The High Sierra Rambler

Issue Two - 2025

We acknowledge that The High Sierra Rambler and the University of Nevada, Reno is situated on the traditional homelands of the Numu (Northern Paiute), Wašiw (Washoe), Newe (Western Shoshone), Nuwu (Southern Paiute) peoples. These lands continue to be a gathering place for Indigenous Peoples and we recognize their deep connections to these places. We extend our appreciation for the opportunity to live, learn, explore, and recreate on their territory and give thanks for their lasting knowledge and stewardship of these places.

Editor's Note

We are the High Sierra Ramblers, and since you have this magazine in your hands that makes you one too! This is the second issue of a very special project born out of the collective desire to see more of the local adventures, people, and places of our high desert and mountain home in print.

It dawned on me a season or so ago that I knew what was going on with people on the other side of the world but I didn't know what my neighbors were up to. What world-class adventures were they getting up to in our very own backyard? And this place truly is world class. You can be soaking in a hot spring in the heart of the desert with wild burros as your neighbors and then sending the lines of your life on the shores of Tahoe all in one day.

I often see Tahoe and the Sierra Nevada featured in large national and international publications, and witness its landscapes sprinkled in ski films and edits – both the indy and the big dogs – but it was rare I saw my friends and neighbors' adventures on anything more than their instagram stories or posts. This had to change, and thus The Rambler was born.

It is a love letter to Nevada and the Sierra – to all its mountain ranges and canyons, its alpine lakes and meadows, its sagebrush steppes and wild creatures. But most of all, this magazine is a celebration of the tight-knit community of adventures, wild folk, and beings that call this place home. There are few places where one can ski, climb, bike, paddle, and swim all in the same day! I am eternally inspired and awed by this landscape, but recently this feeling of reverence has been coupled with the realization of the pressing need to protect it.

During the production of this copy of The Rambler our public lands have come increasingly under threat. Meadows and landscapes on National Forest Land featured in Issue One of The Rambler were proposed to be up for sale in past months as the result of policies in the "Big Beautiful Bill." Our public lands are now more at risk than ever before.

When I look at the mountains, meadows and pines that raised me, the lines in their bark and rings in their wood mirrors to the ones in my bones, I realize just how intertwined with this landscape I am – how connected to it we all are. The roots of the wild lupine and sagebrush underfoot are nourished by the same snows that we slash and carve on the mountainside, bringing joy and life to so many beings.

I invite you to think of all this landscape has given to you, this ecosystem, and this community as you dive into this issue of The Rambler. And please enjoy as you dive in with skis, poles, paddles, laces, wheels and all!

Ramble on,
Kat Fulwider

ram·ble

/’ramb(e)l/ ***verb / noun***

1. to walk for pleasure, typically without a definite route.
2. to talk or write in an aimless, wandering, and often long-winded fashion
3. a walk taken for pleasure in the countryside.

Dedication

The best things in life are not always planned. Sometimes epiphanies are brought about by a casual stroll in the forest or by an apple falling from a tree onto an unsuspecting physicist. To ramble in nature is a remarkable thing, and one is always left changed by the journey. So we ramble, we wander, but we are not lost in this place we have come to call home.

This magazine is dedicated to those who dare to ramble, to adventure close to home as well as to distant lands, for those who dare to send it but don’t forget to slow down and smell the sagebrush, to those who came before and who still are here, who protect this land and water, and who call it home, and to those who appreciate the micro as well as the macro wonders that are found in the Sierra Nevada range and the great and oh-so-quirky state of Nevada.

What's Inside

The Backyard Buzz:

How native plants and vegetables can take root in Reno's backyards.


Habrodais grunus
Golden Oak HS
Plebejus saepiolus
Greenish Blue
Strymon melinus
Gray Hairstreak
Ministrymon leda
Mitoura gryneus
nelsoni
Mitoura nelsoni
Hairstreak
Incisalia augustinus
W. Brown Elfin
Incisalia eryphon
W. Pine Elfin
Satyrium behrii
Behr's Hairstreak
Mitoura silva
Silva Hairstreak
Satyrium sylvinus
Everes amyntula
W. Tailed-Blue
Lycaena cupreus
Lustrous C
Epargyreus clarus
Silver-Spotted S.

As spring peeps out from our snowy hills, gardeners around Reno are gearing up everywhere to turn over a new leaf. However, how does one grow a garden in the middle of desert-ringed suburbia? Turns out, we don't have to travel far to find the answer.

Our first visit is to the University of Nevada, Reno's (UNR) native plant garden. I've travelled across the quad– my office is in the same building, after all– to meet Cynthia Scholl, a resident native plant and pollinator expert and cofounder of the nonprofit Nevada Bugs and Butterflies. It's a crisp day in early March – the kind that makes my nose drip like a leaky tap– and I'm deeply skeptical that we'll find anything blooming as Scholl weaves me through the garden.

We're squatting low when we spot it – a splash of peachy-orange, tightly curled up against the cold.

"That's one of my favourite plants, desert globemallow," Scholl says, twisting the plant to show the bud more clearly. "It's a really important food source for the desert tortoise."

Scholl tells me of her old home in downtown Reno, where she planted a little pot of globemallow on her front step. She was absolutely thrilled to discover native bright green sweat bees buzzing around its blooms one day. "I think it's so cool to show that, even in a really urban area, if you plant native plants, you will be helping native pollinators," she says.

"In Nevada," she continues, leading me to a different clump of plants, "we have about a thousand species of native bees."

As an etymologist and the education coordinator of UNR's Museum of Natural History, Scholl is often asked how the bee population is doing. The answer, however, isn't exactly clear.

"A thousand species is just too many to monitor," she says. "We don't even know where some of them are and we don't have very good records for Nevada, so there's still a lot to learn. But even without knowing all these details, we know that planting native plants will help them."

Desert globemallow. Photo courtesy of Ai Ana Richmond.

Even providing just a small habitat for native pollinators in gardens or pots along your front step, like Scholl's pot of globemallow, can be a huge help, as most pollinators can't fly long distances. Two-thirds of Nevada's native bees are ground nesters, so Scholl recommends for gardens to have patches of undisturbed soil.

"Think of native Nevada ecosystems," she says. "Many of them have quite a bit of bare ground."

Here's a few other buds of advice:

Practice clumping: incorporating several plants of the same kind so pollinators can find them.

Make sure you have plants blooming from early spring to late fall, so there's always something available. Some native examples include showy milkweed (blooming June through September), desert globemallow (blooming April through August), firecracker penstemon (blooming April through August), and sulphur buckwheat (blooming May through August) .

