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QUARTERLY

Winter | 2024



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Twilight of the Kawuneeche? By Anne Morris, Communications Associate



© NPS Photo | VIP Schonlau

*"We need public support
and the resources and
skill sets of all the KVRC
partners to tackle a project
as large and as critical as
saving and restoring the
Kawuneeche Valley."*

Just below the headwaters of the Colorado River lies the Kawuneeche Valley, one of the jewels of Rocky Mountain National Park's (RMNP) west side. To visitors today, the valley appears to be a vibrant grassland. Researchers and resource managers see a different reality, however: an ecosystem out of balance with rapidly accelerating changes threatening this once rich and diverse habitat.

Photographs taken over the past 100 years document the stunning changes in the Kawuneeche Valley due to human influences.

In 1920, the valley thrived as willow-beaver riparian wetland with habitat for numerous plant and animal species, including waterfowl and migratory birds. Tall, healthy willow populations

provided food and building materials for an active beaver population. The beaver, in turn, constructed dams which enabled overbank flooding creating wet meadows. Photographs show a valley brimming with ponds and channels.

Today, the Kawuneeche is a vastly different savannah-like plain. Moose and elk forage heavily on what remains of the willows, reducing plant height and biomass. Abandoned irrigation ditches and channel modifications further dewatered the once extensive floodplain. Researchers have documented a 96 percent loss of tall willow acreage in the Kawuneeche within park boundaries since 1999 and a 94 percent loss of surface waters associated with beaver ponds since 1953.

Continued on page 15

*Tundra views
of wintry
Longs Peak.*



A Message from our Executive Director



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Dear Friends,

“Teamwork makes the dream work.”

If there were a mantra for the Rocky Mountain Conservancy, our donors, and our many government and nonprofit conservation partners, this would be it. When people work together, we can achieve stunning successes in preserving and enhancing our beloved parks and other public lands.

One immediate challenge is the precarious state of the Kawuneeche Valley. As the Kawuneeche Valley Restoration Collaborative (KVRV) formed, I got a crash course in willow, a plant critical for a healthy beaver and wetland ecosystem. Many of these plants are one hundred or more years old. Willows can withstand stressors such as drought, insect pathogens, and overgrazing—but only for so long. We’re about to pass the “point of no return” for saving many of these important plants. As the willow goes, so, too, goes the chance of restoring the Kawuneeche to a vibrant riparian wetland with all the benefits for the Colorado River and Rocky Mountain flora and fauna.

What keeps me hopeful is the sense of urgency and emerging capability of KVRV. I also just need to remember other significant challenges that were met by people and organizations working together such as restoring elk to Rocky and the Estes Valley, rebuilding our magnificent raptor populations following the widespread use of the pesticide DDT, and more recent local accomplishments such as the time-sensitive acquisition of the Cascade Cottages property a few years ago—and the list could go on.

Thank you for being an important part of the team that achieves the dream!

Warmly,



Estee Rivera Murdock

Estee Rivera Murdock

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Ask the Conservancy

Quarterly reporters unearth answers to any questions asked by Conservancy members and park visitors. If you are curious about something in or about the park, email Communications@RMConservancy.org or write: Ask the Conservancy, Rocky Mountain Conservancy, PO Box 3100, Estes Park, CO 80517.

Shop Conservancy Nature Stores

www.RMConservancy.org/shop



Longs Peak and Milky Way | Sid Roberts

Are satellites like Starlink and spacecraft like the International Space Station a risk to dark skies in national park units like RMNP?

As commercial satellite numbers continue to increase, observers will notice that the night sky appears 'busier' than it once was. Due to the altitude and sheer volume of these satellites, even the most pristine night skies in the deepest wilderness can be impacted, bringing a human element to an otherwise natural setting. While the movement of these objects will be discernable, they will not

diminish the remarkable opportunities to view the cosmos that Rocky Mountain National Park provides.

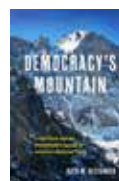
What are the biggest threats to RMNP's dark skies?

As with many national parks, growth of urban corridors outside of park boundaries can have a significant impact on night sky conditions, diminishing natural features and inhibiting dark adaptation for visitors. Within Rocky, light pollution from the Front Range 50 miles away is easily seen along the park's eastern horizon. Skyglow, or light pollution, significantly brightens the sky and obscures the view of stars and night sky objects. Continued development and increases in outdoor lighting in the absence of smart lighting practices is a continuing threat across NPS.

