropped 8 percent in the same period, as 1,000 residents left Moffat County. Craig's mines are facing a slumping coal market, new and expensive pollution rules, and federal plans to preserve habitat for the dwindling sage grouse. "If you were to draw a bull's-eye in the West where everything is converging, it is Moffat County," County Commissioner Chuck Grobe told the *Denver Post* last year.

For all its misfortunes, Craig remains a place where kids play in the streets,

teenagers flirt at the town park, and older folks brag about the 2 percent sales-tax rate, among the lowest in the nation. Many of the people I met there during weeks of reporting over the past year were proud, steadfast, determined to look past the town's frayed edges and into its future. But first they had to confront the local addiction crisis. The problem lurked out of view for years, but now it was in the open, metastasizing, threatening to overwhelm doctors, teachers and police. Since 2014, Moffat County's law enforcement has documented nearly 230 incidents where narcotics were confiscated. In 2016, they arrested 96 people, three times as many as in 2010, according to the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice.

Yet even as the prevalence of opiates and heroin rises, the area's modest law enforcement is plagued with declining budgets. Addiction has swept through the town's population of 20-somethings — and their parents. At one pizza place, a waitress told me about friends who had come and gone, addicted to prescription painkillers, uppers, downers and street drugs. Other waitresses and bus boys helped me fill my notebook with the names of local addicts, as well as stories of the drama, bad luck and rumors that buzzed around their lives. Residents, police and other addicts described the

realities of the epidemic in painful detail. Most everyone agreed it all started in 2006, when a private pain clinic, High Country Medical, opened downtown.

**M**arch 2006 was a hard and bitter month, with gusty winds that rarely let up and average temperatures below freezing. It snowed on nearly half the days that month. Amid those wintry conditions, Joel Miller, a Texas-born doctor of osteopathy with bleached blond hair, partial to shiny ear studs, opened High Country Medical on Yampa Avenue, the main drag. Miller's clinic took over the space of a hair studio and shared the building with a physical therapist. Miller was a marathon runner and motorcyclist who'd spent five years in Craig working at the Memorial Hospital. In a letter from prison, where he is serving time for unlawful distribution of a controlled substance without a legitimate medical purpose and for providing false information on his medical license to the Federal Drug Administration, Miller told me he'd always wanted to practice rural health. "The number-one reason people seek medical care is pain," he said. "Some people just want to be normal. But a lot of people want to be beyond 'normal.'"

Miller quickly developed a dedicated base of patients who lauded his empathy and attention to their problems. He would make house calls and deliveries, day and night, on weekends. "I wanted to be and was there for my patients," he wrote. "I was part of the community."

Miller's approach wasn't uncommon. In the early 1990s, doctors experienced a paradigm shift in pain management. "More conversations about the grotesque under-treatment of pain were happening more often," Ted Cicero, a pharmaceutical drug researcher from Washington University in St. Louis, told me. The American Pain Society, an organization of health professionals, released a 1995 study that claimed millions of Americans were living with extreme pain. Pain was added as a vital sign to patient health, part of patient evaluations of doctors and their "entitlement to basic health." Suddenly physicians were encouraged to treat chronic pain with the kind of potent opiates that, until the 1990s, were reserved for cancer or for only the most extreme pain. "That opened a market to millions of Americans experiencing anything from severe headaches, back pain, arthritis, post-surgery recovery — you name it," Cicero said. "Pain became entirely subjective, and doctors were suddenly under more pressure to solve it."

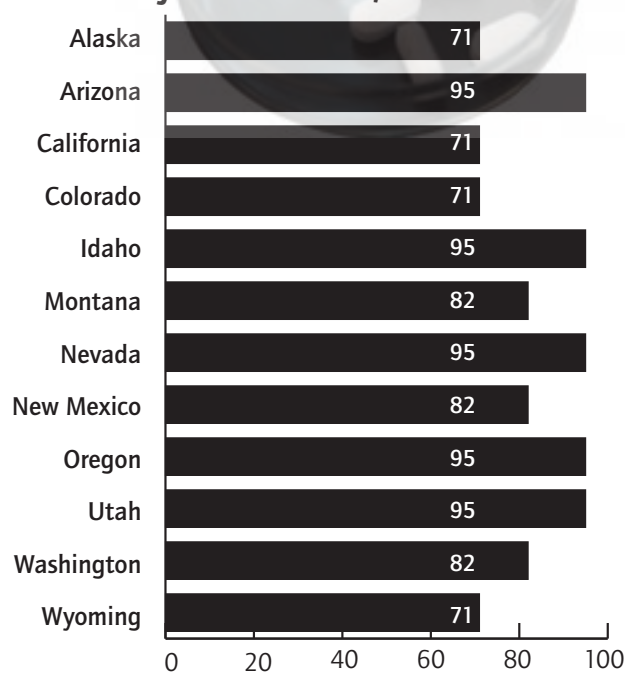
The shift created a new market for brand-name pain pills, and several pharmaceutical companies, including Purdue Pharma, Insys Therapeutics and Endo Pharmaceuticals, developed new medications. Opiates provided the most effective pain relief. So spread the use of MS Contin, OxyContin, liquid morphine, Vicodin — even a medicated lollipop laced with fentanyl, a manufactured opiate

**"Pain became entirely subjective, and doctors were suddenly under more pressure to solve it."**

*—Ted Cicero,  
pharmaceutical  
drug researcher from  
Washington University*



**Number of opioid prescriptions per 100 people, by Western state, 2015**



SOURCE: CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL  
IMAGE: HYDROCODONE PILLS, DEA

painkiller 80 times more potent than morphine. Initially, these new painkillers were marketed as alternatives to addictive opiates. In fact, they created their own addictions.

In 2006, executives of Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer of OxyContin, pleaded guilty to criminal charges for “misbranding and misleading the public” about the drug’s risk of addiction and potential for abuse. In its OxyContin settlement, Purdue Pharma paid \$634.5 million in fines to the Justice Department and to resolve civil lawsuits brought against them by patients who became addicted after being prescribed the substance. Yet between 1995 and 2001, Purdue Pharma made \$2.8 billion in revenue from OxyContin, and the year after its settlement, made more than \$1 billion. By then, numerous OxyContin copycats and generics had entered the market, and the fervor for prescriptions was outpacing society’s understanding of addiction or the best treatment for long-term pain.

In the West, opiate addiction spread quietly, especially in rural areas, where the social stigma prevents communities from resourcing detox facilities, needle exchanges and other programs for addicts. In 1999, approximately 4,000

people died nationwide from opioid pain relievers. In those early days, northern New Mexico towns like Española had the highest death rates from prescription painkillers and heroin, but soon many counties across the West would catch up. In Colorado, in 1999, only 1 percent of treatment admissions in rehabilitation programs were for prescription opioids, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). According to the CDC, in 2006 nearly 14,000 people nationwide died from overdoses on opioid pain relievers.

By 2009, four out of 10 Colorado adults admitted to misusing prescription painkillers, according to a survey by the Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention, which was founded a year earlier to address the epidemic. In 2012, U.S. physicians dispensed 259 million prescriptions for opioid painkillers, enough to give a bottle of the pills to every adult in the country. By 2015, 20 percent of patients in drug treatment were there for opioid addiction, the highest rate of any substance, according to the most recent survey, published in 2016 by SAMHSA and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.



Craig and its residents were caught as unaware as any town in the country.

