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A losing battle
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The threat of extinction, which is the only
wildlife, the only one left.
By Tom Igoe

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FEATURE ARTICLE - August 18, 2003

Where the Antelope (and the Oil Companies) Play

by Brian Maffly

PINEDALE, Wyo. — When the snow cover peels off the Upper Green River Basin, a biannual dance springs to life outside this century-old ranching community. Thousands of pronghorn antelope head north, the females deep into pregnancy, to birthing grounds and summer range at higher elevations.

Last April, in the sagebrush between Jackson and Pinedale, I encountered numerous bands of these tan and white creatures on the way to their summer haunts in the mountains. They grazed peacefully, until they noticed me watching. Then they were off and running at highway speeds.

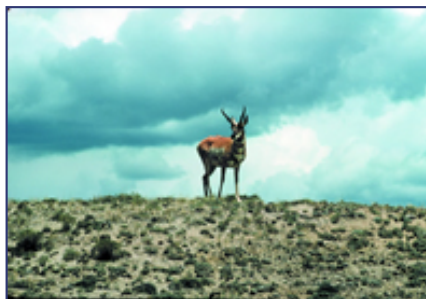
One of nature's greatest athletes, *Antilocapra americana* is the continent's swiftest animal. Having co-evolved with a long-extinct cheetah-like cat, the pronghorn is capable of sustained speeds of 50 mph.

While every other surviving species of North American ungulate is linked to forebears that crossed the Bering Land Bridge from Asia, the pronghorn is a true native, the sole surviving member of a family that dates back 20 million years.

Prior to white settlement, pronghorn rivaled the great herds of bison that also roamed the Plains; ecologists estimate there were 30 to 60 million of the animals. Wholesale slaughter drove them to near extinction at the turn of the 20th century; then conservation, led by sport hunters, allowed their numbers to rebound to about 1 million in North America.

Today, about half the entire pronghorn population lives in Wyoming, making the animals more plentiful than people in the so-called Cowboy State. But the pronghorn remain vulnerable, because they need open land. They tend to avoid forests and thick brush, and are unwilling to jump fences, though they can duck under barbed wire with an effortless downshift.

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Pronghorn antelope. FRANZ CAMENZIND

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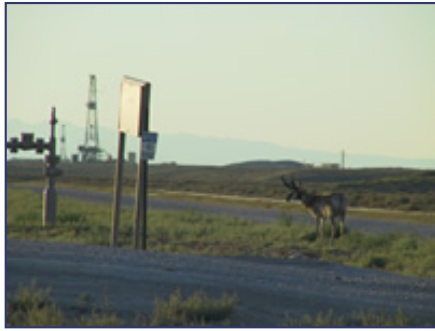
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HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Paonia, CO 81428
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High Country News is published 24 times annually by the nonprofit High Country Foundation.

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An antelope by a drill rig on the Pinedale Anticline. LINDA BAKER

One band of several hundred pronghorns here has become a cause célèbre among conservationists, because it makes the longest overland migration of any animal in the Lower 48 states. The twice-a-year trek takes the band between winter range south of Pinedale and summer pasture in Grand Teton National Park. The migration, which crosses a 9,000-foot pass in the Gros Ventre Mountains, stretches 160 miles one-way.

But the future doesn't look bright for this band, or for any of the other 46,000 pronghorn that spend part or all of the year in the Upper Green. The basin — which is also home to 60,000 deer, elk, moose and bighorn sheep, and one of the largest remaining populations of sage grouse — happens to sit on top of one of the nation's richest natural gas deposits. Under energy-policy directives coming out of the White House, and with headlines screaming about a gas shortage, the southwest corner of Wyoming — already a full-fledged resource colony — is getting even busier, swarming with seismic-exploration thumper trucks, drilling rigs and Texans.

The federal Bureau of Land Management, which is the primary landlord here, has already leased about a million acres for possible drilling — 86 percent of the Pinedale Resource Area, plus the rights under some private and state land. The players include multinationals such as ExxonMobil, Enron Oil and Gas, EnCana USA, BP America, and billionaire investor Warren Buffet, who owns a giant pipeline that connects to power plants and other energy-hungry customers in Southern California.