How does RMNP compare to other National Park Service sites as a place to visit for dark skies?

Rocky provides outstanding opportunities to view the starry night sky amid the majestic Rocky Mountains. Overhead, the night sky is near pristine and is easily in the top 25% of all park units. Natural night sky natural features such as the Milky Way, distant galaxies, nebula, and star clusters can all be observed. Not only does the park provide wonderful night sky interpretive programs but sets an example for stewardship by using night sky friendly outdoor lighting. Further, the opportunity to view the cosmos from 11,000 ft on Trail Ridge Road during the summer is a unique experience unmatched across the NPS!

Dr. Adam Beeco, NPS Natural Sounds & Night Skies Division



DEMOCRACY'S MOUNTAIN: LONGS PEAK AND THE UNFULFILLED PROMISES OF AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS

A prized mountaineering destination since the 1870s, Longs Peak has seen astonishing climbing feats--and, unsurprisingly, also significant risk and harm. Dr. Ruth Alexander's nuanced account of Longs Peak reveals the dangers of undermining national parks' fundamental obligations and presents a powerful appeal to meet them fairly and fully. Softcover. Item #013047 Price: \$26.95
Member Price: \$22.91



THE LANDMARK PROJECT RMNP BEANIE

This warm and stylish RMNP beanie from The Landmark Project features Longs Peak. Made with 50% recycled polyester and 50% acrylic yarns. Item #9980 Price: \$32.99
Member Price: \$28.04



RMNP BIGHORN SHEEP RUMPL BLANKET

This cozy puffy blanket features RMNP's iconic bighorn sheep posing in front of Hallett Peak. 52" x 75". 100% recycled polyester. 2.1 lbs. Item #7807 Price: \$129.00
Member Price: \$109.65



SMOKEY "ONLY YOU" BEANIE

Stay warm while protecting our public lands with this Smokey the Bear "Only You" beanie from The Landmark Project! Made with 50% recycled polyester and 50% acrylic yarns. Item# 011087 Price: \$32.99
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RMNP MAP COFFEE TUMBLER

Enjoy your cup of coffee wherever you go! When waking up in a tent or while watching the sunrise from your favorite park trail, keep your coffee at the perfect temperature, hot or iced, in this 14 oz, double steel-walled, coffee tumbler. Hand wash only. Item #012419 Price: \$26.99
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More memorabilia at
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Dr. Tim Meehan,
at the elusive
peregrine nest
in The Book area
of Lumpy Ridge.
That nest, the
sandy ledge
behind him, was
discovered by
climbing rangers
in 2020.



By
Anne Morris,
Communications
Associate

Eyes on the Sky: Teamwork to Protect Rocky's Rare Raptors

Volunteer Cindy Seckman describes the wonder she feels when observing golden eagles. "You see this large dark bird circling, and suddenly the sun catches those beautiful golden feathers."



Golden Eagle in flight | Perry Conway

Not many people have the time, patience, or optical gear to see them: magnificent peregrine falcons and golden eagles. Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) is home to several historical nesting locations for these once-endangered—and still rare—raptors, and climbing rangers, volunteers, and recreational climbers work together to locate, survey, and protect these special birds and their aeries.

Each February, Rocky implements the raptor protection program by temporarily closing some climbing routes and hiking trails in sensitive nesting areas around Lumpy Ridge and along the Continental Divide. Then comes the first challenge, discovering whether the falcons and eagles are in fact in the area and establishing nests. Both species are highly territorial and even an area as large as Lumpy Ridge may support only a single active peregrine falcon nest and perhaps a single active golden eagle nest.

Jonathan Lewis, RMNP Conservation Biology program manager, leads the Avian Programs. He said the park has six to 10 core volunteers that spend weekly 4-hour shifts searching for the presence of raptors and then locating the nests—somewhat like avian detectives.