In 2006, when Miller was establishing his clinic, Josh Flaharty was a high school junior in the nearby town of Oak Creek, 30 minutes from Craig. By 17, he'd shuffled through other high schools. He and his family moved to Craig, and he wrestled with "behavior issues." He was shy, had few friends, and struggled with attention-deficit disorder and depression. Things got better after graduation, especially when Flaharty adopted a brindled boxer named Mr. Bubbles. His luck didn't hold, however. One day, Flaharty took Mr. Bubbles to a junkyard in Oak Creek. As Josh rummaged around for stereo parts

clear, frigid night in March, I arrived at the office to meet with Sgt. Courtland Folks. Folks is 45 and stoic, the head of the county's K-9 unit, whose drug-sniffing dogs are used to combat the spreading drug epidemic. Like Flaharty, he came to Craig as a pre-teen and struggled in high school, eventually getting involved with "the wrong crowd," he told me in his office, where a large bong, confiscated, sat atop a filing cabinet. He experimented with drugs as a teenager in Craig, joined the Army after high school, and returned home in 1994. "In the military, the drug scene doesn't quit," he said. "So that continued. And then I came back and drove a truck. Obviously, there's drugs

people don't just do that anymore. We're seeing pills, meth, heroin, more cocaine. And people are consuming all of them together."

After 2006, police ran into more and more pills. During one traffic stop, a minor was arrested with pills and a loaded gun. In another incident, Craig police staked out a Loaf 'N Jug, where a young couple had stashed their pills. In a routine drunk-driver stop, the suspect denied drinking, but admitted to taking a mix of prescription pills. One woman reported multiple burglaries, including 150-pill bottles of 40-milligram oxycodone, each pill worth about \$40 on the street. "We figured out that she was doing this so she could get her hands on more medication," Folks said. "Even one incident like this was surprising for a small community like Craig. We were seeing this just come out of nowhere. The community didn't have a painkiller problem, and then suddenly it did."

During many of those calls, officers found medical bottles with Joel Miller's name on them. Miller told me his practice filled up with patients in its first year. By its one-year anniversary, High Country Medical was seeing 25 to 30 people on a typical day, in a county of about 13,000.

"There were some patients that were abusing a situation," Folks said. "But there was a doctor out there enabling their addictions."

In 2010, Colorado implemented a new prescription pill-monitoring program, which created a statewide shared database for doctors, pharmacists and other health care providers to track patients' medication use, in real-time.

The Craig Police Department and the Moffat County Sheriff's Office shared a special task force, the All Crimes Enforcement Team, or ACET, which began to focus on drug possession in the area. By then, Folks had four dogs that were regularly on shift and available whenever drug possession was suspected. Law enforcement started pulling over more people and issuing more tickets for drug possession. "It got to a point where we were actually breaking up 'Skittles parties,' where high school kids were partying over bowls filled with dozens of pills," Folks told me. "We were seeing a shift from kids drinking and partying, to high school-aged kids that were getting high on their parents' prescriptions."

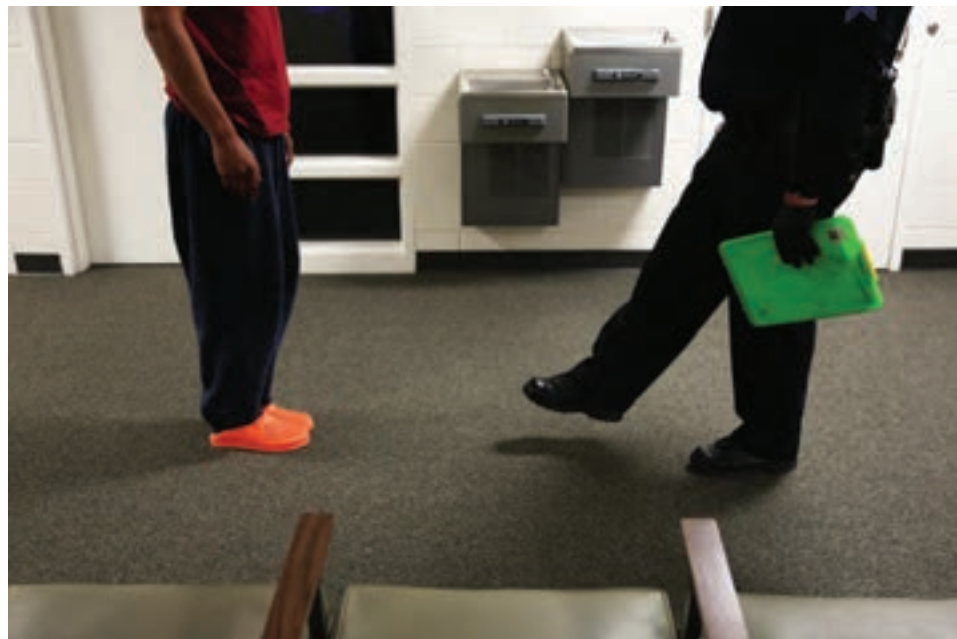
A young, ambitious investigator on Moffat County's special crime force, Ryan Hess, began looking into reports from community tipsters about High Country Medical. "There were several doctors, practitioners and pharmacists in the area that had, throughout a period of, I'd say, about two or three months, came up to me and spoke to me about Miller's practices," Hess told me.

A City Market pharmacist, a nurse practitioner and an emergency room doctor all reported that Miller's patients were being over-prescribed medication

◀◀ Sgt. Courtland Folks of the Moffat County Sheriff's Office addresses a driver after his K-9 dog, Kilo, indicates the presence of narcotics in a vehicle he's stopped. Kilo is trained to detect meth, heroin, ecstasy and cocaine.

◀ Alvin Luker, a corporal with the Craig Police Department and the drug recognition expert for Craig's law enforcement, evaluates a man after he was arrested for driving under the influence of an unknown substance.

BROOKE WARREN



to rebuild a set of speakers, Mr. Bubbles slipped away and onto the property of a rancher, who shot and killed the dog. That experience proved deeply traumatic to Flaharty, who was soon after diagnosed with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2010, he underwent a spinal fusion surgery to fix two slipped discs in his back, and was prescribed an opiate painkiller.

"Getting those pills was actually the worst thing that could have happened," he told me. "I latched onto them." Over the course of a year, he refilled his prescriptions through his doctor, but he also started using methamphetamines. Sometimes he'd sell off extra pills to buy other drugs. "I started selling drugs because that was the only way I could have people around," he said. "I mean, I stayed away from the really hard stuff at first, and would only sell it to people, but eventually I would get invited to do meth or something with someone after I sold it to them. They were lonely, too."

The Moffat County Sheriff's Office shares a single-level tan-brick building with the Craig Police Department and Colorado State Patrol. On a

everywhere when you're running the interstate. Those first-hand experiences were my life on the other side of the badge, so to speak." In 2000, he joined the sheriff's office, and by 2004 was head of the K-9 unit.

Folks started with one dog, a chocolate lab named Gonzo's Drug Barracuda Czar. On patrols, he saw how drugs were taking hold of his community. "In a rural, secluded place like Craig, people that don't get out never face themselves," he said. "They continue to do drugs because they fall into those habits. When I first entered law enforcement, I would encounter many old friends that I used to party with. I still have to face myself every day and remind myself why I didn't go down that path."

Craig's drug use changed over time, he said. "For whatever reason, a few years ago our meth problem starting changing, and we began seeing a multitude of narcotics coming in. Lot of pills and heroin started showing up." Craig had had a lot of experience with meth abuse, Folks said, adding that, "really, in the history here, we've learned how to deal with meth. There will always be a portion of the population doing it, but we felt like we had it under control. But now

to the point of abuse and addiction. Over the year, Hess, analyzed patterns and interviewed dozens of witnesses, including Miller's patients. He suspected Miller's practices were enabling some of his patients to distribute painkillers to drug users in the community, and began building a case. Hess started referring to High Country Medical as a "pill mill ... totally out of control." He reached out to the federal Drug Enforcement Agency and the Colorado attorney general's office for help with his investigation.

wrappers and tissues, they found pain pills stashed under the bed and, on a small table, an open packet for a fentanyl patch, the likely cause of the overdose. The patch had been prescribed by Miller.