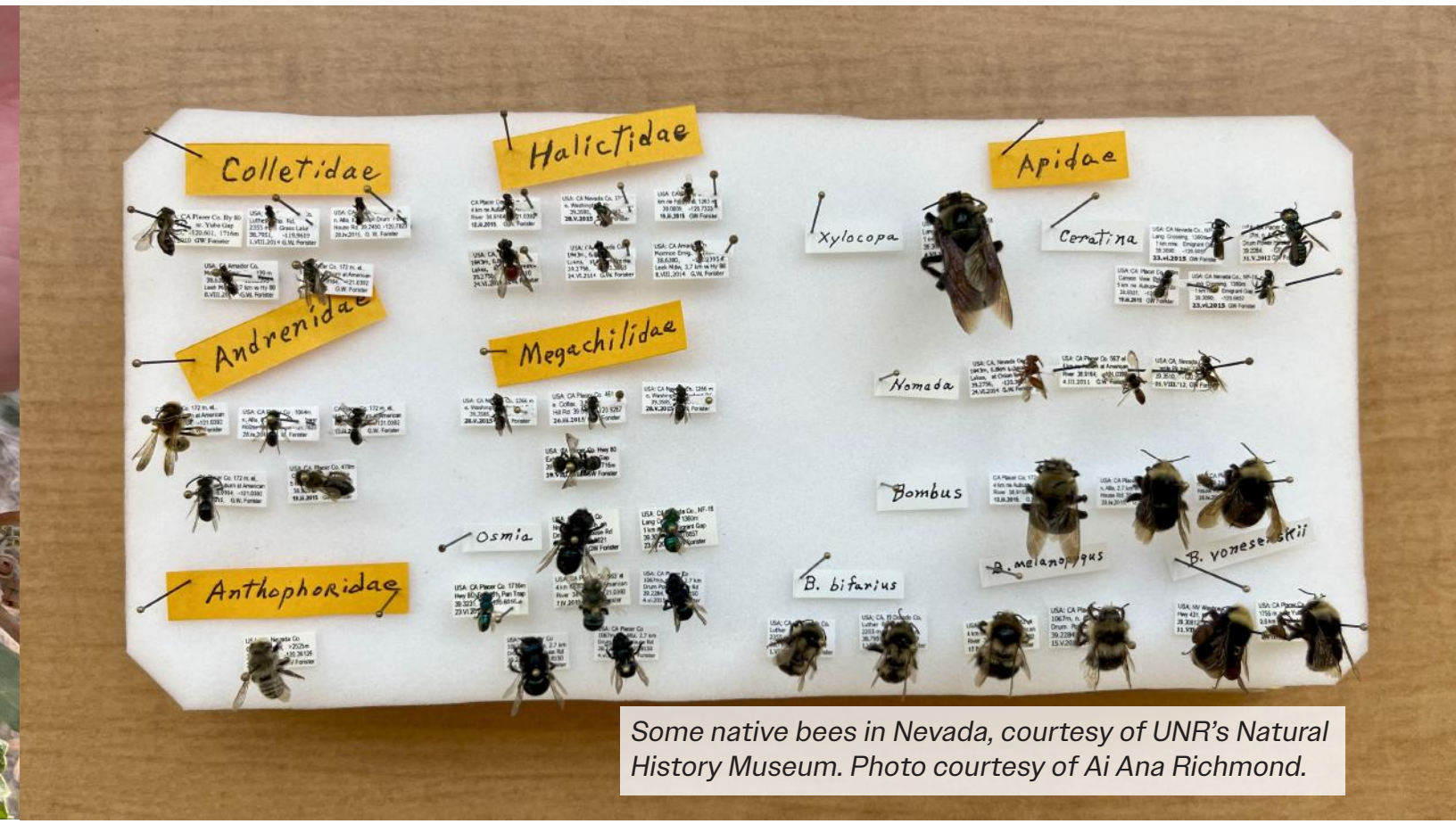
Color variation is important– just like us, many pollinators have favorite colors! Make sure there's a little something for everyone.

Lastly, don't use pesticides. Garden pesticides often have much higher levels of damaging chemicals compared to their agricultural equivalents. However, cultivating a diverse garden can help offset the pests.

"The more you have a functioning ecosystem, the more things will keep themselves in check" Scholl says. "It takes a little time, but it will happen." She also talks about the importance of reframing these pests when they do strike. Female leafcutter bees will cut circles out of leaves to use to line their nests. Rose leaves are one of their favorites to use.

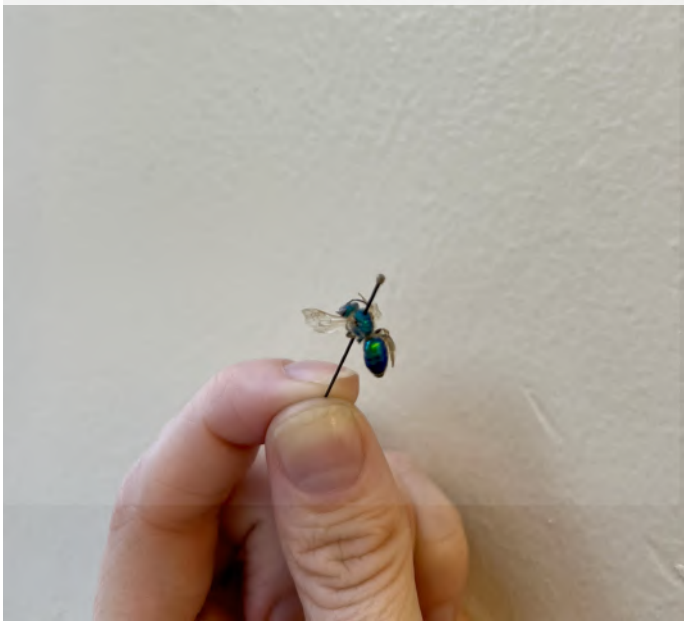
"Maybe you get really sad to see all these holes in the leaves of your rose plant," Scholl says. "But think about it as mama bees coming to make little bee baby blankets – just let it be!"

The importance of having blooming plants for most of the season was something Dr. Atticus Murphy shared with me, too. Dr Murphy is a recent graduate from Tufts University, where he studied the social contagion of urban gardening and its impact on native pollinators, including



Some native bees in Nevada, courtesy of UNR's Natural History Museum. Photo courtesy of Ai Ana Richmond.

A pinned native sweat bee from UNR's Natural History Museum collection. Photo courtesy of Ai Ana Richmond



Cynthia's handful of native seeds.Photo courtesy of Ai Ana Richmond

Showy milkweed, a Nevada native and favourite of monarch butterflies.. Photo courtesy of Ai Ana Richmond.

the iconic monarch butterfly. Social contagion is the spread of a behavior through a group– like yawning, speeding on the highway, or, in this case, gardening.

Murphy likens a diverse garden to a buffet, saying if you have diverse plants, "you're going to attract more pollinators with different food preferences."

Not only do gardens benefit native pollinators, but their human counterparts can gain a lot, too. Dr Murphy's research helped him identify the strong correlation between gardening and mental health.

"It's a happy accident, but people do report that they like more diverse flower gardens: if you see many colors and types of flowers in a garden, you'll think it looks prettier," he says. "Gardens also build communities, so many people report feeling more in touch with their community when they garden. That's one reason that it's socially contagious."

Dr Murphy's PhD research unearthed that gardening can be socially contagious– being bitten by the gardening bug, as it were.

"Yards next-door to a garden are three times as likely to have a garden themselves, and this can spread within five or ten neighbors around them," he says.

There are a few reasons for this: people who see each other's gardens are likely to talk to each other and spread the idea around. It makes it less intimidating. It's also just pretty: if you're around beauty every day, you're more likely to imitate it.

Gardens are good for our native pollinators. They're good for our mental health and a sense of community. But what about food?

Dr. Felipe Barrios Masias researches small-scale agricultural efforts at UNR, examining how plants respond to environmental stress. Because Reno's climate allows for freezing temperatures even into late spring and early fall, local gardeners struggle with a short growing period.