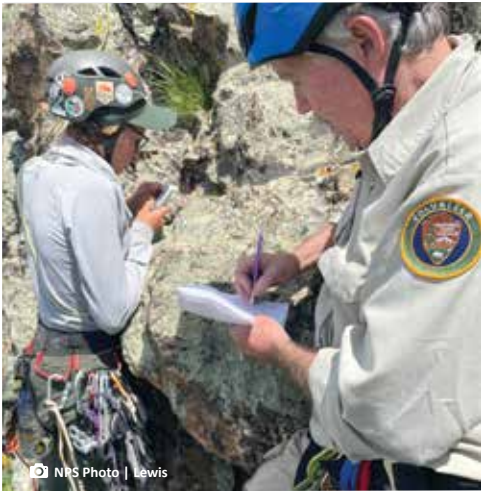
It's not a skill everyone can master. Using scopes and binoculars, volunteers scan for raptors from designated observation locations and then identify the birds using clues such as size, color, profile, and behavior. For example, volunteers may distinguish among larger or smaller species by timing how long it takes a circling bird to complete a rotation. Spotting a rare golden eagle or peregrine falcon among the ravens and hawks can be thrilling.

Once observers have a confirmed golden eagle or peregrine sighting, the next step is to locate the nest.

Larry and Cindy Seckman have volunteered as observers in the meadows around Lumpy Ridge for more than five years. Larry described how they use maps to identify and mark past nest sites. Then they observe raptors and notate the maps to show where and in what direction the birds are flying or from what direction the birds are calling. Over time, the observations help them triangulate potential nest sites which



Peregrine Falcon | Perry Conway



Wildlife Technician Valerie Griffin and Volunteer Rob Ramey survey a peregrine nest.

trained climbing biologists and rangers such as Lewis and wildlife technician Valerie Griffin and climbing volunteers can then investigate.

Finding a peregrine nest is especially difficult. All peregrine falcons need is a compact sheltered space on a high cliff ledge with a small amount of gravel-like substrate. Unlike the nests of eagles which can be 5-6 feet across and several feet deep, peregrine nests are hard to pick out by the untrained observer—or climber—even if looking right at the site.

Once located, the nest is monitored for success in producing and fledging the next generation of raptors. Rangers may visit the nest after the breeding season is over and the nest has been vacated to take photographs and measure nest size and shell thickness if eggs were present. Avian managers also seek to understand reasons a nest was not successful, which could include infertile eggs, poaching of chicks by other raptors, and even bad weather.

If the raptors are a special breed, so, too, are the volunteers who support them. When wildlife biologist Dr. Rob Ramey and his wife, ornithologist Dr. Laura Brown, aren't looking for raptors in Colorado, they can often be found overseas doing fieldwork with elephants or other wildlife. Ramey and Dr. Tim Meehan are climbing volunteers with extensive experience in raptor research and protection in

other areas such as Yosemite, Big Sur, and locally, in Boulder Canyon. Other passionate volunteers include David and Susan King, Jim Dennison, Ron Harris, Dennis Stepaniak, John Vitone, and volunteer climbing steward Sam Ridley.

"It has been a team effort to locate and document the nests, involving long-time volunteers, Jonathan Lewis and Valerie Griffin, park climbing rangers, and observant climbers who report nests and bird sightings," said Ramey. "Dr. Tim Meehan and I have brought our unique combination of raptor nesting biology and climbing experience as well. Collectively, this collaboration is gathering high-quality, long-term data on raptor nesting in RMNP, benefitting the birds and our understanding of them." Ramey also acknowledged the support of the recreational climbers respecting the temporary raptor nesting closures by finding other places to climb until closures are lifted.

Lewis also credits recreational climbers with strong stewardship. Climbers often report raptor or nest sightings, and informally "police their own," educating fellow climbers on the importance of the closure policy. Avoiding raptor nesting areas is in the climbers' self-interest as well, as raptors may dive-bomb anything they perceive to threaten their nest.

Needle in a haystack? This view of Lumpy Ridge with Cindy Seckman in the foreground shows the scale of terrain and sky volunteers monitor to sight raptors and locate their nests.



RMNP uses an adaptive management approach and opens climbing routes and trails as soon as it's determined no active nests are in the area—usually beginning around June 1st. The park will verify routes are safe and no nests are present by conducting climber clearance surveys.