**O**n a crisp Monday morning in April 2012, Moffat County officers, an officer from the Colorado attorney general's office and three DEA agents entered the back door of High Country Medical, search warrant in hand. They found Miller's office torn apart, moving

was a strange moment of calm as Gjellum waited for the suspect to get off the phone. Then Gjellum served his warrant. Investigators found a refrigerator in the break room full of hard liquor, and they seized loose prescription drugs, including fentanyl patches, the strongest prescription narcotic available.

No one was arrested, but Hess had Miller's patient records and began putting together a grand jury indictment for Miller's prescription practices. Just 10 days after the raid, a 53-year-old former coal miner named Philip Bachle overdosed on a combination of hydrocodone, an opioid pain medication, and diazepam, a sedative that treats anxiety, both prescribed by Miller. The miner was found alone in his apartment several days after his death. He had no children and no family. There wasn't even an obituary in the *Craig Daily Press*, the town's only newspaper.

After his practice was seized, Miller's personal life began to implode. Between July 2012 and August 2013, police responded to multiple domestic violence calls at Miller's home. Laura Houston, Miller's girlfriend at the time, told police that Miller was "constantly taking pills," drinking alcohol and "trying to figure out who ratted him out," according to Hess' testimony. (Houston did not testify at the trial.)

The Colorado Board of Medicine issued a letter to Miller requiring him to go to an out-of-state treatment facility for a substance abuse evaluation. Miller missed the deadline, and his license was ultimately suspended. In August 2012, he violated court orders and left the state for the Sturgis motorcycle rally in South Dakota with Houston and friends. In February 2013, Houston contacted Hess, worried Miller was going to kill himself. "I need some meth, some coke," Miller had texted. "Better yet, both. Then some heroin to OD on. I'm gone forever."

On Aug. 26, 2013, police arrested Miller and charged him with health care fraud, unlawfully distributing controlled substances and dispensing substances resulting in death. On Nov. 9, 2015, Miller was found guilty of seven counts of unlawfully distributing controlled substances and for providing false information to the DEA and state medical board. (He was, however, cleared of the charges related to the deaths of Volkmar and Bachle.) He was ultimately sentenced to five years in prison. Given the nearly two years he has already served, he could be out as soon as December 2017.

Miller now teaches health and yoga classes to fellow inmates at the Federal Correctional Institution in Englewood, Colorado. He continues to defend his practice and the way he treated Craig's pain. "In the current era of medical practice, there are conflicting goals in care and for management of pain," he wrote. "I personally stand by my practice of medicine. There are social priorities and an

Joel Miller outside the High Country Medical clinic he operated in Craig between 2006 and 2012. Miller kept operating the clinic even after the Colorado Board of Medical Examiners suspended his medical license.

FILE PHOTO COURTESY CRAIG DAILY PRESS

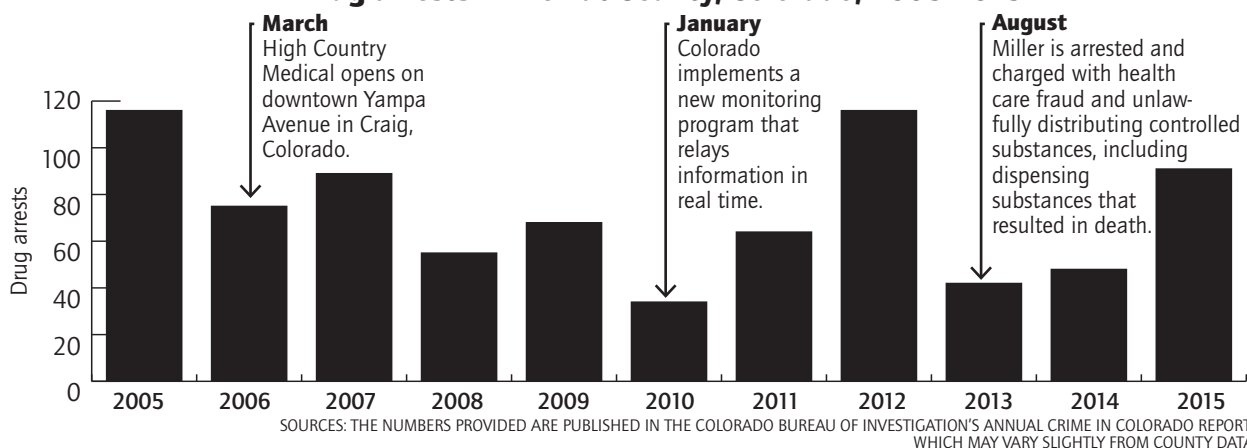


On a late summer evening in August 2010, police responded to a report of a fatality in a mixed industrial-residential neighborhood in Craig. At a small white home, officers Travis Young and Josh Martinez found a group of distraught teenagers, who pointed them to one of the bedrooms. There, on the floor, they found the body of Shelly Volkmar, 44, in shorts and a tank top, lying on her back. Her hands were folded together, as if in prayer, and there were remnants of dried white foam around her mouth. As they searched the stuffy room, amid food

boxes and patient files scattered throughout. Miller and his staff, perhaps tipped off, had tried moving out of the office space and into an office across the hall.

Undeterred, the team quietly entered that office's back door and approached the front counter, where they found Miller talking on his cellphone. The doctor made eye contact with John Gjellum, a special agent with the DEA, but stayed on his phone for around half a minute. By then, Hess, the attorney general's office and the DEA had been investigating Miller for nearly two years, and there

### Drug arrests in Moffat County, Colorado, 2005-2015







immense supply of ways to treat people. As a byproduct, legitimate well-meaning providers can be and are caught in the crosshairs of this battle and become collateral damage.”

In fact, it was many of Miller’s patients who became collateral damage. Some of the worst damage may yet be to come.

#### FILLING THE VOID

By the summer of 2010, Josh Flaharty knew he had a painkiller addiction. He was still taking oxycodone, and usually at higher doses than prescribed, though he was judicious about keeping a few to sell. His back still acted up, and the pills eased the pain, but his life had grown increasingly complicated, largely because of the company he kept. By that summer, he was living in his car, floating from couch to couch in Craig’s drug underground. Flaharty was usually the person who would sell his spare pills or track down some meth, driving down the dark road to Oak Creek, or meeting dealers at the nearby Dinosaur National Monument. Once he scored, he would head back to one of Craig’s rundown drug houses, where there was always someone doing something. “For drugs like heroin and meth, people are using them all night,” he told me. “They start looking for it, I mean, whenever. It

was never boring.”

In late 2010, as he filled a prescription, Flaharty complained to the pharmacist that he thought he was supposed to get more pills than he’d received. The pharmacist, who logged the incident in the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, flagged him. His doctor, based in Steamboat Springs, was alerted and dropped him as a patient. Flaharty had other doctors and a counselor, and therefore a steady supply of Adderall, which he says allayed the worst of his opioid withdrawal. He began abusing that, too, taking more than 60 milligrams a day. As his tolerance built, he started breaking it down and shooting it up. When that didn’t feel like enough, and often it didn’t, he would smoke meth. And because he was already using his medications intravenously, it wasn’t long before he was shooting up meth, too.

The deeper Flaharty tumbled into addiction, the more erratic and lonely his life became. “I didn’t have any real friends,” he said. “And when you’re coming down from drugs and realizing that no one is there at those times, it feels worse than it did when you were clean and lonely.”

For years, Flaharty got by on meth and medication. He became the go-to guy for many meth users in Craig, and while he could get most of his supplies locally,

sometimes he would go down to Denver to re-up. On one of those trips, in 2014, he was offered heroin for the first time. He smoked it. “I honestly don’t remember a lot about that, but I thought it was good enough to bring it back,” Flaharty said. He wasn’t the only one who started selling heroin in Craig; according to local law enforcement, other dealers were bringing it in from Wyoming, Denver and Steamboat Springs. “It started to be that thing that a lot of people wanted,” Flaharty said.