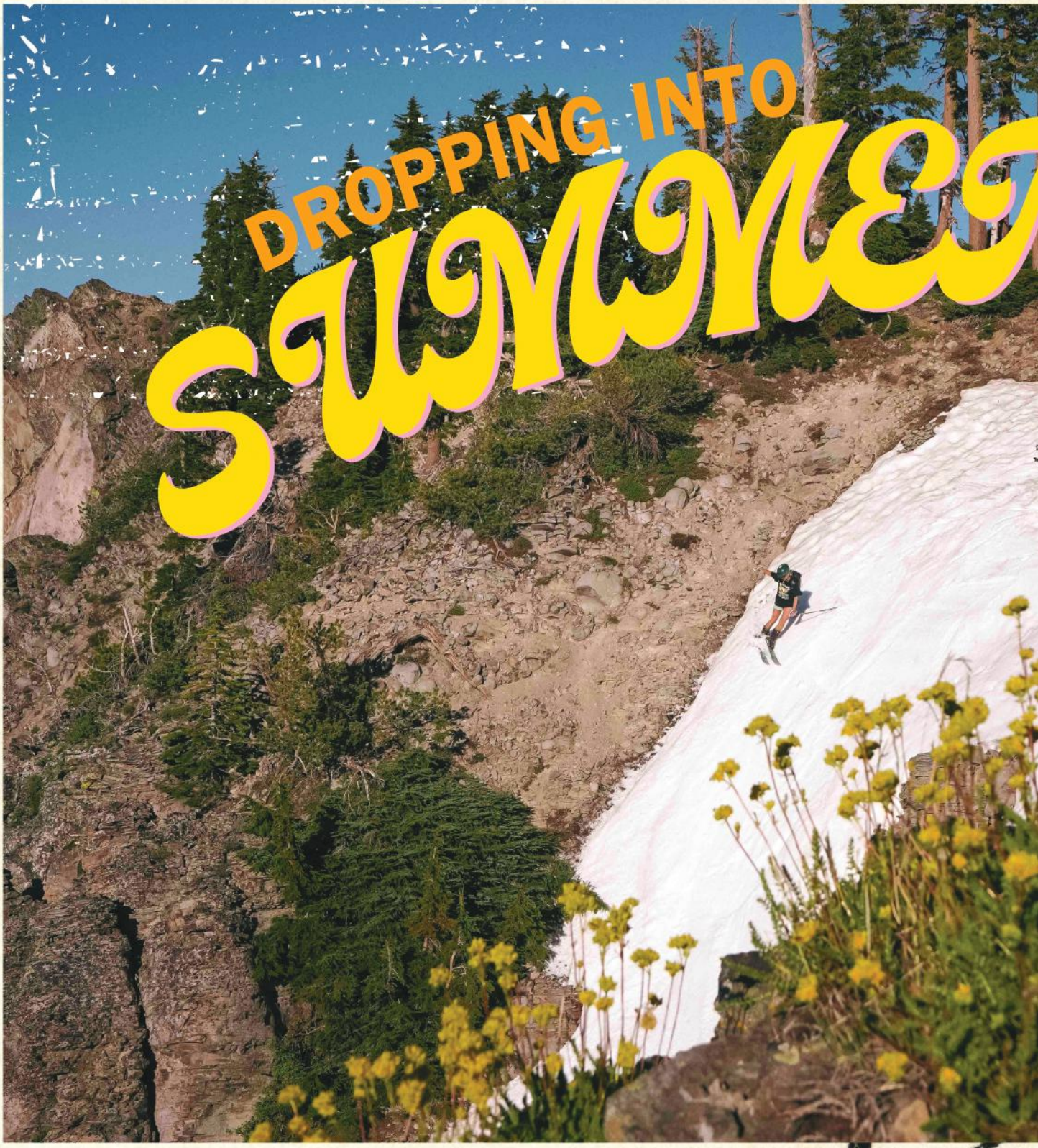
"If it's an open garden, don't start it before June," Dr Masias says about gardening in Reno. "Farmers that use hoop houses start transplanting much earlier, even April or May. But it is risky. In early spring, the day-to-night temperature fluctuations are high so you really need to wait, especially if you're growing tomatoes or peppers. Then you should stop gardening when you get a frost: usually September or October, but it varies."

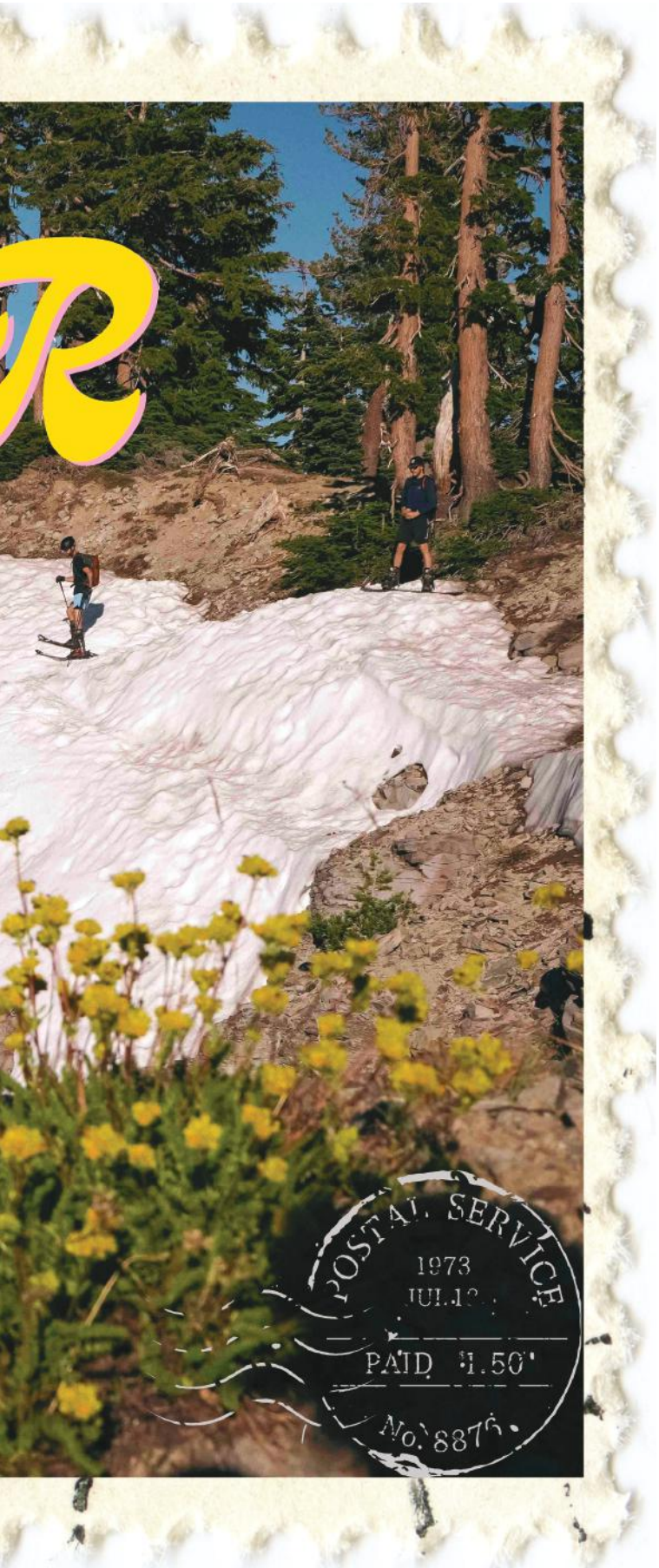
This variance also depends on the type of gardening you're doing: raised beds are most vulnerable. Hoop houses, where raised beds are covered in plastic, can be planted much earlier, but this comes at a cost – much more work. "You have to take the plastic on and off over the course of the day to manage temperatures," Dr Masias says. He has tried it, but found that he preferred less intense backyard gardening.