The gas boom promises to test industry's professed commitment to tread lightly on the land. It's also shaping up to be an epic struggle between two core Western values: conservation of wildlife and resource extraction.

An arid, high-elevation sagebrush plain with only a few thousand human residents, the Upper Green River Basin is hemmed by spectacular mountains including the Wind River, Gros Ventre and Wyoming ranges. To get back and forth from the mountains, the pronghorns that winter in the basin — and their distant cousins, mule deer — follow ancient migration corridors that narrow in places biologists call "bottlenecks."



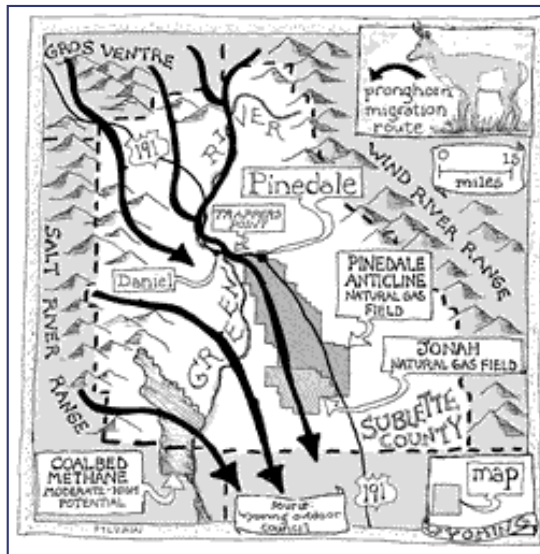
Antelope at Trappers Point, one "bottleneck" on their migration route. FRANZ CAMENZIND

The most famous bottleneck is a few miles west of Pinedale, where the terrain undulates to a high point between the Green and New Fork rivers. Several thousand pronghorn and deer pass through Trappers Point, among them the far-ranging Teton Park band. The topography funnels them through a mile-wide slot between the rivers — a bottleneck that's been effectively narrowed to just a half-mile wide by a scatter of houses, dirt roads and U.S. Highway 191.

I visited Trappers Point in April at the tail end of the migration with Meredith Taylor, a veteran Wyoming Outdoor Council conservationist and Dubois, Wyo., outfitter. "This is the neck of the hourglass. You see those pronghorn over there?" she said, gesturing toward a group across the highway. "That's where it's starting to widen out."

The place has been a busy wildlife crossing for thousands of years. When

Highway 191 was widened in the early 1990s, crews uncovered a 6,000-year-old kill site. From the bones and spear points, archaeologists determined that ancient hunters took advantage of this bottleneck to lie in wait for migrating antelope. Fetal bones indicate the pronghorn were killed at a late stage of pregnancy, offering proof they were passing through at about the same time of the spring as they do today, says Dave Vlcek, a BLM archaeologist.



Pronghorn antelope migration route. Diane Sylvain

The Upper Green is dotted with such migration bottlenecks, and only recently has their importance become known. “You lose one of these bottlenecks, you lose the whole migration corridor,” says Hall Sawyer, a Laramie biologist, who is three years into mapping pronghorn and deer movements with radio telemetry and GPS.

Citing Sawyer’s findings, conservationists argue that the BLM should discourage human activity near these bottlenecks, lest development “cork” a fragile link in migration routes. But the BLM has a spotty record so far.

Last year, the agency quietly offered 2,300 acres near Trappers for gas drilling. A local conservationist discovered the lease and notified state wildlife officials, who sent an Aug. 2 letter to the BLM, urging the agency to yank the offered lease.

“We view those bottlenecks as at risk. It’s a high priority for us,” said the Pinedale Game and Fish supervisor, Bernard Holz. “We didn’t realize how crucial Trappers Point was until Hall’s studies. It wouldn’t be a good decision to put anything in that corridor.”

BLM officials agreed, but a few days later the lease was auctioned in Cheyenne, anyway. The high bidder, an Oklahoma energy firm known as Continental, has appealed the BLM’s reversal.

Two months before that fiasco, another Trappers-area lease was auctioned, prompting a letter of protest from residents, who argued the lease imperiled big-game migration. One of the protesters was Gordon Johnston, chairman of the Sublette County Commission.