The peregrine falcon is one of the fastest animals on earth, reaching speeds well in excess of 200 mph when diving to hunt. Peregrine falcons feed on smaller birds such as songbirds, using their speed and talons to stun or knock out the smaller birds and then swinging back to capture their prey. Golden eagles are much larger, though they can also reach speeds of 200 mph. Their diet is primarily small mammals such as marmots (in contrast to bald eagles that hunt fish) but they will also poach the nests of falcons and other raptors.

Peregrines and other iconic raptors such as bald and golden eagles came to the edge of extinction by the 1970s following the widespread agricultural use of the pesticide DDT but rebounded following a DDT ban, state and federal protections, and aggressive stewardship.



By
Amelia Gross,
Rocky Mountain
Conservancy
Education Intern

Children Reap the Benefits of Nature Play in Outdoor Explorers Club



Last fall, the Rocky Mountain Conservancy wrapped up a third successful season of the Outdoor Explorers Club, an after-school program offered to children in kindergarten through third grade in Estes Park Elementary School or home-schooled in the Estes Valley region.

For six weeks, we led students on outdoor, educational adventures throughout Rocky Mountain National Park and surrounding public lands. Following their curiosities, we explored animal evidence, went on scavenger hunts, and were lucky enough to work with Kent Mountain Adventure Center (KMAC) guides for rock-climbing classes.



Play has inherent value for everyone, promoting health and wellbeing.

— Fran Mainella,
Former NPS Director

Thanks to grant funding from the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado and through the generosity of Conservancy donors, we were able to offer this program at no charge to families—and were able even to purchase new equipment and supplies. Although, even with our new tools, the favorite activity of the students remains using the digital cameras that are older than they are!

On one particular afternoon, the young photographers happily captured pictures based on a fall scavenger hunt worksheet, which led to a wonderful discussion of the changing aspen trees, the few remaining wildflowers, and why certain bodies of water have fish. Whether it was searching for animal tracks, looking for different types of bugs, or exploring the historic Birch Ruins, nobody said it better than our first-grade participant who,



Conservancy Photo

when asked what we were doing, responded, “We’re outdoors and we’re exploring!”

Little did they know that while exploring, they were gaining other benefits. Beyond educational enrichment, simply spending time in nature helps children develop self-confidence, inspires creativity and imagination, and is shown to reduce stress and anxiety in adolescents.

To learn more about the importance of outdoor education and remedying the “play deprivation crisis,” I spoke with former director of the National Park Service, Fran Mainella. Now on the boards of the U.S. Play Coalition,

Children and Nature Network, and others, Mainella is an advocate for getting kids outdoors so they can develop the skills for success.

“Play is native to us from the time we are born,” she said, “but changes in society have led to less play and detrimental effects for today’s kids.” Mainella explained that a major reason is the lure of technology. Also, many parents “don’t want their kids to get dirty” or think what children need is “to study, study, study.”



Conservancy Photo

This is misguided, Mainella continued. “Science says if you have nature play you will be more successful academically.” The benefit of play extends to teens as well. She explained that play has inherent value for everyone, promoting health and wellbeing.

“We’re outdoors and we’re exploring!”

While play is beneficial at all ages, it is especially important to encourage nature play early, so young children can build on their experiences and avoid developing unjustified fears. Mainella said the confidence young children develop by playing in nature helps them to grow up to be adults who are comfortable in the outdoors.

“Through progressive experiences, kids learn to not take nature for granted,” she explained, “making them more likely to value the outdoors in their adult life and ‘cast ballots for those who support the outdoors.’”

Or as we like to say in the conservation world, outdoor play and positive experiences in nature help develop the next generation of stewards of national parks like Rocky and similar public lands.

The Rocky Mountain Conservancy plans to offer the Outdoor Explorers Club again in 2024 and expand the program to include fourth and fifth graders. The continued support of the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado and Conservancy donors will help even more students enjoy and explore Rocky Mountain National Park and experience the countless academic, health, and social benefits of play.

Check out the Rocky Mountain Conservancy website in the spring for more information on this year’s program.



Conservancy Photo

The 2023
Conservation Corps
vegetation crew.



By
Laurel DesMarteau,
Scientists in
Parks Science
Communication
Assistant

New Conservation Corps Vegetation Crew Supports Rocky's Exotic Plant Management

The Exotic Plant Management Plan allows the park to mitigate invasive plant infestations and calls for the removal of these species manually, mechanically, and through herbicide application.