The question still remains – what plants do best in Reno? The variety you choose is imperative. Dr Masias, for instance, has found that green beans and wax beans are hardy. He also loves tomatoes, jalapenos, and aji, a Peruvian chili that has been bred to do well here in Reno. Peppers are a challenge, but onions, chives, cucumbers and carrots are all well-suited to Nevada's soil.

So, there you have it! It is possible to grow a garden of native plants, provide important pollinator habitat, and produce food for yourself– "that is," as Dr Masias says, "if you're up for the challenge."

Photos by Ai Ana Richmond
Story by Ai Ana Richmond
Layout by Cherie Franklin


DROPPING INTO
SUMMER



Pebbles crunch underfoot as I set off up the trail with my rock skis and boots strapped haphazardly to my pack on a warm June afternoon. I opted for jorts – jean shorts– for today's mission, the pockets of which are adorned with bright yellow painted sunflowers that match the patches of wild Mules Ear flowers along the trail. An apropos nod to the fact that not everyday one gets to go ski a couloir at the start of summer.

Today's afternoon mission is the Fourth of July Chutes…in June.

This multi-season gem is tucked away in a canyon along the West Shore of Tahoe and it is a mandatory hike-in. As such it requires a bit of intrepidness, gumption, and entirely more bug spray than we thought to bring — I forgot that in summer we trade flying snowflakes for flying insects, and the latter of the two bites.

This bug bitten, muddy ski boot-goofin and delightfully rad adventure began when my friend and partner in hooliganry, Lucy Dougherty blasted into the group message, "4th of July Chutes in Blackwood Canyon tomorrow, come!!!" I found myself replying without a second thought "Ooooh super down!!!" Messages followed by long strings of exclamation points flew back and forth and the mission was a go.

The following afternoon a group of ten skiers, boarders, and stoke bringers met at a dirt road trailhead armed with their rock skis, sunscreen, good vibes and a ridiculous pair of dinosaur sunglasses. We tromped on up the dirt trail and soon the pine trees parted to reveal our goal — a strip of white descending from a ridgeline between rock bands into a snowy-ish bowl below.

Setting sights on our objective lit a fire in our steps as we continued upwards, over patches of snow and mud, and up a steep final ascent until the trail peaked out above treeline and we crested the ridgeline. From here Desolation Wilderness opened up before us —

Above: Alex Darby and Christina Meylan smile atop the edge of the main Fourth of July Cute. Tahoe can be seen in the background.
Below: Lucy Daugherty smiles as she sports her T-Rex Sunglasses.

patches of white painted the mountain peaks above as splashes of purple Lupines dotted a sea of green Manzanita shrubland.

Finally we reached the Summit.

The Fourth of July Chute yawned open out in front of us, flanked by bright yellow wild buckwheat flowers and towering pillars of granite, with the sapphire blue waters of Tahoe lying placidly beyond.

Tracks criss-crossed the chute's snowy surface

which was punctuated with a large boulder in its center. Tyler, a quiet and humble, but complete sleeper agent of badassery, looked at this massive rock as a feature to jump over — something he had done the previous week. He said something along the lines of it having more snow before and thinking it better to just shred the rest of the chute than send a gap over it.

Through giggles and plenty of jokes, we transitioned from hiking shoes to ski and snowboard boots and geared up. Helmets were donned and to Lucy's delighted surprise fit perfectly with her Jurassic glasses. The stoke was at an all time high, even higher than the 8,000 feet above sea level we all found ourselves at!

And with big smiles on our sunscreen slathered faces, one by one we began to drop. A chorus of laughter, whoops and "dropping" echoed through the canyon beyond.

Last but not least after firing off tons of photos, it was my time to drop. The butterflies rose up in my stomach as I stared down the

chute. A call and response of “Yeehaws!” and “Yeeews!” erupted from my waiting friends below as I dropped in.

The slush was fast and steep down the narrow canyon, and mini slush slides carried my skis as I carved the way down its face to my waiting friends below!

Smiles were everywhere as we began the long return of a traverse/hike/scramble out. A few free base grinds on fallen trees and rocks later we were hiking out, this time with mud-encrusted ski boots and joyous smiles on our faces.

As we bushwacked back to our cars and the promise of some damn-good waffle fries and cold ones at the Bridge Tender we encountered a teeny tiny hopping little toad friend and perhaps enough mosquitos to pick us up and carry us back to the waiting cars below. But as the light became more tinged with gold and the shadows grew longer, I was reminded yet again of why I love this region so much.

In a single day I went from digging in

my garden to hiking up a ridge amongst wildflowers and dropping in alongside my friends. We finished off a perfect day by jumping in Lake Tahoe for a starry evening swim.

Dropping into summer in the Sierra just hits different.

Photos, Story, and Layout by Kat Fulwider

Photo by Paul Atkinson
Comet Tsuchinshan
over Wheeler Peak.

Nevada's Nightlight

The Mission to Protect Desert Darkness

To many, finding someone lying alone on the ground in the middle of a rural Nevada night would be a cause for concern. But for Paul Atkinson, staring up at the night sky is the norm.

Atkinson is an astrophotographer. For the last ten years, he has traveled around the country from his home in Raleigh, North Carolina in search of dark skies. In 2024, this search brought him to Northern Nevada, the location of some of the darkest skies in the lower 48.

Atkinson first spent two nights in one of Nevada's ghost towns, Delamar, before beginning an artist's residency in Great Basin National Park.

"That was really something to be the only person in this pretty empty landscape with ruins of buildings," Atkinson said. "I imagine that once there were a couple thousand people but right then, when I was there, it was a population of one."

Great Basin National Park is one of Nevada's official dark sky places as designated by Dark Sky International (DSI), a U.S.-based nonprofit focused on the night sky and light pollution. But Atkinson's story shows that one doesn't need to travel to complete isolation to appreciate the stars. Raleigh, as North Carolina's capital, is no stranger to city lights, but all it took to show Atkinson the wonders of the sky was a half-hour drive.

"There are very few places on the East Coast where you can find anything approaching a dark sky," Atkinson said. "That first night was amazing. I pointed my camera in the direction the Milky Way should be, and there it was."

While Reno is only about half the size of Raleigh, I understand Atkison's misconceptions about the stars. When I was young, I would look up at the sky and presume that the stars I was seeing were all there were to see. Like Atkinson, I was proven wrong.

Eighty percent of the U.S. population lives in urban areas, meaning the vast majority of people look up at a sky impacted by light pollution. When large concentrations of artificial lights remain on at night, the light is reflected throughout the atmosphere, creating a visual effect called sky glow, which lightens the horizons and drowns out starlight. There are some places, however, where there is so little light at night that the sky retains its original majesty.

Whereas Great Basin National Park sits in the center of Nevada's Eastern border, Massacre Rim Dark Sky Sanctuary is located about 150 miles north of Reno along the Nevada-California border. DSI named the sanctuary as Nevada's newest protected sky place in 2019, and it consists of a hundred thousand acres of little but sagebrush and mountains, making it the perfect place to see the stars.

With a minimum elevation of 5,000 feet, meaning less atmosphere for starlight to travel through, and its deep isolation, the entire night sky in Massacre Rim is lit with stars. Go during a new moon and right after a storm to clear the dust from the sky, and there is no better place to stargaze. Here, I can only second Atkinson's observations about Great Basin, "Where I live, I can look up at the sky and count the stars. But in a dark sky place, there are too many to count."

Richard Bednarski was integral in the push to get Massacre Rim designated as a dark sky sanctuary. At the time, he worked with Friends of Nevada Wilderness, an organization deeply involved in conserving Nevada's native ecosystems. He was the one traversing the area with a sky quality meter—a device that measures the brightness of star light and ambient light—to see if the zone qualified under DSI's metrics.