“There was no thought in there for antelope and the migration route in that area,” Johnston said, when I visited his 11-acre spread in Daniel, near the site on the Green River where trappers staged their summer rendezvous in the 1830s.

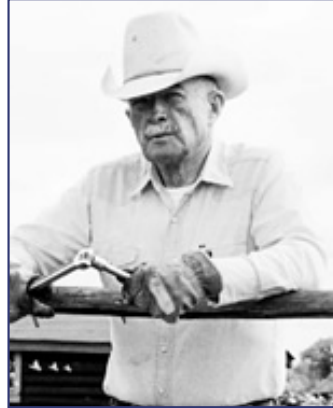
Johnston’s county has ridden the most recent gas boom to prosperity: Sublette is now one of the West’s leading producers of natural gas, behind only San Juan County in New Mexico. The benefits include some good-paying jobs, low unemployment, and industry tax payments that cover nearly half the total county budget. Pinedale, the county seat, has only 1,400 people, but there are new renovations to the courthouse, state-of-the-art patrol cars, a new senior center, a library addition, school additions, bonuses for teachers, new computers in every classroom. And coming soon: A \$300,000 playground and a \$27,000 grand piano, both for the schoolkids, and a new community ice rink.

When I ask Johnston about the changes brought by energy development, he says, “It’s what we live on. There are things we have to put up with.” Anyone who

questions his core conservative values can talk to the American flag flying high above his front yard, and the portraits of his grandsons, Justin and Morgan, fourth-generation Marines serving in the Iraq war.

“But,” he adds, “I’ve seen antelope coming through here for 50 years. I’d like to see them for another 50 years.”

Johnston knows something about seasonal migration. He came to the basin as a college-educated cowhand half a century ago, moving cattle from dry lowlands to alpine meadows. In those days, there wasn’t much to slow your travel, he says. “You could ride from Farson to Big Piney without opening a fence.”



I’ve seen antelope coming through here for 50 years. I’d like to see them for another 50 years,” says Gordon Johnston, Sublette County Commission. COURTESY PINEDALE ROUNDUP

Johnston has gained a few supporters, among them the publisher of the local newspaper, the Pinedale Roundup. “Sublette County has a rich and proud heritage of oil and gas development,” wrote Rob Shaul, a fifth-generation local and lifelong Republican, in a May 22 editorial. “But today, we’re taking a stand against the future development of oil and gas (on federal land) in Sublette County.”

“We’ve done our role of supplying energy to the nation,” says Shaul, who is also worried by the growth of rural subdivisions. “We camp and hunt and fish here, and we need to protect the wildness and the beauty that’s left.”

But Shaul, Johnston and their allies face an uphill battle. Two miles under the sagebrush of southwest Wyoming lies a sea of natural gas known to exceed 300 trillion cubic feet, enough to fuel the nation’s current rate of consumption for 14 years. According to a recent estimate by the federal Energy Information Agency, natural gas use will rise by 60 percent by 2020. With production declining nearly everywhere else in the Lower 48, public land in the Rocky Mountain states will be expected to feed the demand (see story next page).

It’s not as if the Rocky Mountain states have been dawdling. Production in the Rockies has more than doubled since 1980. Wyoming’s total production, with the conventional plays in the Upper Green, and coalbed methane plays in the Powder River Basin to the northeast, has soared to rank third in the nation, behind only Texas and Alaska.

“In the U.S., Wyoming is the only state showing growth year after year,” says Patrick Pitet, an energy specialist with the Wyoming Business Council. “It’s not only important for Wyoming’s economy, it’s also important nationally, because of the growing demand and decline of production in other states.”

Currently, about 2,200 gas wells are pumping on the Upper Green, and there are another 1,000 abandoned or inactive wells. The BLM considers 350,000 acres to be in production, and new wells are being approved by the hundreds. The infrastructure includes a vast network of collector pipelines, access roads, and other utilities.

The BLM has also given the green light to the Upper Green’s first coalbed methane play, which may eventually cover vast acreage, if the Powder River Basin is any model; more than 80,000 methane wells are being installed over millions of acres there, pitting ranchers against energy companies.