While much of the Rocky Mountain Conservancy's Conservation Corps (RMC-CC) focuses on trail maintenance and historic preservation in and around Rocky Mountain National Park, this summer the Corps fielded a new crew focused specifically on vegetation. The team was supervised by the park's vegetation office which focuses on plant restoration—the growth and regrowth of native species—and management of invasive species.

According to Rocky Mountain National Park's current Exotic Plant Management Plan, at least 42 exotic plant species are known to exist in the park, with the largest concentration at lower elevations and in more developed areas. These species are of particular concern due to their ability to displace native vegetation and their potential to adversely affect the long-term health of park ecosystems.

The Exotic Plant Management Plan allows the park to mitigate invasive plant infestations and calls for the



removal of these species manually, mechanically, and through herbicide application.

Under the direction of Field Lead Natalie Chiaperri, the Crew learned plant identification skills, proper herbicide use and safety, and the use of backpack sprayers to apply herbicide to exotic species like leafy spurge (*Euphorbia asula*) and orange hawkweed (*Heiracium aurantiacum*). The crew also learned techniques for manual removal. Through this work, the RMC-CC supports the National Park Service mission of protecting and preserving resources for current and future generations.

"Our aim with concentrated

Donate to support
the Rocky Mountain
Conservancy
Conservation Corps



[herbicide] spraying is to treat high priority exotic species,” said Ann Mills, Rocky’s lead for invasive plant removal during the 2023 season. “The ultimate goal is eradication.”

The Corps’ inaugural vegetation crew had six members, which like the rest of the Conservation Corps, came with diverse backgrounds and interests. Kaylyn (Kay) Hinson, an undergraduate English student and aspiring librarian, originally looked for a summer job outdoors to escape the burnout she faced from staring at a computer screen for too long. “I sought out this position for the same reason I want to become a librarian; to help serve my community and the greater good.”

Another corps member, Lydia Mills, pursued her undergraduate degree in meteorology and sustainability and hopes to contribute to environmental science research and potentially even work with the Continental Divide Research Learning Center (CDRLC) in Rocky. Despite their differing interests and goals for the future,

the members of this year’s RMCC Vegetation Crew all expressed a common love and appreciation for working in the outdoors and helping contribute to the bigger picture of vegetation management and wilderness conservation.

The crew members weren’t the only ones who experienced professional and personal enrichment during the season.

Chiaperri, who is pursuing her master’s degree in education, stated, “I really appreciate this opportunity because it’s allowed me to teach about science and grow as an educator, while still participating in all of the science-based field work.” She sees a busy future for the new vegetation crew program.

“I can definitely see us expanding the learning opportunities for crew members in the field besides just invasives removal, and they will continue to provide a great helping hand for our vegetation crew and our goals.”



RMC-CC Vegetation Crew members prepare backpack sprayers for herbicide application.



The 2023 Conservation Corps vegetation crew hard at work eradicating invasive plant species. | NPS Photo

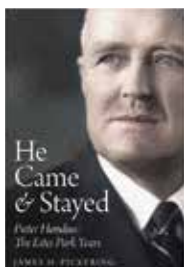
In Case You Missed It



Registration for 2024 Field Institute courses opens Feb. 1st with discounts for Rocky Mountain Conservancy members.

The Field Institute schedule is packed with nearly 40 courses available on everything from plant identification to nature photography, all taught by experts in the field. The Field Institute will offer more courses on the west side of the park this year and has added more half-day courses for those who prefer a shorter program. Join the Conservancy for a learning adventure!

Jim Pickering, past president of the Conservancy's board of directors, has published, *He Came & Stayed: Pieter Hondius, The Estes Park Years.*



This book explores the life and impact of Pieter Hondius, Sr., one of the Estes Valley's early influential European

settlers, whose land holdings once included Horseshoe Park and Beaver Meadows within what is now RMNP. One of Hondius' legacies is that his son, Pieter Hondius, Jr., became an accomplished advocate for conservation and historic preservation throughout Colorado including serving on the board of the Rocky Mountain Nature Association (now the Rocky Mountain Conservancy). The book is available through the Estes Park Museum.