By the time that Miller was convicted in 2015, Flaharty was mostly alone and his life was increasingly chaotic. He had run-ins with the local police, including a charge for theft. One day, a mailman called the police, because Flaharty had been stashing his dirty heroin spoon and needles in his mailbox. He was making regular trips for heroin and living with other drug users in town. “I was doing a lot of meth to mostly stay distracted and busy,” he said. “When you’re using meth, you are focused on whatever is right in front of you, and the days go by really quick. So nothing really matters. When I would come down from meth I’d try to take it easy for a couple days, but I’d usually end up running an errand for someone who wanted heroin, and then I’d use with them. It’s pretty hard to stop at that point.”

**Josh Flaharty visits his bedroom in an old trailer, damaged during the years he and other drug users stayed and partied there. Flaharty and his mother are now working to repair holes in the walls and other damage in preparation for renting it.**

BROOKE WARREN



A woman and her husband discuss housing options while they stand on the street with their family's belongings after leaving the place they were staying because of a physical altercation. Meanwhile, the local authorities had come to arrest the owners of the house, where as many as 10 people had been staying, and where Josh Flaharty says he used to stay and get drugs. BROOKE WARREN



**"It takes a very serious person to recover. They have to leave the community. When this is all you know, that's a very hard thing to do."**

—Annette Norton,  
supervisor of Craig's  
drug probation  
program

In 2014, Ted Cicero, the researcher at Washington University in St. Louis, joined the Center for Applied Research on Substance Use and Health Disparities at Nova Southeastern University to study a shift in the demographics of heroin users. Until then, there hadn't been any research on heroin users today compared to 40 to 50 years ago, but researchers suspected they had changed.

Cicero and his colleagues used data from an ongoing nationwide program called the Survey of Key Informants Patients (SKIP), which consists of 150 public and privately funded drug rehabilitation and treatment centers across the country. SKIP recruits its clients to participate in an anonymous survey that asks them to explain their personal patterns of abuse and addiction. In return, participants — 85 percent of patients approached completed the 2013 survey — received a \$20 Wal-Mart gift card.

Of more than 9,000 recovering opioid addicts that completed the survey, nearly 3,000 reported heroin as their drug of choice. Cicero focused on that subset, seeking users willing to give up their anonymity for a structured interview. Fifty-four people responded. Over a three-month period in 2013, they described their relationship to heroin and to prescription opioid compounds like fentanyl or oxycodone.

Cicero identified three patterns. Some chose heroin because it was cheap and easy to find, and others because it was easy to inject. Still others used it because the high was comparable to that produced by prescription painkillers.

The study also found a major shift in users. In the 1960s, 83 percent of heroin users were men in their early 20s, typically minorities living in urban areas, whose first opiate experience was with heroin. According to Cicero's study, the vast majority of heroin users today, 75 percent, are, on average, 23 years old, both men and women, living in rural or suburban areas, who were introduced to opioids through prescription drugs.

Even though whites and non-whites were equally represented in Cicero's study, 90 percent of respondents who started using heroin over the last decade were white. "Prescription opioids are legal, are prescribed by a physician and are considered trustworthy and predictable," Cicero told me. His study found that despite the fact that users viewed painkillers as "safer," some prescription opioid abusers, particularly those who inject or inhale their drugs, graduate to heroin. "The pharmaceutical industry and the approach to treating pain has essentially primed the market for heroin abuse," Cicero said.

In May 2016, Purdue Pharma issued a statement defending its popular drug, OxyContin: "For more than a decade, Purdue Pharma has sought to play a constructive role in the fight against opioid abuse, including by reformulating OxyContin with abuse-deterrent properties and leading our industry in this area of innovation." In December 2016, in a rare show of unity among a deeply divided Senate, Congress passed the 21st Century Cures Act, which provides \$500 million a year to help states prevent opioid abuse and get

better treatment for addicts.

In 2010, states across the country began improving and implementing prescription pill-monitoring programs, which were inconsistently used by doctors and pharmacists before. The programs helped doctors see exactly what prescriptions their patients were using, when they were prescribed, when they were picked up from pharmacies and when they were refilled. They could also tell whether or not their patients were seeing more than one doctor. The information made it possible for physicians to discover whether a patient was "doctor shopping" or potentially abusing prescriptions. These regulations led to more dismissals of patients by doctors, as happened to Flaharty, and to crackdowns on "pill mills," including High Country Medical.

As a result, fewer prescriptive opioids made their way into the medicine cabinets of middle-class users. Unfortunately, many of those people had already become tolerant to high doses, and this appears to have led to increased heroin use. Of the 9,000 respondents in Cicero's SKIP survey, 88 of the heroin users said they started in the 1960s; more than 1,600 said they took up the drug after 2000. Of those in the second group, 94 percent reported their first opioid use through prescription pills.

One of Cicero's interviewees explained the shift: "OxyContin was getting harder and harder to get and the pills you could get weren't as easy to use in a needle. They would just 'gel up.' It was cheaper and easier to get heroin, which was much stronger and would get you higher than Oxycodone (a generic version of the



drug).” Because opioid prescriptions and heroin are both opiate derivatives, the highs are similar. Some users reported a “cleaner” high from prescriptions, but found heroin cheaper and easier to find.

Overall, the response to the epidemic in the West has been a “whack-a-mole approach,” Susan Kingston, coordinator for the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute at the Center for Opioid Safety Education in Seattle, told me. “We’re trying to make any change we can. Big solutions are happening, but they are slow and need a lot of money and political commitment.”

In Colorado, all licensed pharmacists and prescribers are required to register a Prescription Drug Monitoring Program account and log all visits and the drugs dispensed in real time. Other states across the West began implementing their own monitoring programs, following Colorado’s lead and ensuring that the reporting tools were up-to-date. Colorado, Oregon and Washington were among the most aggressive users of monitoring programs to crack down on pill abuse.

In September 2016, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services established \$11 million in grants for Colorado, among 10 other states, to expand rehabilitation services for those with opioid addiction disorders. The state has among the highest treatment rates, according to SAMHSA, and so far has received more than \$51 million in federal grants to fight addiction. Yet the problem stubbornly persists.

**I**n Craig, heroin abuse has jumped. From the time High Country Medical closed, in 2012, to 2015, heroin busts went up 70 percent, from 36 to 121, according to estimates from the Colorado Department of Justice. (There were just seven violations in the decade prior to Miller’s arrival.)

Craig’s jail is nearly too small to hold the number of people now coming into it. In September 2016, Folks and the correctional staff had to expand the size of the women’s ward. All told, the majority of women and men in Craig’s jail are there for drug-related crimes, increasingly involving heroin. In 2016, 145 people were brought in on drug-related charges, according to the department’s most recent annual report, and a handful of young women went through heroin withdrawal in their cells. “We don’t have much for them, except for a safe and supervised place to go through that,” Folks told me. “If it gets really bad, we call the ambulance and get them to the hospital.”

Meanwhile, Craig’s police department budget has continued to decrease, falling from \$3.2 million 2013 to \$2.7 million in 2015. That means Folks and the other police in Craig are facing a growing problem with diminishing resources. And the very nature of Craig, with its rural isolation, has made things even more difficult.

“If people were only doing prescription pills, we could get a handle on that,” Folks said. “We seemed to, when we dis-



mantled High Country Medical. If people were only doing heroin, we could begin to get our hands around that problem, but this is a really complex drug environment here, because it’s a rural community. There’s not a steady supply, so people are taking whatever they can get. That leads to a lot of poly-drug users. Mixing these drugs makes overdoses more likely.”

Not only is law enforcement overwhelmed, but other services are, as well. The drug courts are crowded with cases and there are no nearby facilities where addicts can go to recover. In urban areas, addicts have access to detox facilities, methadone clinics that can help them get back to work, rehab centers and mental health services. In Craig, there are none of these. So addicts tend to stay addicts, finding short respites of sobriety in jail or through drug court.