"On the scale they use, the higher a number, the brighter the location," Bednarski said. "In Reno, it usually measures about an eight. Out there, it measures a one or two."

In the year-long process of establishing Massacre Rim as a dark sky sanctuary, Bednarski grew familiar with the terrain

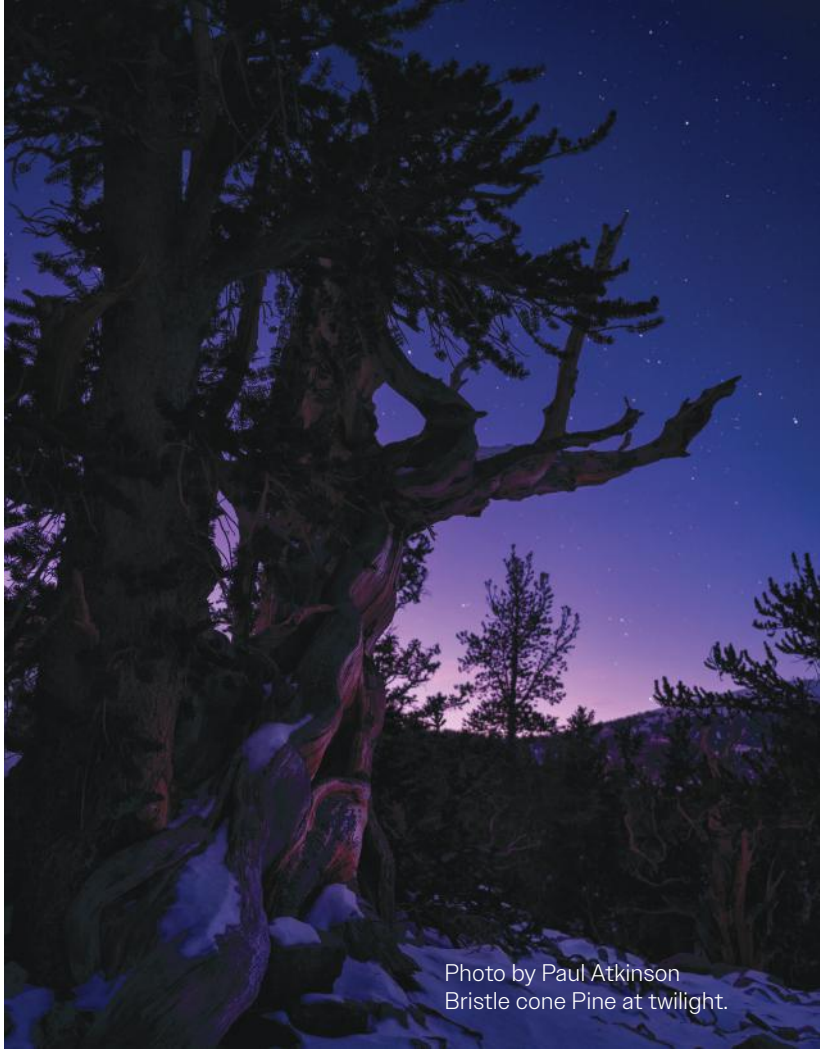


Photo by Paul Atkinson
Bristle cone Pine at twilight.

Photo by Taylor Moore
Massacre Rim, 2:30 a.m.

and found a deeper appreciation for the importance of the dark. He explored Massacre Rim's two public use cabins, Steven's Camp and Massacre Ranch, and worked to help open up Nevada's night skies to the public.

"The skies are the one place we can go to look for humility and to remind us, as Carl Sagan said, 'We're just a blue dot,'" Bednarski said. "It's important to me to know that there's a place I can take my kids to show them the sky. I couldn't even point out constellations because there are so many stars you can't find them."

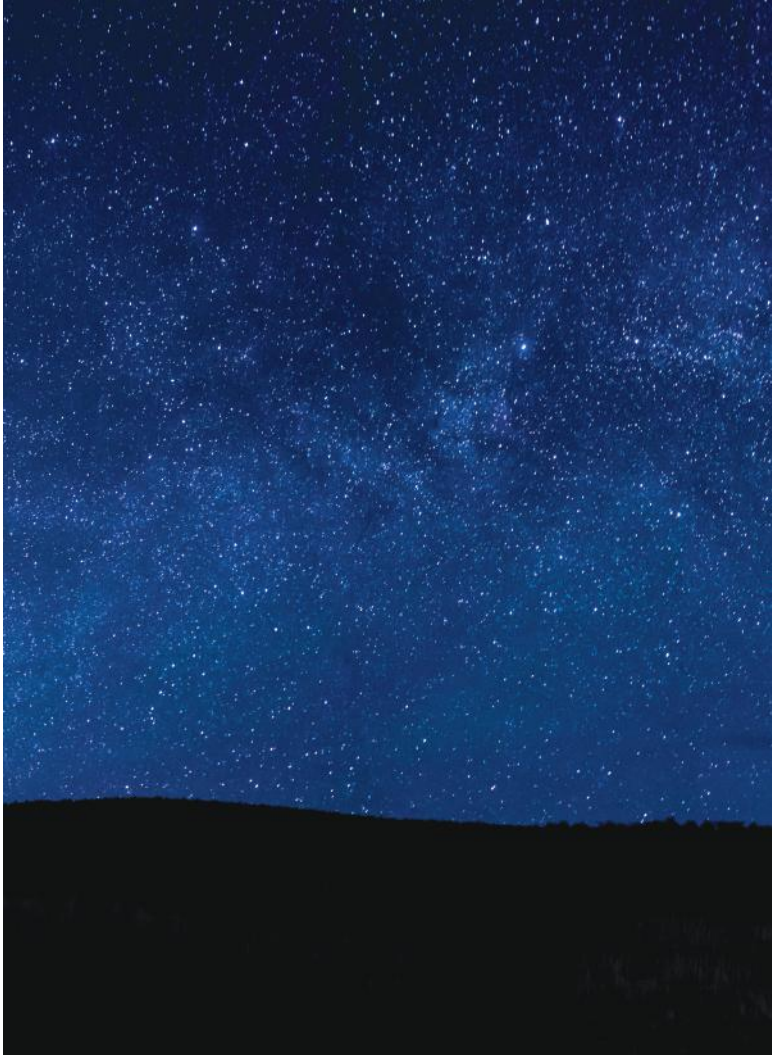
Establishing a location as a protected sky is only part of the battle against light pollution, which is why DSI also assists volunteers in providing outreach and education on the adverse effects of a brighter night sky. Michael Rhymer is DSI's Dark Sky Places Program Associate, a position he has held for three years, though he has been involved with the organization for much longer. He says people need to know it's not just about aesthetics.

"We are concerned about wildlife. We are concerned about energy consumption. We are concerned about safety," Rhymer tells me.