Conservancy Round-Up



Simcha Rudolph's partner cutting the ribbon at Sprague Lake along with RMNP Superintendent Gary Ingram and park staff and Conservancy board members and staff in late October.

The Sprague Lake boardwalk reconstruction is a wonderful example of how Rocky, the Conservancy, and donors work together to preserve and enhance the park. The project was planned and executed by RMNP staff and completed with the support of funds from the estate of the late Simcha Rudolph. Simcha loved Rocky Mountain National Park and the outdoors. The project included removing the old boardwalk, improving the substructure and installing a steel frame as the support base to protect wetlands areas, and widening this section of the trail. This project also improved two scenic overlooks. We're grateful for Simcha's gift and its impact on enhancing the visitor experience.

New Search & Rescue Donation Card



Rocky Mountain Conservancy

RMNP Search and Rescue Fund funds critical training, medical supplies, and equipment supports volunteers and staff for RMNP Search and Rescue

RMConservancy.org/SAR

RMNP staff cannot solicit donations directly from the public.

After Search & Rescue operations, however, people often ask how they can thank the park or "pay it forward" for the SAR team's life-saving support. To respond to these situations, the Conservancy has printed business cards that first responders can hand out with information on **how to donate to the Rocky Mountain Conservancy's SAR Fund**. The Conservancy helps fund RMNP's extensive SAR training, equipment and supplies, mental health services, and specialized utility vehicles.

Apply for 2024 Conservation Corps. Do you know a young person who might benefit from serving in the Conservation Corps or High School Leadership Corps? Check out the programs and how to apply at www.RMConservancy.org/work-with-us/.

Rocky Terraces workforce housing for RMNP and Conservancy team members is on track for spring completion. The Conservancy is grateful for recent in-kind donations valued at more than \$30,000, including flooring, bathroom and kitchen fixtures, and generous appliance discounts.

Save the date for RMNP's Biennial Research Conference March 6-7, 2024.



The conference will be held at the Ridgeline Hotel in Estes Park

with on-site registration. The Rocky Mountain Conservancy helps fund the conference, which is open to the public and free of charge. Come explore current research that supports science-informed decision making and adaptive management at RMNP. See go.nps.gov/RMNPconference2024 for details.