“We’re in uncharted territory,” Annette Norton, supervisor of Craig’s drug probation program, told me in October. “This is a complicated problem, far more complicated than anyone has acknowledged here in Craig. There are deep, deep histories of mental illness that have never been addressed here. It takes a very serious person to recover. They have to leave the community. When this is all you know, that’s a very hard thing to do.”

**W**hen I visited Craig in October, I went in search of the kind of help available to an addict there. A wild goose chase ensued. I called the numbers listed online for those who sought to get clean, and checked the phonebooks for local Narcotics Anony-

mous groups. I was met with dial tones and the screeches of out-of-service numbers. Some of the numbers connected me to former contacts now based in faraway places. None of the information I could find seemed current. I searched Facebook support groups and visited a halfway house to see if I could talk to recovering addicts, but no one would help me. I attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, hoping that I might meet someone who could help me learn more about options for drug addicts. There, a friendly, tired woman told me about a weekly Narcotics Anonymous meeting at the Christian church on Ledford Street, run by a woman named Elizabeth Tucker.

On a warm Thursday evening, I arrived at the church, which sits next to a Pizza Hut downtown. A few other cars idled in the parking lot with their just-out-of-view drivers waiting inside. A young man sat in his car smoking, his cigarette peeking through a slightly opened window. At last, Elizabeth Tucker arrived. She wore a white hoodie, her long black hair framing a pale face with light blue eyes. I followed her and a small group of others through the church’s back door, and, once she had turned on the lights, introduced myself. We talked as she began setting up chairs in a circle.

Tucker, who is 28, was one of Miller’s patients. She’d first gone to see him for elbow pain, shortly after his practice opened. He prescribed her a high-dose hydrocodone. That worked for a while, but when the nagging pain returned, Miller upped the dose. She stayed on painkillers for more than a year. She began gaining

**Elizabeth Tucker leaves a church-sponsored addict support group with her husband, Adam, whom she met in parole court and did meth with, and her daughter Emma. Elizabeth Tucker was one of Joel Miller’s former patients who eventually became addicted to meth. Now that she’s in recovery she organizes the local Narcotics Anonymous group, one of the few services available for recovering addicts in Craig. BROOKE WARREN**



"We arrest them, they go through the drug court system, and then we go around again."

—Sgt. Courtland Folks, Moffat County Sheriff's Office



**Top, Sgt. Courtland Folks of the Moffat County Sheriff's Office places synthetic narcotics in bins as part of a training for his dog, Kilo. Above, Josh Flaharty and his mom, Elizabeth, get Frosties from Wendy's, after visiting the trailer where he lived before his arrest. BROOKE WARREN**

weight, so Miller wrote a prescription for a schedule II amphetamine, meant to treat attention deficit disorders. After Miller was arrested, Tucker tried to find pills on the street, but that was getting harder. Without the pain pills, she went into withdrawal and would be debilitated for days. To counter that, she'd take amphetamines. When she ran out of those, she went looking for crystal meth, which was cheaper, longer-lasting and easy to find. She lost track of days at a time, befriended other addicts, got kicked out of one place after another. Two years of her life passed. She had three children and lost them to social services. "It's impossible to describe

the personal failure of being a mother that loses her children," she told me.

That experience spurred her recovery, however. There were few services, as NA and AA groups formed and dissolved, depending on the woes of the people running them. She met Adam, now her husband, and they used and struggled through their addiction together. Then she got pregnant but continued to use until a few weeks before her due date. In 2014, she had a fourth child, a baby girl named Emma, and she's been clean ever since. "We saw a window where we could be a family. So we did," Tucker said. In Craig, this counts as a success story.

Tucker's NA meeting is the only one for 40 miles, held once a week. Eventually, the dozen or so chairs she had set out were filled, by men and women aged mostly from mid-20s to late 50s. One man had come down from Wyoming. The meeting took about an hour, and when it broke up, I chatted with some of the participants behind the church, as they lit up cigarettes. A young man with dark hair and a goatee approached and introduced himself. His name was Josh Flaharty.

"So, this is it," Elizabeth Flaharty, Josh's mother, said as we walked into a green and white trailer, in a mixed commercial and residential zone in downtown Craig. "If you would have come here six months ago, those windows would be broken, this step here would have been broken. It's a lot better now." Josh Flaharty stood nearby, quietly, letting his mother do most of the talking.

From the outside, the place didn't look so bad. Josh had parties, and sometimes people trashed the place, but he hadn't lived here since June. It had been mostly patched up, with new siding on the outside and drywall plastered inside. But there were still dents in the door and black stains where people stubbed out cigarettes on the makeshift porch — scars that hinted at Josh's old life here. Elizabeth pointed out a "No Trespassing" sign duct-taped to the front of the trailer. "We had to put that there, because after Josh was arrested, there were still people trying to come here and use drugs," she said.

On June 25, 2016, Josh was using drugs with his regular circle — three other local addicts, including a man who was crashing at the trailer after a days-



long binge of heroin, pills and meth. Josh eventually fell asleep, he claims, then woke up with the man's hands around his throat. Josh says he fought back, knocking over a hubcap ashtray and spilling ash and cigarette butts on the carpet, before he grabbed a wood plank and beat the man unconscious. A neighbor called the police, and Josh was arrested and charged with attempted murder. His mother bailed him out, and since then, his trial has been scheduled and rescheduled and scheduled again. He'd been out for less than two months when we met at the Narcotics Anonymous meeting, and he was still using meth and other drugs regularly.

We walked through the trailer, where obscene drawings in marker decorated the white walls, and ashes still lay mashed into the stale carpet. "At least the blood got cleaned up," he said. That was his mother's doing. "After he was arrested, I came over so many times," Elizabeth said. "My son is in jail, he's facing murder charges, and every time I came over here I couldn't do more than just stand inside of the door and cry. Now that he's in so much trouble and is finally talking about getting clean, I really hope this is the time it will actually happen."

Josh and I stood looking into the kitchen, where paper towels and all-purpose cleaner still sat on the counter. It was hard to imagine where he could go from here. He'd been denied access to a new in-patient recovery center, in nearby

Steamboat Springs, because of the criminal charges against him. Beyond that, options were few: a long-term in-patient rehab in Vernal, Utah, 120 miles away, a detox center in Glenwood Springs, 115 miles away, or long-term care in Denver, a nearly four-hour drive from here. Josh didn't like his odds of recovery outside of Craig, tough as things may be here in his hometown. Denver, after all, was where he first encountered heroin.

"In the cities, there are more drugs, more people," Josh said, "but no family to keep you in check. It's easy to forget what you're fighting for."

**A**s addicts like Josh Flaharty and Elizabeth Tucker battle to reclaim their lives, the town of Craig seems destined to struggle with its drug problem for a long time to come. Craig's law enforcement has grown frustrated with the few resources for drug addicts.

In October, I joined Folks outside of the sheriff's office for a training session with his drug dog, Kilo, a 5-year-old Belgian Malinois. On a sunny day with a light breeze, we stood beside his unmarked Suburban in the back parking lot, where about half a dozen other police cars were parked. Folks opened the back door of his car and Kilo leapt inside, ready for another patrol. Folks walked to the back hatch of the car, opened it, and pulled out an arsenal of training tools, certified by the DEA.

Among them were four large rub-

ber storage bins with hidden compartments. He set them out, one by one. As he positioned them on the concrete, he put a PVC pipe in the second bin from the left side, among the other three just like it that were lined up for the training. As we walked back to the Suburban, he talked about his patrols in Craig with Kilo and what happens to the people that get caught.

"We find drugs, we arrest them, they go through the drug court system, and then we go around again," he said, as Kilo sat waiting in the vehicle. "I've talked to more people in the last year about rehab than I have in my entire life. We're trying to find solutions for people that want help, but when a person can't even afford the \$100 a day that it costs for them to get high, it's even harder to afford the \$50,000 cost for rehab."