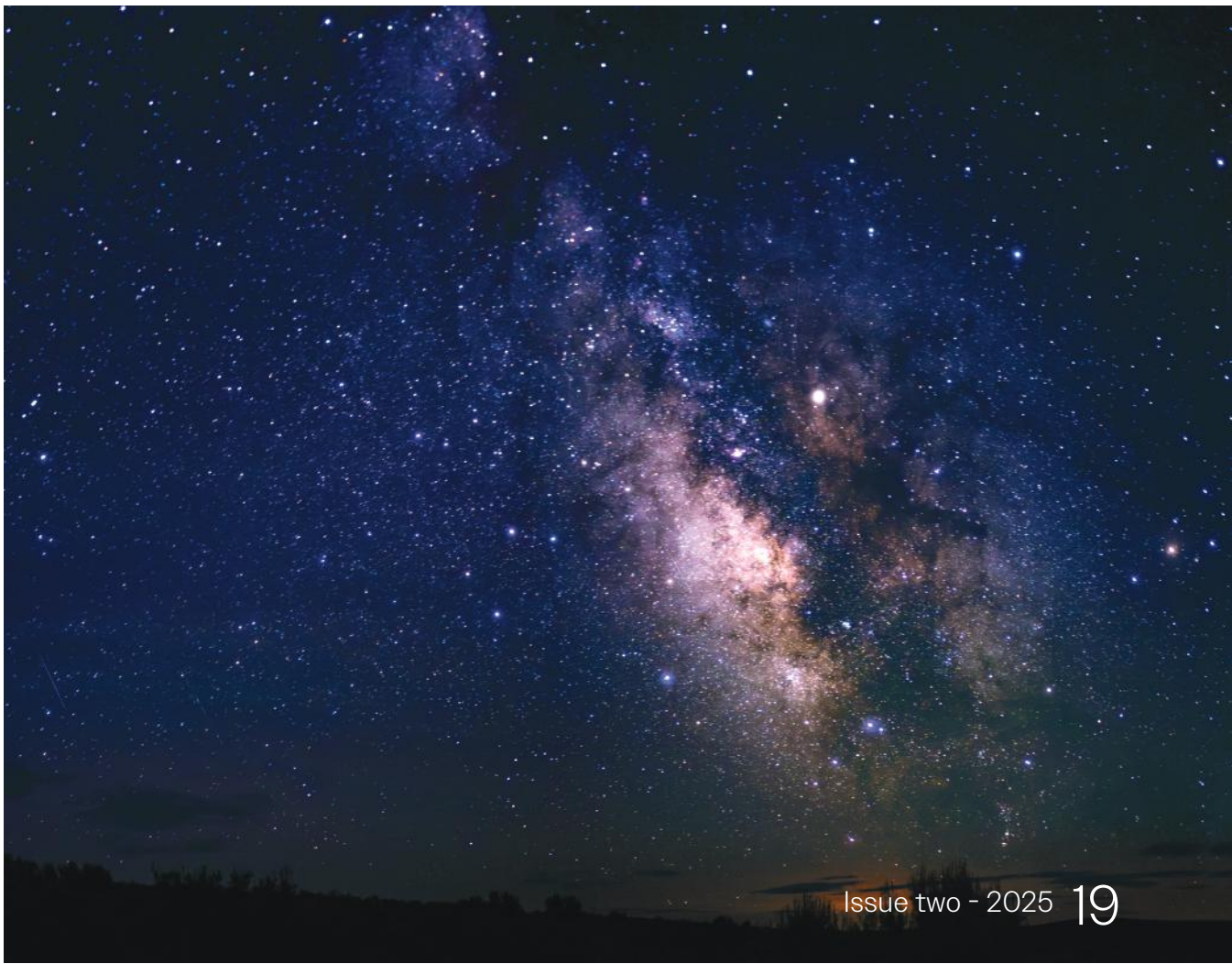
As a focal point in the battle against light pollution, DSI provides educational materials on these various aspects. According to them, ecosystems have evolved to rely on the day-night cycle, and disruptions due to light pollution can impact nocturnal animals, predator and prey interactions, bird navigation, and many other nocturnal activities.

For humans, light pollution affects more than just the stargazers. Sky glow negatively impacts our night vision, increases glare for night drivers, and a lack of dark nights affects our natural circadian rhythm, which can lead to a host of sleep problems. Wasted night lighting — the main cause of light pollution— is also a key contributor to energy waste, producing 21 million tons of carbon dioxide annually.

"We want people to understand that we aren't trying to take away people's lights at night," Rhymer said. "We want to protect what is already dark, and we want to reclaim



(Clockwise)
Photo by Richard Bednarski
Photo by Richard Bednarski
Photo by Taylor Moore
The Milky Way as seen from Moonrocks, Nev. Moonrocks sits about 40 minutes north of Sparks, Nev. and is thus impacted by light pollution from surrounding communities, causing less visible, but still prominent, stars.



the dark from light-polluted areas. DSI's part in that mission is to make educational resources readily available to everyone wanting to learn."

Photo by Paul Atkinson
Red pictrographs illuminated by moonlight at Great Basin NP.

There are many ways someone interested in protecting the night skies can help, from seeking out education, volunteering for DSI or visiting dark sky places. While it may not be feasible for everyone to just turn off all of their lights at night, DSI also educates people on how to more effectively light up the night. While they have lists of specific businesses which adhere to light pollution guidelines, the gist is to find outdoor lighting that reduces glare, restricts the amount of upward light and limits the use of blue light in light bulbs.

"The sky is our gateway to our connection with nature and the universe at large," Rhymer said. "If we deprive ourselves of that connection, then we deprive ourselves of that sense of wonder and awe and we don't look beyond ourselves."

When Ben Rupert, a member of the Duck Duck Valley Shoshone-Paiute and Washoe tribes, tells me the story of the seven sisters sitting in a Carson City coffee shop, I understand what Rhymer means when he says the stars are something beyond the individual.

"The Kiowa, the Sioux, the Eastern Shoshone, the Navajo all have different versions of the same myth, the seven sisters," Rupert said. "I went to New Zealand during the Māori celebration of Matariki, which observes the first rise of the seven stars as their new year. Hawaii has something similar and Australia relates the seven stars to the seven original indigenous tribes. Even the Subaru logo is based on the seven stars of the constellation."

Many people are likely most familiar with the Greek name for this star-inspired legend, the Pleiades, but cultures across the world have similar myths telling their story. In Rupert's version of the story, seven sisters are fleeing from a bear, praying for help when the ground rises beneath them, lifting the sisters high up into the sky. The bear, still in pursuit, jumps and rakes his claws up and down the mountain, gouging the deep grooves that Wyoming's Devils Tower is so known for. Right when the bear is about to reach them over the peak of the mountain, the sisters pray again and become the seven stars.

"We are just a blue dot." - Carl Sagan

Rupert, a retired Nevada firefighter, now volunteers for the organization Nevada's Indian Tribes, which helps unite the world of tourism with the 28 federally recognized indigenous tribes in Nevada. While their work spans many avenues, Rupert, inspired by his

travels, has made a recent push towards recognizing Nevada's dark skies. The first step of this effort was aiding in writing the grant to build Togugunde (pronounced Do-go-gun-duth) Observatory on the Duck Valley Indian Reservation. Once finished, this observatory will be the first observatory on reservation land, and Rupert was integral in establishing the project and getting it fully funded. Rupert's story is a close reminder that not only are the stars important because of their beauty, but also because of the way they allow connection with the past.

As demonstrated through the Togugunde Observatory, as well as other efforts through organizations such as TravelNevada, which is currently building a stargazer's toolkit, Nevada's dark skies are becoming increasingly popular. While more attention to the issue of light pollution is a good thing, higher traffic to these isolated areas could present a threat if people do not understand how to limit their light usage when camping or damage the environment, which is why it's important to respect these areas.

"What is missing is not gone forever," Rhymer reminds me. "We can get it back through our actions. One solution is very simple: use fewer lights at night, and that is a huge step."

Another step is taking in the sky with your own eyes.