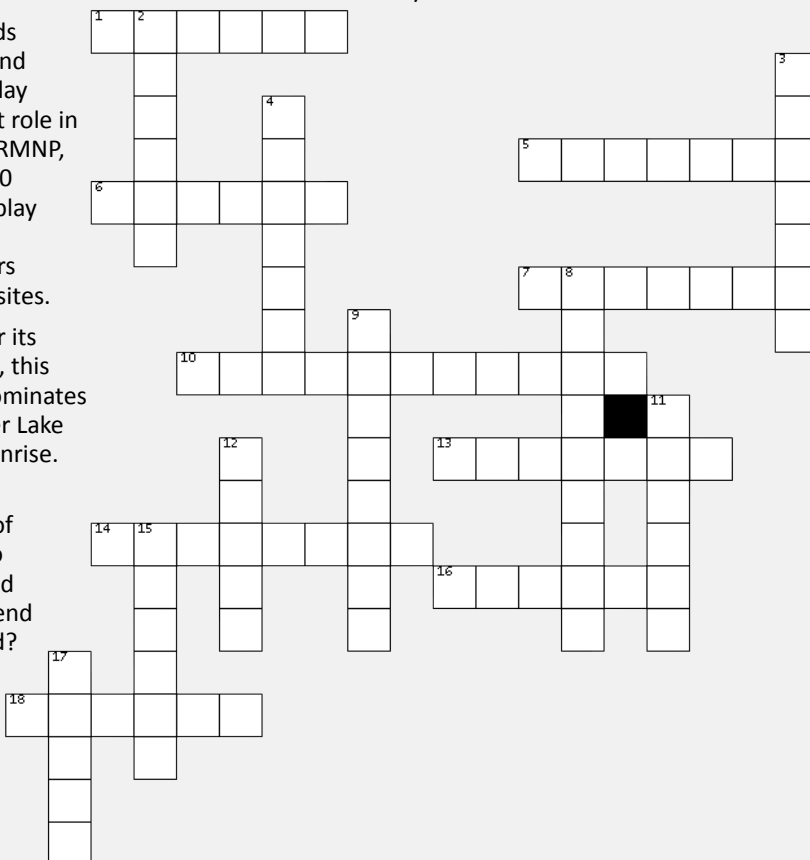
Rocky Mountain Conservancy Park Puzzler

Across

1. New RMNP Superintendent Gary Ingram served at which former president's National Historic Site prior to his assignment at Cumberland Island National Seashore, as mentioned in the Autumn Quarterly?
5. What are the largest terrestrial members of the squirrel family located in the park?
6. What is the Shawnee term for elk, which translates to "white rump?"
7. This mountain dominates the northwest skyline in Horseshoe Park at 13,514 feet.
10. In the Autumn Quarterly, what species is an ideal indicator for assessing mercury pollution in aquatic ecosystems?
13. This mine was opened on the east side of the park in 1905; gold ore and copper sulfide came out of it until 1912.
14. Can you name the creek that bisects Big Meadows on Rocky's west side?
16. What canyon southwest of the Alpine Visitor Center is the location of the headwaters of the Big Thompson River?
18. The most recent Quarterly mentioned that this friendly and inquisitive mule could be considered the "Miss Congeniality" of RMNP's pack animal team.

Down

2. Enos Mills is famous in Estes Park, but do you know his middle name?
3. RMNP is home to 156 lakes and 450 miles of streams. However, due to conservation efforts, not all are open to this type of recreation.
4. This mountain is found on the southern border of RMNP, east of Twin Peaks. It is named after a member of the Arapaho Tribe whose name translates to "black coyote."
8. These kinds of artifacts and specimens play an important role in the story of RMNP, with over 710 items on display at the park's visitor centers and historic sites.
9. Named for its cleft summit, this mountain dominates the view over Lake Helene at Sunrise.
11. What percentage of their lives do yellow-bellied marmots spend underground?
12. This waterfall is located about one mile up the Old Fall River Road and is worth a spring hike or a summer drive.
15. Calypso Cascades, located in Wild Basin, was named after this type of rare pink flower that grows in the damp forest nearby.
17. According to the Rocky Mountain Conservancy's 2022 year-end highlights, how many acres did the park expand that year?



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Meet Karen Lloyd-D'Onofrio, New Development Officer



The Rocky Mountain Conservancy Philanthropy Department welcomes Karen Lloyd-D'Onofrio as the team's new development officer.

Karen's responsibilities include advocating for all the Conservancy programs that support Rocky Mountain National Park, meeting and building relationships with donors, and fundraising.

Although Karen was born and raised in the United Kingdom

near the Welsh border, her roots in Colorado are well developed. After settling in Colorado with her family, she soon enrolled in the University of Colorado and earned a degree in American history. She continued her studies in Boulder earning a Master of Science in museum administration and paleontology, and a Ph.D. in history with a focus on the environmental history of the American West.

Karen's recent work experience includes five years as the Association Historian and Director of Museums & Archives at the YMCA of the Rockies and serving as a board director of the Berthoud Historical Society. She also managed the Deer Valley Petroglyph Preserve in Tempe during a one-year visiting professorship at Arizona State University.

What ties Karen's academic and work experience together is a fascination with how the stories of peoples and

places get told through specimens, artifacts, and photographs. She has used archives and diaries and other sources to understand how items end up in museums and how that process shapes the history that is presented, or as she says, "finding the thread connecting artifacts, museums, people and places."

"Karen brings a wonderful skill set to the Rocky Mountain Conservancy," said Kaci Yoh, director of Philanthropy. "She knows Rocky Mountain National Park and our gateway communities well through her work with the YMCA and she shares a passion for conserving our environment. She also has extensive experience in capital campaigns to preserve historic homesteads and to construct the Estes Park Women's Monument."

Karen and her husband, Michael, live in Berthoud and enjoy amateur bird watching, spending time with Karen's grown children, and introducing granddaughter, Tay, to the natural world.

Twilight of the Kawuneeche?

Continued from page 1

"The area has dried up and vegetation has changed dramatically," said Dr. David Cooper of the Warner College of Natural Resources at Colorado State University, who has been studying the Kawuneeche for 33 years. Ten- to 12-foot-high willows that once widely covered the valley have today almost been exterminated.