Folks put on a pair of gloves and reached into a plastic pencil case. He pulled out a small, tan sack of synthetic heroin. He walked to the row of bins, put the stash in the second from the left, and walked back to the Suburban. He opened the door and Kilo jumped out and rushed to the bins. Folks stood back, watching sternly. Kilo moved from bin to bin, then stopped for a moment at the drug stash, but moved on. He then started barking at the last bin in the row, then sat down and calmly put his paw on the bin, the indication for a find. Folks looked at the dog in quiet frustration, then muttered: "That's not the right one." □



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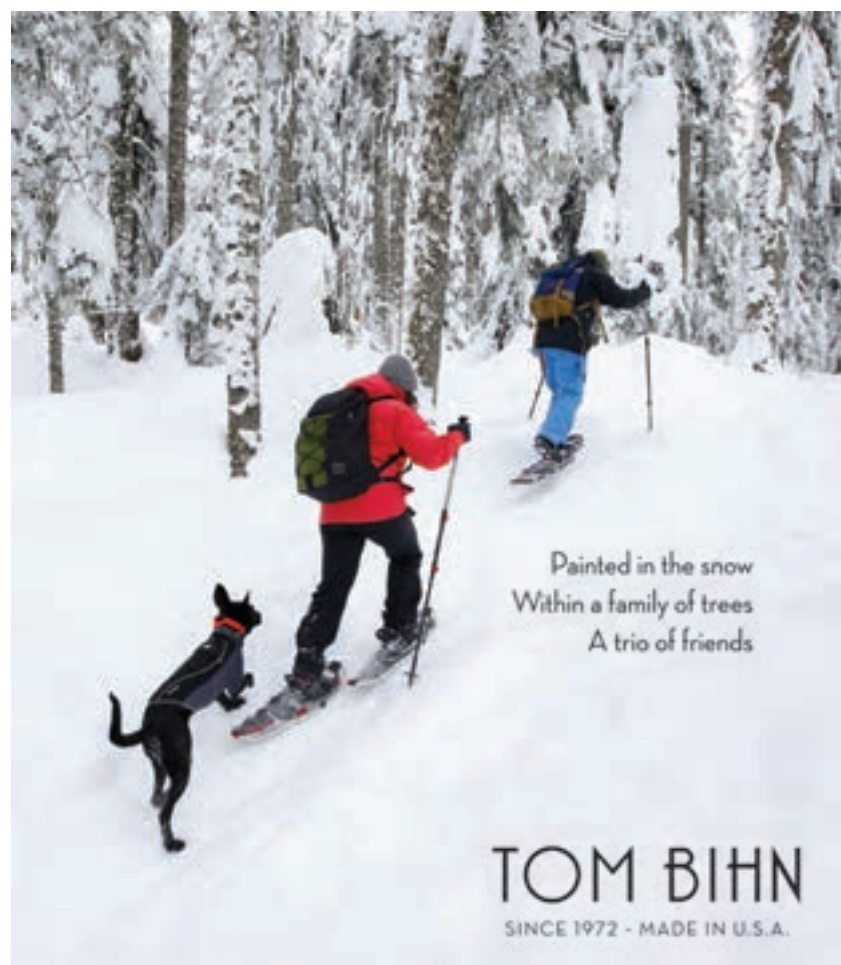
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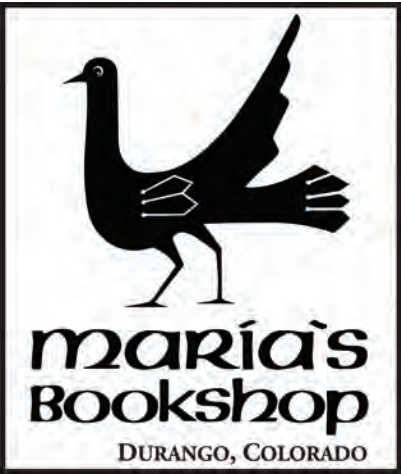
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**High Country News** 



# Wildlife against the wall



OPINION BY  
BEN GOLDFARB

The Santa Rita Mountains, a chain of forested peaks that rise from the desert southeast of Tucson, Arizona, rank among the Southwest's premier biodiversity hotspots. The region's most notable resident is a 160-pound, Mexican-born male jaguar called El Jefe, who was first spotted on American soil in 2011. While El Jefe rules the Santa Ritas, he'll likely have to return to Mexico to produce an heir. The United States hasn't hosted a verified female jaguar since 1963.

For El Jefe and the border's other wild inhabitants, searching for love is a complicated proposition. The United States shares a 2,000-mile border with its southern neighbor, nearly 700 miles of which is blocked by fences and vehicle barriers. Still, it remains relatively crossable for wildlife; some stretches of the Santa Ritas, for instance, are too rugged

nectivity to conservation. Species from wolverines to salamanders require not only protected areas to thrive, but also safe passage between them. Wide-ranging elk need to migrate from summer to winter range; isolated animals like El Jefe have to find mates; and secluded populations must mingle in order to avoid inbreeding. Today, biologists nationwide emphasize linkage: Witness the Path of the Pronghorn, America's first federal migration corridor, or the Forest Service accounting for connectivity in planning rules. E.M. Forster's injunction to "Only connect!" ruled the zeitgeist — until President Trump.

There is copious evidence that suggests Trump's wall would damage borderlands ecosystems. One 2011 study found that some native species in California have already lost up to 75 percent of their range to border fences.

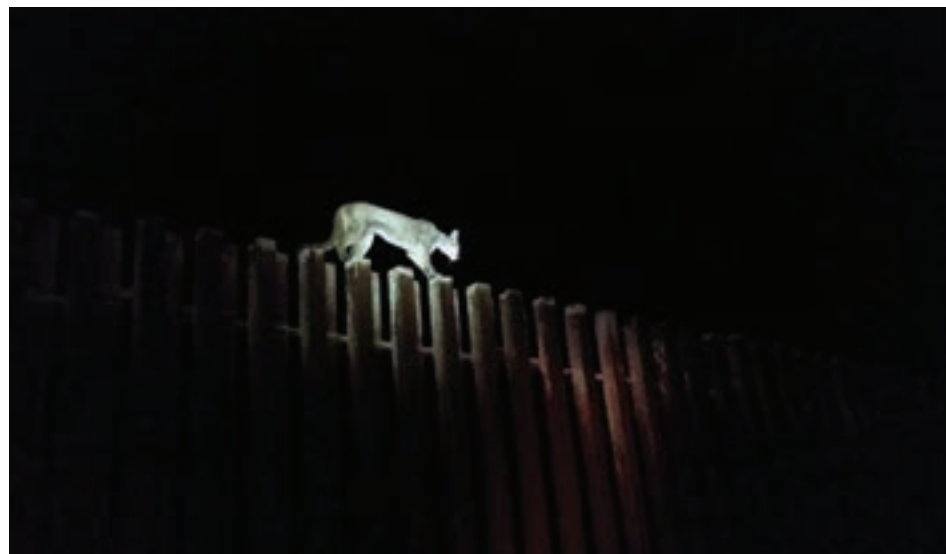
tal law, pose a stumbling block to this grandiose project? Section 7 of the ESA requires federal agencies to consult with Fish and Wildlife on projects that could jeopardize endangered species or destroy critical habitat. Yet a 2015 analysis found that Section 7 consultations hadn't stopped or extensively altered a single project since 2008. The act won't dent Trump's wall, especially since the Department of Homeland Security has waived the law to expand border fences in the past.

At times, bemoaning Donald Trump's harm to wildlife can feel a bit like complaining about the *Titanic's* house band. His presidency is bringing near-daily affronts to his fellow *Homo sapiens*. He's signed executive orders that will impair the health of women, ban certain refugees, and jeopardize Americans' retirement money. Heck, the wall isn't even his worst insult to animals: His vows to withdraw from international climate treaties stand to doom more species, by accelerating global warming, than any barrier ever could.