To get an overview, I talked with Linda Baker, a 23-year Pinedale resident and the



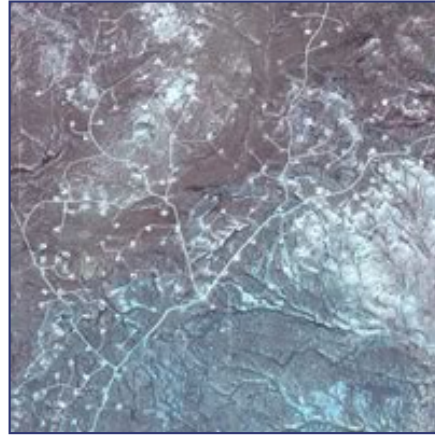
Landsat satellite images of a seven-square-mile area of the Jonah gas field, 1986. Images by SkyTruth for Upper Green River Valley Coalition

From the air, the gas fields are visible scars, but they have not taken over the whole landscape yet; they're relatively concentrated in what the industry calls "sweet spots," where the gas can be drilled most efficiently.

Our destination was the Jonah gas field southeast of town, 30,000 acres occupied by 400 wells. Spaced at one per 80 acres, the Jonah well pads cover up to 3 acres each, connected by a network of cul-de-sac roads. Set into each pad, we could see two rectangular reservoirs, one holding drilling fluids and the other discharged groundwater. After the drilling is complete, the reservoirs evaporate and the residues are burned off, Baker said.

The Jonah is already Wyoming's most productive non-coalbed gas field. As crowded as it appears, if the BLM approves a proposed "infill," EnCana USA will drill as many as 1,250 more wells on the same ground. The completed infill would have well pads every 20 acres, two to four times more dense than the current pattern.

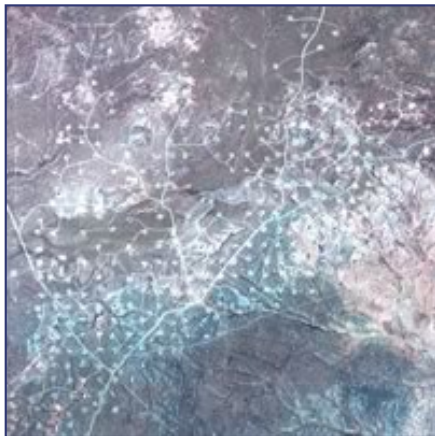
local representative for a coalition of environmental groups called the Upper Green River Valley Coalition. On a clear day with a choppy breeze, we met a volunteer pilot with LightHawk, a kind of nonprofit airline for conservation causes, at Pinedale's sleepy airport. We took off in David Kunkel's twin-engine Cessna 340, and circled the Upper Green River Basin, gazing down at the bottomland and the foothills shedding remnant pockets of snow.



Landsat satellite images of a seven-square-mile area of the Jonah gas field, 1999. Images by SkyTruth for Upper Green River Valley Coalition

"It is basically a single-use proposal," Baker said. "What they are proposing would devastate any other resource value."

Environmentalists use the Jonah to illustrate what may be in store for the rest of the Upper Green, particularly an up-and-coming gas field called Pinedale Anticline, which stretches 6 miles wide and 35 miles long, right to the southern edge of Pinedale.



Landsat satellite images of a seven-square-mile area of the Jonah gas field, 2001. Images by SkyTruth for Upper Green River Valley Coalition

Three years ago, the BLM OK'd plans to install over 700 producing wells (with allowances for up to 200 dry holes), 276 miles of access roads and 280 miles of pipelines in the Anticline. In a recent survey of resources, the BLM predicted that full buildout will mean as many as 1,800 wells in the Anticline, on 20-acre spacing.

Three years ago, the BLM OK'd plans to install over 700 producing wells (with allowances for up to 200 dry holes), 276 miles of access roads and 280 miles of

The Anticline, known locally as “the Mesa,” is crucial winter and migration range, seasonal home to several thousand pronghorn and mule deer, and lesser numbers of moose, elk and white-tailed deer, and plenty of sage grouse.