To address these changes and challenges, the Rocky Mountain Conservancy, along with RMNP and a diverse group of government and conservation organizations, have created the Kawuneeche Valley Restoration Collaborative (KVRC) to restore riparian wetlands and waterways in the upper Colorado River watershed. Working along with the Rocky Mountain Conservancy and RMNP are the town of Grand Lake, Grand County, the U.S. Forest Service, Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, the Nature Conservancy, Colorado State University, and the Colorado River Water Conservation District. KVRC is also consulting with Tribal Nations whose traditional homelands include RMNP. Other stakeholders include Ducks Unlimited, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Trout Unlimited, and the Upper Colorado Watershed Environment Team.

"As RMNP's nonprofit partner, the Rocky Mountain Conservancy is bringing grant and donor funding for research and restoration as well as project management expertise," said Estee Rivera, executive director. "We don't have much time to preserve what remains of precious resources like the stressed willow population. We need public support and the resources and skill sets of all the KVRC partners to tackle a project as large and as critical as saving and restoring the Kawuneeche Valley."

During 2023, the Rocky Mountain Conservancy provided \$190,000 in direct financial support and helped raise and manage nearly \$876,000 in grant funds to support assessment, planning, research, and education efforts.

The KVRC partnership was forming in 2020 when the massive East Troublesome Fire devastated Grand County and burned more than 22,000 acres within RMNP, adding to the sense of urgency for restoring the Kawuneeche Valley wetlands. Current efforts are building on baseline research and exploring restoration strategies. Potential projects include fencing to protect willows and other aquatic vegetation, removal of exotic plants, planting of willows and other vegetation, building of simulated beaver structures, and mitigating abandoned man-made ditches.

A healthier watershed in the Kawuneeche Valley not only strengthens resiliency to climate change but would improve overall water quality of the Colorado River, cool water temperatures to support native trout and other aquatic populations, and serve as a natural fire break.

"It's a huge opportunity to bring back biodiversity and hydrological functioning to the ecosystem," said Koren Nydick, chief of Resource Stewardship at RMNP. "As we move into the future with projections of expanding drought and wildfire frequency, it's going to be really important that our willow-riparian ecosystem keeps water on the landscape and help us adapt to climate change."

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Nature Notes

• **Ann Schonlau** captured this photo of a very big and full moon rising over Moraine Park. • On a hike up Fall River Road, **Brad Fitch and his wife** came across the remains of a large bull elk, likely taken down by a mountain lion. Several weeks before, another bull elk carcass was found just inside the Park's Fall River entrance, possibly killed by the same lion. • **Lynwood Sumner, Jr.**, and **Leah Anderson** both enjoyed sighting a moose cow and calf and took time to observe for a while. Sumner was amazed at the majesty. Anderson noted, "Just sitting there (from a distance) watching them was pretty magical." • **Lisa Cook** did a trail run on the Green Mountain - Onahu loop hoping to see some wildlife. She only saw squirrels and birds until she finished her run and heard some elk bugling. She was glad to see and hear the elk, even if it was in the parking lot! • **Suzanne Gunn** was hiking the Finch Lake Trail and spied little bird foot prints in the snow, and then saw some ptarmigan or grouse scurry away through the trees. • **Bridget Malake** tried all last winter to see a snowshoe hare. This

fall she was thrilled to spot a snowshoe hare while hiking in Black Canyon. She reports his feet were white and the rest of his coat was brownish—maybe just beginning its winter adaptation changing color from brown to white. • **Phyllis Holst** took this photo of a stunning damselfly at Bierstadt Lake this summer. • Visiting Bear Lake, **Samantha Lieurance** overhead a teenager exclaim, "It's like a photo but real life—like I'm in a nature documentary!" • **Carol Nehls** commented that every visit to Rocky offers a glimpse of unique beauty no matter the season! • And speaking of seasons, new Colorado residents **Mark and Shawn Whitney** wasted no time exploring the park after the first major snowfall in late October. Shawn captured the wintry photo of Longs Peak on the cover. • One early morning in Moraine Park, **Darlene Bushue** photographed a family group of seven healthy coyotes sporting thick winter coats. Two were running and the other five joined them with lots of playful greetings. After hanging out and hunting mice and voles, the group wandered away toward the campground.



Ann Schonlau



Damselfly | Phyllis Holst



Darlene Bushue