Yet the wall is a crisis, a towering symbol of Trump's disdain for science, stewardship and environmental process. His hiring freeze will make it harder for federal agencies to manage natural resources, his plans to neuter the Environmental Protection Agency will make our air and water dirtier, and his expunging of global warming from the White House website bodes ill for our climate. He's also empowering a Congress that's already discarding stream protection and gas-flaring rules left and right.

Around the country, cadres of scientists have already taken stands against this benighted attitude — some by vowing to run for public office, others by going rogue on social media. Most promising is the March for Science, an upcoming protest in Washington, D.C., that thousands of scientists have pledged to attend. We can only hope that at least one marcher will be walking for connecting habitats and against the wall. □

*Ben Goldfarb is a freelance journalist who covers wildlife conservation and fisheries management.*



A mountain lion clammers on a border fence near Naco, Arizona. Cougars and other wildlife lose habitat range when physical borders inhibit their safe travel.

ARIZONA GAME AND FISH

for fencing. But the border's permeability to animals may not last.

On Jan. 25, President Donald Trump signed an executive order calling for "the immediate construction" of a border wall to deter illegal immigration. Such a wall was, of course, the central plank in Trump's campaign, and it remains as inhumane, ineffective and expensive an idea as ever. Mexico's about as likely to pay for it as Trump is to release his tax returns. There is, of course, yet another reason to oppose the Great Wall of Trump: It will be a catastrophe for the natural world.

For decades, scientists have understood the importance of habitat con-

An Arizona camera-trap study found that border infrastructure impeded the transit of cougars and coatis, but failed to affect the movements of human beings. Journalists have reported watching bison trample fences to reach food and water. A recent global review reported that barriers "curtail animals' mobility, fragment populations and cause direct mortality."

All told, analysis conducted by *Outside Magazine* using a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service planning tool suggests that Trump's wall could affect more than 100 threatened or endangered species. Might the Endangered Species Act, America's toothiest environmen-

## WEB EXTRA

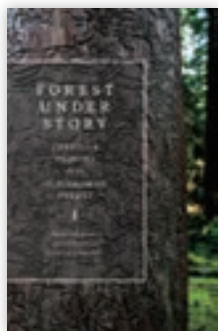
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New trees grow from a stump in the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest. BOB KEEFER/BOBKEEFERPHOTO.COM

## Data and poetry in the experimental forest



**Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest**  
Nathaniel Brodie, Charles Goodrich, and Frederick J. Swanson (editors)  
264 pages, hardcover: \$29.95.  
University of Washington Press, 2016.

In the western Cascade Range, just one hour east of Eugene, Oregon, there is an old-growth forest where ecosystem science and the humanities converge. Since 1948, the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest has been a research sanctuary for scientists studying biodiversity, climate, hydrology, soils and stream ecology. And so, 31 writers have taken to its slopes to collaborate on *Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest*. These environmental poets and essayists — all of them participants in the forest's collaborative Long-Term Ecological Reflections Program — have pressed their literary stethoscopes to the roots and snags and cones of the 16,000-acre reserve to record what they observed, coming up with answers both empirical and oracular.

The forest's oldest Douglas firs are 650 years old, meaning these 300-foot tall giants were just saplings when the Black Death was devastating Europe. Essayist John R. Campbell demonstrates how the forest's topography defies the "usually horizontal, linear" way time is expressed. As he descends a creek cut, each step

takes him not only downward, but back in time, millennium by millennium, until he is "entering the original pyroclastic flows ... stepping, unsteadily, down (not back) toward 25 million years ago." Another contributor, lepidopterist and writer Robert Michael Pyle, cranes his neck upward and catches a glimpse of the "old vine maples (that) hoop and droop under their epiphytic shawls." He views the maples through the lens of gerontology, dressing old growth in the verbiage of old fashion so as to signal the forest's enduring wisdom.

But it is not enough to just see the forest. In his poem, "Parsing My Wife as Lookout Creek," Andrew C. Gottlieb shapes lines like a river, letting them meander across the page to mimic the movement of running water: "the river's unnecessary way of sharing what she composed / unburdened by grammars, maps, latitudes, rules / banks." Beyond Gottlieb's concrete poetics, Bob Keefer's black-and-white two-page photography spreads help readers further visualize Andrews Forest.

If this has all started to smack of

literary "tree-huggery," then just wait for the opening to Scott Russell Sanders' essay, in which he admits to caressing trees not unlike the way one would "stroke the fenders of automobiles or finger silk fabrics or fondle cats." When we make contact with a tree, Sanders reminds us, we are repeating a gesture that was essential to our simian ancestors, who found shelter in the branches 5 million years ago. But early in the 20th century, loggers in the Pacific Northwest began regarding the ancient forest as over-mature timber, and much of the old growth was converted "into studs for the walls of West Coast homes."

Caressing or chopping, caching or littering, there is a suggestion throughout *Forest Under Story* that we will be remembered for how we handle the land, and how we communicate with it. Robin Wall Kimmerer visits sap-flow meters that have been attached to the trees and notes: "Water is a storyteller." In her essay, "Interview With a Watershed," Kimmerer considers writer and physician Lewis Thomas' four forms of language: chitchat, conversation, mathematics and poetry. "The data may change our minds," Kimmerer writes, "but we need poetry to change our hearts."

The complementary functions of mathematics and poetry are dramatized in a duet by poet and essayist Alison Hawthorne Deming and geologist Frederick J. Swanson. "Poetry-Science Gratitude Duet" begins as an exchange of flatteries but shifts into a discourse that defines (and occasionally defies) the pair's roles as scientist and writer. As in a true duet, each sings an equal number of parts. Deming thanks Swanson for his stillness "in the face of the velocity our kind has created." And Swanson thanks Deming for writing what "scientists may feel but cannot articulate." Deming's hope to "free scientific discourse from its yoke and see what can sing in its vocabulary" is actuated over and over in the individual works of the poets and essayists of *Forest Under Story*. In the Andrews Experimental Forest, "experimental" is the domain of the scientist and writer alike.

It is also the domain of the forest itself. Kimmerer goes beyond Lewis Thomas' four forms of communication to propose a fifth: the language of the land. This is how the forest dictates its own story. *Forest Under Story* seems keenly aware that the most important feature of language involves listening. When writers listen to the forest, when they press their ears against the bark of a hemlock or yew, the forest always speaks, however softly. In a recurring excerpt from her long poem "Debris," Vicki Graham agrees: "Listen to the sounds of the forest / the sounds of the land, the sounds / of a place loved and touched / by human hands."

BY LAWRENCE LENHART





# Stucco'd all over

ESSAY BY LEATH TONINO

I had a college professor who studied squirrels. In fact, he ate, slept and breathed squirrels — you know the type. *Squirrel, where? Did it have grizzled-gray dorsal fur? Was it digging for ectomycorrhizal fungi? On a scale of one to 10, was it an 11?*

Specifically, he adored the tassel-eared squirrel, or Abert's squirrel, a denizen of the Rocky Mountains' ponderosa pine forests. As the name suggests, its distinguishing morphological characteristic is a tuft of hair extending approximately three centimeters from each ear. "Truly elegant," wrote naturalist S.W. Woodhouse in 1853.

Well, my professor, the Squirrel Man, also had hairy ears. The dude was tufted, tasseled, truly elegant! Furthermore, he boasted an impressive beard, a pelage really, and drank coffee in such quantities that he climbed the classroom walls during lectures. I've never met a person who so closely resembled, both physically and in spirit, a member of the genus *Sciurus*.

Which raises the question: Do wildlife lovers assume qualities of the beloved? Does the very act of sustained observation transform our bodies and minds?