Industry’s defenders like to point to pronghorn clustered around Pinedale-area wells, once the initial disturbance of drilling and installation subsides. But while photos of wildlife grazing next to gas wells have great PR value, it’s anecdotal evidence with little scientific value, says Sawyer, the antelope biologist. “For everything you see, there’s a lot of things you don’t see,” Sawyer says. “There’s no way of knowing if their numbers are in decline or what’s going on with pronghorns that are avoiding the wells.” The gas developments are proceeding faster than the studies.

Coordinated by Baker, the Upper Green River Valley Coalition is appealing every new gas lease, arguing that the BLM’s 15-year-old Resource Management Plan, the land-use bible for the Pinedale area, is hopelessly outdated. It devotes only a few pages to energy development, and envisions only 900 gas wells. Until the plan’s ongoing revision is completed, Baker believes the agency should impose a moratorium on new leases.

But the BLM has shrugged off those appeals; they’re now being weighed by the Department of Interior’s Board of Land Appeals. “We have a written policy that we will continue with decisions while a plan is being amended,” says Alan Rabinoff, the BLM’s deputy state director for minerals and land.

The agency’s relationship with industry is a little too cozy for many onlookers. On April 17, for example, the BLM had scheduled a 6 p.m. “scoping” meeting in a Pinedale library room, to solicit public input on the Jonah infill. The company wanting to do the infill, EnCana, encouraged hundreds of its employees to show up, by holding a company picnic in the Pinedale Entertainment Center. As the day took shape, the company informed the BLM that everyone couldn’t fit into the library, and suggested the meeting be moved to the Entertainment Center. The BLM saw no better option. The meeting was moved to the room where the picnic was winding down. More than 300 people attended, mostly company employees.

“Conservationists were cowed, and left,” Baker says. “It was like walking into a strange city and getting up and saying something that will not be well received.”

The vastness of the Upper Green has allowed for an uneasy coexistence so far, with room for both industry and wildlife. Industry, for its part, acknowledges a responsibility to “harvest” the gas in an environmentally responsible way. It is industry, in fact, that has been the chief funder of Sawyer’s research on pronghorns and other wildlife.

“We live in Wyoming just like everyone else, so we want to make sure we maintain our abundance of wildlife,” says Dru Bower, vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming. “The bottom line is minerals are where they are. You can’t move them to where they are more pleasing to other people and where they don’t overlap with other resources.

“Our footprint on the land has decreased over time, through better technology and more awareness,” adds Bower. Companies sometimes use “directional drilling” to sink multiple wells from one pad, which reduces the amount of disturbance to the land. And generally, well permits require companies to mitigate any impacts to wildlife. On the Mesa, for example, BLM bans drilling in the winter, when deer and antelope are present; surface disturbance within a quarter-mile of sage grouse mating grounds, called



“Twenty years ago, when I moved here, you could look out to the Wind River Range and not see a light. I used to think I was at the very fringe of civilization,” says Linda Baker, Upper Green River Valley Coalition. JOHN DAHLKE

leks; and noise disturbances greater than 10 decibels over background noise.

But the wildlife guidelines are minimal in the eyes of some biologists (see story page 11), and they're not entirely binding, either. Working with Wyoming Game and Fish, the BLM allows generous exemptions to the closures of crucial winter range. Energy companies can get access by applying for "short-term" exemptions; last winter, 66 out of 81 requests for exemptions were granted.

In the most glaring example, with no specific public comment process or formal environmental analysis, Salt Lake City-based Questar got access to crucial mule deer range on the Mesa for all of last winter, in order to install a well pad and drill five wells from it. The BLM said that deer would not be harmed and that if there were impacts, they could be studied. The Upper Green River Valley Coalition has sued the BLM to overturn the season-long exemption.

"The decision sets a terrible precedent. It represents a gutting of one of the few safeguards the BLM has in place for wintering big game," says Peter Aengst, a regional representative for The Wilderness Society who is based in Bozeman, Mont. "Allowing drilling and truck traffic throughout the winter will inevitably lead to reduced wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities."

To counter this issue and others, environmentalists have put together a policy platform: They want the pace to slow significantly, more research before leasing and drilling, better monitoring of impacts once development begins, and better rehabilitation of retired well sites. To protect the migration corridors and bottlenecks like Trappers Point, they call for the establishment of the first national migration corridor, with conservation easements on key private land, bans on development of the most crucial public land, and better land-use planning through county governments.