"You really owe it to yourself to seek out these dark sky areas," Atkinson said. "I think once people understand what it is that you're missing, then they will understand what the value is of these places. The stars are not something that we can take for granted, and we've got to protect what's around us. Because if we don't, we could lose it."

When I sit on the hood of my SUV, tinted brown from the Nevada dust, and look up into the sky above Northern Nevada, I also begin to understand what I am missing, and I will continue to search for it for the rest of my life.

Story and Layout by Taylor Moore

Photo by Paul Atkinson
Twilight at Stella Lake, Great Basin NP

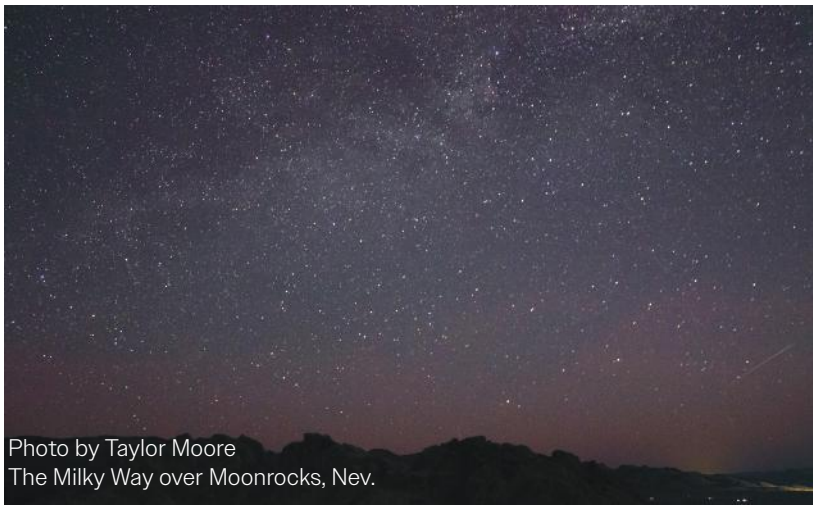


Photo by Taylor Moore
The Milky Way over Moonrocks, Nev.

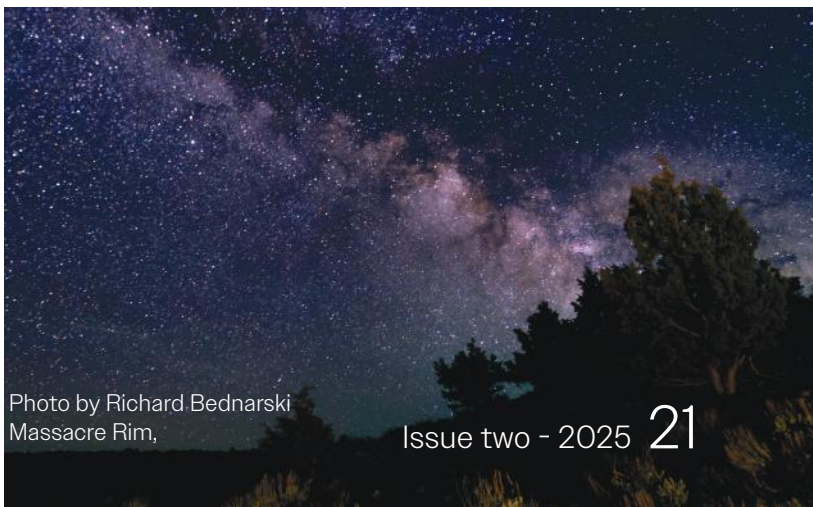


Photo by Richard Bednarski
Massacre Rim,

"SPOONER CRAG"

Photos by Beatrice Bashibyukyan
Layout by Cherie Franklin

We'd just returned from a trip to Utah's hellishly hot, fiery-red Kolob canyons. Tired and sore - but still aching to keep the stoke alive. After a short break of traveling the Southwest mid-summer in our borrowed, AC-less Kia Soul (KIAnna), Austin Armstrong and I continued our search for new adventures. Only this time with our next semester looming, we decided to stay local.

Being new to Reno at the time, I had yet to visit any of the nearby crags. I'd been hearing of Tahoe's beautiful granite routes and stellar views, but needed a break from feeling baked golden every time we hopped on a route. Hoping to avoid crowds and peak afternoon heat, Austin suggested we visit one of his go-to spots for those impromptu, after-work climbing days – Spooner Crag.

Nestled near the east shore of Lake Tahoe, you can find Spooner right off the junction of highways 28 and 50. Once you hit the parking lot, pack up, take a short hike, and you're there. You'll find a variety of sport routes around 50 feet tall, shaded for both climbers and belayers, and plenty of cool slabby boulders to lay back on for a post-pump picnic.

This is where you'll be able to find me, inhaling squashed PB&J's, sipping room temperature coffee, and watching sunlight glistening through an umbrella of tree leaves with my lov e… a summer afternoon could not get any better.

Skiing the Basin

Nevada has over 314 named mountain ranges, more so than any other state in the contiguous United States. Within those ranges stand 64 peaks with over 3,000 feet of prominence, or vertical relief.

Conor Phelan, leader of the Prominence Project, is on a mission to ski all 64 of these peaks using only human power.

Q+A Between Conor Phelan and Rob Kyte

Photos by Conor Phelan

Layout by Kat Fulwider

Photo Left: Sean O'Neill shreds a ridge in the Independence Mountains. 2025

The Prominence Project is, in many ways, a love letter to a lesser-known, seldom-tread zone of opportunity for truly great skiing across Nevada's Great Basin. Having now completed 48 of the 64 objective peaks, what Phelan and other project contributors have found is that the extra effort it often takes to ski these peaks has been worth it exponentially.

The Rambler connected with Phelan to dig deeper into the ethos, inspiration, and discoveries of the Prominence Project. The following is a dialogue between Robert Kyte and Phelan.

For people who don't know you—what's the short version of how you became the kind of skier who would take on something like The Prominence Project? What parts of your background, personality, or experiences do you think led you to this point?

Funny enough, my current skiing interests stem from a childhood of rarely skiing. I learned how to slide on two planks as a youngster at Bristol Mountain near our home in Western New York, but skiing remained a novelty and not part of my identity.

I spent most of my young adulthood on distance running, even competing at the collegiate level. It wasn't until 2016, when I moved to Missoula, MT for graduate school with my now-wife that skiing appeared on my radar again. By the time I arrived there, my running career was ending, and I craved a new endurance challenge. Finding out I could ski anywhere under my own power? Sold.

I was very fortunate to have a friend and mentor like Brian Story. I was, and still am, inspired by his passion for route-finding and appreciation for the mountains we traversed. Molded by these experiences, I moved to Reno in 2018 primed to seek out the obscure.

The Prominence Project feels as much about personal process as it does about skiing — what has this long-term commitment revealed to you about yourself, both as a skier and as a person?

You're absolutely right: the past several years spent skiing in the Great Basin have revealed that skiing is merely the context, not the thesis. This project has always been a self-imposed structure to force myself to explore places I never knew existed. Committing to these ranges and the effort it takes to visit them during the winter, season after season, has solidified within me a deep feeling of belonging to a specific place, a specific landscape. It has also made it clear how important people and community are to me.

What's the quote from Doctor Zhivago? Something like "happiness is only real when shared."

What is it about these obscure, often-overlooked Nevada peaks that speaks to you?

Like many people, I find value in solitude and remoteness. Most peaks throughout Nevada offer these characteristics in spades.