Consider the devoted marine biologist swimming in endless pursuit of some sleek, streamlined fish. After hundreds of hours in the water, won't certain of her muscles have developed and others atrophied? Or take the diehard ornithologist roaming inky-dark woodlands, searching near and far for owls. Won't she eventually develop superior night vision?

Another professor, a guy who ate, slept and breathed Plato, summed up the ancient Greek understanding of psychology: "You become like the object you intend." That means the things we spend time with, commit our senses to, and reflect on, alter us. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines "intentionality" as the power of minds to be about something. If your mind is entirely about, say, a prairie dog or a salamander, where does that leave the so-called *you*?

Walt Whitman touches on this when he describes himself as "stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over." It's quite the image — a human plastered with bits and pieces of other creatures, zoologically collaged both inside and out. How does the poet, or the naturalist, hybridize with his animal neighbors? Whitman answers a few stanzas later: "I stand and look at them long and long."

Cut to a small park in San Francisco ringed with Monterey

pinus where, more often than not, yours truly can be found looking long and long at a family of red-tailed hawks. I found their nest a month ago — airborne feces and my stucco'd baseball cap facilitated the discovery — and have been visiting regularly ever since. To stare. To study. To take notes.

Actually, that last bit is a lie. Halfway through my third marathon session, I dropped my pencil and didn't pick it up. Paying close attention somehow turns off the intellectual, analytical part of my brain. Just being nearby, splitting the difference between meditation and mesmerization, constitutes my method of inquiry.

A couple centuries before Whitman, the haiku master Matsuo Bashō entreated his disciples, "Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn." I'm a few notches shy of enlightenment, but this does jibe with my daily practice in the park.

I stand long and long. I look longer and longer. The tunnel of my binoculars, by focusing consciousness, makes me about that nest of awkward, tottering, almost-fledged juveniles. They turn their heads, scanning for mother and father — and I do the same, my eyes in a squint. A chilly gust ruffles their feathers, sneaks under my collar — and we all shy away, hunching into ourselves for warmth. Everybody spaces out. Borders blur. I slide towards the edge of me and the beginning of them.

And then, so fast, the raptors are dancing a jig and I'm dancing a jig and the air is full of cries because Mom's coming in hot with a mouse. Dinner is served!

Perhaps this is getting too wacky. Let's grab hold of something more tangible — say, Squirrel Man's ears. Are they the result of his decades-long fascination with *Sciurus aberti*? Probably not. I'm the first to admit that those magnificent tufts of his are beyond my ken. Honestly, this entire subject, though exciting, leaves me dizzy.

But just in case there is some truth here — in case the lover of wildlife does assume qualities of the beloved — why not offer a quick word of encouragement to the passionate folks who research blobfishes, monkfishes, walruses, matamoras turtles, vampire bats and naked mole rats? I say, be not deterred. Follow your heart's idiosyncratic path. On a scale of one to 10, you are an 11. Pay no attention to the superficial haters when they call you ugly. □

Leath Tonino's writing appears in *Outside*, *Orion*, *The Sun* and other magazines. This is not his first essay — and likely not his last — to mention bird poo.



CHARLES LE BRUN (1619–1690)



## HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

## WYOMING

**Truckers in Wyoming really know how to fly** down a highway, not that they do so on purpose. “Flying” is what happens when an errant gust smacks into a tractor-trailer, levitates it entirely for a few timeless seconds, and then flips the rig right over. This happens fairly routinely to drivers in the Cowboy State, and the windiest stretches of highway have been identified: Dead Horse Bend, Snively Lane, Wyoming Boulevard, Arlington, Beaver Rim, Bordeaux, Elk Mountain and Dunlop, among others. “During a bad blow,” reports *Wyofile*, these blustery spots “can lay trucks over like cordwood.” Between 2012 and 2016, the Wyoming Department of Transportation says, 232 trucks got flipped. Lander trucker Wally West, who has been driving rigs for more than 50 years, knows about blow-overs first-hand. He’s survived two: one in 1998, and the other in late 2016, both in Red Canyon south of Lander. “It’s over before you know it’s started,” he says. “The first lift kind of puckers your butt.” The “lift” occurs when a 70 mph wind escalates to 140 mph and causes a 32,000-pound truck to lose traction and briefly hover in mid-air before landing and toppling over. Then it’s a matter of coping with a reoriented world: “Doors have become floors and ceilings, seat belts have become suspension harnesses, and the exit is a long, stiff climb away,” writes Matthew Copeland. A highway patrolman helped West safely exit his upside-down truck after his most recent adventure. Then again, he said, “Everybody stops to make sure you’re OK. Of course they do. This is Wyoming.”

## COLORADO

**Routt County commissioners** in western Colorado were outraged when a skier and a snowboarder recently called volunteers to come rescue them for the second time in four years from the same steep, avalanche-prone canyon. “I’m incensed that those guys had to be rescued twice,” Commissioner Cari Hermacinski told the *Denver Post*. “I’m (expletive) mad.” What made it worse was hearing that the backcountry skiers failed



COLORADO Does that T-shirt come in “elk-stra large”?

PRATEEK SHAKYA/WATER WHEEL GIFT CORNER

to bring any of the equipment they’d been strongly advised to bring after the first rescue — basic gear such as avalanche beacons, additional clothes, an avalanche shovel and a compass. To add injury to insult, one of the search-and-rescue volunteers, Jay Bowman, suffered serious fractures to his arm and leg, as well as a laceration on his head, after being swept up in an avalanche and hitting aspen trees.

## THE WEST

**Legally, pets are property**, but in Alaska they’ve gained social status under an amendment to the state’s divorce statutes. Courts must now take into consideration “the well-being of the animal” in deciding the fate of a pet, reports the *Washington Post*. This might mean that Rover gets to live in two doghouses because commuting between owners is deemed best for him. The Alaska amendment was sponsored by two former state representatives; one handled a divorce case that resulted in joint custody of a sled dog team.

And in San Francisco, a dispute between dog owners and the managers of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area heated up recently with the online posting of “WoofieLeaks.” The “leaks” are actually emails between National Park Service staffers who worked on a policy that bars dogs from some beaches and trails

in order to protect imperiled species, such as the threatened snowy plover. Dog owners insist that the emails show “bias” against their pets. Each year, however, the recreation area deals with some 300 “dog-related” incidents, reports *E&E News*.

## THE WEST

**“You know the weather is bad when you find a moose in your basement,”** a headline in the *Washington Post* astutely observes. In Hailey, Idaho, a moose fell into a window well and crashed onto the carpeted floor. The moose refused to be coaxed upstairs, so it had to be sedated and carried outside, “groggy and confused, but free.” And in Estes Park, Colorado, when the owner of the Water Wheel Gift Corner left his door open, “an elk walked in and just browsed for about 45 minutes,” Fox31 reports. Local officers lured the elk out to the sidewalk with apples, but 10 minutes later, it re-entered the store. No word on whether it purchased anything this time, though finally, the shop owner closed the door.

## NEVADA

**Thanks to the wonderful website,**

atlasobscura.com, we’ve learned that Las Vegas now boasts “a common but little-known Sin City feature: the bunny refugee camp.” The bunnies aren’t native wildlife; they’re the feral progeny of abandoned pets “with cute ears and fuzzy coats.” There are lots and lots of them — untold thousands — occupying backyards, state parks and even a mental health facility, “and no one knows what to do with them.” The rabbits survive thanks to the kindness of volunteers who call themselves “rogue bunny-lovers,” but most people agree the animals need a permanent home in order to lead healthy lives.

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

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



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“ I personally discovered \$47 trillion worth of clean air in Montana alone, and — it was a really good week — \$225 trillion of clean, clear, fresh water, free of any fracking contaminants whatsoever.”

Rick Bass, in his essay, “Beset by sharks,” from *Writers on the Range*, [hcn.org/wotr](http://hcn.org/wotr)