"It's a conservation vision for the future," Meredith Taylor says, "protecting the integrity of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem as a functioning ecosystem."

The situation promises to get hotter in the coming years as gas shortages drive prices to historic highs, and industry's friends in Washington, D.C., rewrite federal energy policy.

Bypassing Congress and the public, the Bush administration — stacked with former industry lobbyists and executives — has issued directives to the BLM and other agencies that require more justification for any decisions that hold back energy development. Bush's Executive Order #13212, in May 2001, for example, ordered that "agencies shall expedite their review of permits or take other actions as necessary to accelerate" energy development. And to ensure things are sped up, the order established the White House Task Force on Energy Project Streamlining ([HCN, 9/2/02: Backlash](#)).

Last April, the BLM national headquarters issued new orders for local offices to snap to, changing the way drilling proposals are handled; different projects are to be bundled together, for example, and the impacts analyzed as a whole, so the analysis can be quicker. BLM Director Kathleen Clarke said it would be "a much-improved method of working with our energy partners (in industry)."

In May, a Streamlining Task Force crew did a road show in Wyoming and Colorado, meeting privately with state officials and environmental leaders, trying to reduce suspicion while announcing a new mechanism for acceleration: the Rocky Mountain Energy Council. It will concentrate on the five states that are now the nation's oil and gas sweet spots: Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Montana.

The Rocky Mountain Energy Council began to take shape in a big meeting in the

Denver Federal Center on July 8-9. The meeting was held behind closed doors. Several Bush appointees were keynote speakers, and the group included about 90 federal and state officials, including the BLM, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Environmental Protection Agency. No environmental groups, no ranchers suffering coalbed methane impacts, no local government officials trying to gain some small measure of control over oil and gas impacts, were allowed in.

The Energy Council is expected to set up its office in Denver eventually with several paid staffers, and it promises that meetings in the future will be more open, including more stakeholders.

“We are expediting the process, not cutting corners. When I say expediting, I mean looking for ways to be more efficient,” says the BLM’s Rabinoff in Wyoming. “Clearly, the Rocky Mountain region will play a pivotal role in supplying this nation’s energy needs. Our challenge is to do this in an expeditious and environmentally responsible manner.” The council will encourage “partnerships” among the agencies — coordinated responses to drilling proposals by all the agencies responsible, not only for energy, but also for wildlife, archaeology and other resources. Environmental analysis in particular will be “streamlined.”

A lot of the agencies’ professionals are worried, says Mike Chiropolos, an attorney with Western Resource Advocates in Denver. “We’ve still got some dedicated people out there in the agencies. And they know, if they have to focus all their efforts on sucking minerals out of the ground, they won’t be able to meet their other obligations” — the panoply of laws requiring multiple-use management, protection of species, and so on.

In the Upper Green River Basin, Pinedale Roundup publisher Rob Shaul is optimistic. “In my estimation, the Anticline (Mesa) project will be the last big one in Sublette County, because there is growing opposition locally, and that will carry weight.”

But the county government has yet to take a formal position, and in other places, local governments that have made a stand against the oil and gas industry have been crushed ([HCN, 9/2/02: Backlash](#)).

And the gas boom shows no sign of slowing. Five coalbed methane test wells have proved up, and several hundred wells are planned southwest of Pinedale. The giant pipeline to Southern California just opened a second bore, doubling its capacity. And right now, the BLM is adjusting its “reasonably foreseeable development” upward, from 5,120 new wells over the next 17 years to as many as 10,000 new wells.

“Twenty years ago, when I moved here, you could look out to the Wind River Range and not see a light,” Linda Baker says. “I used to think I was at the very fringe of civilization, and the people here were very strong individuals for persevering through the winters. Our immediate neighbors were four-footed animals that always lived here.

“I’m realizing how fragile this area is, and how quickly it has changed,” she says. “I want to see a healing.”

Brian Maffly writes from Bozeman, Mont. High Country News Editor in the Field Ray Ring contributed to this story.

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