I also find great pleasure in the process of figuring it out–going from merely a point on the map to a plan involving friends, snowpack, route-finding, camping, cooking, flora, fauna, starry skies, endless vistas, and of course, skiing.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to find these experiences in the modern backcountry ski world. But for many mountains in Nevada, you have no other option. There is nobody to explain how to go about it, and I enjoy that.

When you're out on these remote summits, how do you think about your relationship to the landscape? As someone moving through these Indigenous landscapes on skis, how do you grapple with the relationship between recreation and respect for the deeper history of these places?

Photo Left: Laura Wade rides her bike near Mt. Moriah. 2023.
Photo Above: Megan Dingman shreds in the Southern Rubies. 2024.

This is something I turn over in my mind quite often. In some ways, I detest the appearance of The Prominence Project as merely a list of places to be checked off. The notion of peakbagging is antithetical to all the reasons I relate to the land. It's merely a tool I use for initial direction, everything else is provided by the Basin.

I believe there are two separate yet simultaneously entwined phenomena at play every time I visit these landscapes. On one hand, there is my very personal, solitary interaction with my surroundings. It's the way I smell the sagebrush, the sunlight that stirs intangible feelings, the vastness that makes me wish my eyes could open wider.

On the other hand, there is the reflection that my time in these places cannot be disentangled from the greater picture. The knowledge that I am a product of history, and

there are some who likely see me as a symbol of ongoing injustices. It is of no surprise that the greatest scars on this landscape have been wrought in more recent years, and not by the original stewards. Stewards who are still here, still living on their land.

Take Mt. Tenabo: Western Shoshone sacred site, massive gold mine desecration. Do I ski it? Sacrilege or veneration? I don't know. I know I'm privileged to be here, and I hope I can share some love for these incredible places.

Projects like this require a kind of obsession. How do you ride the line between healthy dedication and fixation? What keeps you grounded?

The term 'obsession' carries a certain negative connotation. When it comes to my passion for skiing in Nevada, I think it is just that: a passion. I love it.

I believe that the 'otherness' of The Prominence Project conjures up assumptions of compulsion or mania. But, I will push back a bit on this. Take, for example, the thousands of people who enjoy backcountry skiing in more well-known destinations (Tahoe, the Wasatch, the Tetons, etc). For the folks who love skiing in those places, and spend as much time as possible doing so, there is a level of cultural acceptance there. The skiing I love just happens to be in a place where that level of acceptance isn't nearly as prevalent.

That said, if I ever find myself blurring the lines between passion and obsession, I have plenty of friends who are more than happy to keep me in check.

Is there a difference for you between skiing these peaks to tick them for the project and skiing them for the pure experience of being in the mountains? How do you hold space for both ideas at once?

There is absolutely a difference, and it's something I think about constantly. On one hand, yes: the project started as a list, a structured way to push myself into these incredible places. That peakbagging element, as I've said, feels anathema to what I truly value. But I have to recognize this structure also led me to discover deeper experiences. The real skiing, the pure experience, comes from being immersed in the Great Basin landscape.

How do I hold space for both? I try to see the project as a framework, a starting point. It gets me out the door with only the vaguest direction, and once I'm out there, the experience takes over.

As the list of un-skied peaks continues to dwindle, I occasionally have folks inquire what I plan to do after I finish. I plan to keep skiing in the Great Basin! For every peak I visit, there are a dozen other lines, zones, or ranges that pique my interest. While the official list is shortening, my internal list only continues to expand.

From the outset, I never put a timeline on the

project. That idea always felt superficial. This isn't something I want to rush through. I want to savor it.

How do you navigate fear and uncertainty, especially when you're alone or far from help? Has that relationship to risk evolved as you've worked through the list?

My relationship to risk has certainly evolved over time. I credit experience and age for the ways in which my risk assessment and tolerance has changed. When I began skiing in Nevada I was still a relative newcomer to the sport in general. I was also young. I have never had much of a stomach for risk, but in my early years of backcountry skiing I was much more likely to ski solo, and I was far more unaware, as a young mind is, of the extant risks that surrounded me.

Several years later, I know enough to know I know nothing. On rare occasions, I still enjoy a solo vision quest, but for the most part, gathering a capable team is one of the first steps I take when planning a trip into central Nevada. I have also gained knowledge and skills related to preventative risk mitigation, especially pertaining to the remoteness and solitude inherent in Basin skiing. These risks can never be fully eliminated, but being better prepared is an immense step forward.

Lastly, as time passes, the people and place components of the experience only continue to grow in value, counterbalancing the need to take on risk. I would happily trade vertical for laughs, miles for views.

Have you had moments in the project where you've questioned whether it's worth continuing — and if so, what brings you back?

I have never questioned whether or not to continue. There are times when the weather forecast is wrong, a piece of equipment might fail, or the snowpack is scary. And maybe the

Above photo: The crew warms up around a camp fire with snowy mountains in the distance.
Photo Left: The crew heads up the skin track in the Northern Toiyabes. 2021.

David Corr and Zac Barbiasz walk a ridge line on Santa Rosa Peak. 2020.

Opposite page: Laura Wade skis down Star Peak. 2023.

snow skied terribly, but the bonfire that night made it worthwhile, and the next morning spent digging our car out of the mud created a much-needed opportunity to catch up with a friend. And heck, when the skiing is good–which it often is–it's unbeatable.

Most people will never set foot on many of these peaks, let alone ski them. What do you hope people understand about Nevada's mountains from watching your journey? Is there a part of this project that hopes to draw more people to Nevada's peaks?

Encouraging others to visit these places throughout Nevada has always been a core part of the project. Given the scale and expanse of Nevada, concerns about crowding are laughable, and gatekeeping is a mindset I find tiresome. In a sport that is so often defined by exclusivity and setting cultural parameters, I like to believe Nevada offers a wonderful canvas for personal expression. I am a true believer in the notion that people protect and fight for things they know and love, things they have first hand experience with. We all benefit when others develop a connection with these landscapes, especially in light of everything going on right now with our public lands and those who take care of them.

In an era where social media can sometimes make adventure feel performative, how do you balance sharing this project publicly while keeping it authentic to your own experience?

This is a great question, and my answer is distinctly personal. There are certainly folks skiing amazing lines in Nevada who never feel the need to share, and that's cool. I just happen to think differently. Call it documenting, storytelling, blogging, whatever–I love the creative processes of photography and writing. It's how I crystallize these cherished memories. If others find them entertaining, informative, or inspiring, even better.

The reality is that Great Basin skiing is demanding. A one-off weekend trip for social media points is possible, but true passion drives repeated visits, year after year.

Driving 13 hours round-trip to camp in frigid temperatures and then gamble on ski conditions isn't something you do without a deep, genuine love for the experience.

Once this is done, do you think you'll be drawn to another long-term project?

This project is ongoing. I'll continue to ski the peaks, but as I've said, that's simply the starting point. I might come up with something in addition to the current list. Whether I create a new project or not, my focus remains: spend time exploring Nevada's Great Basin, on skis, with friends.

You can learn more about Conor and the Prominence Project team at skiingthebasin.com.

Cold Air, Hot Streak:

Kick. Click. Push. These sounds occur in rapid succession to one another as boot clips into binding, and 16-year-old Reno native Hannah Epstyn goes hurtling down one of the steepest chutes that Whistler Mountain ski resort has to offer, about to attempt one of the biggest tricks of her freeride skiing career thus far.

Jessie Epstyn, Hannah's mother, says she's always been that way: "There was no fear anywhere in that kid."

The road to this competition has been long and has lasted most of Hannah's adolescent life. To understand how she got there, we go back to the beginning.

"Skiing has just always been a part of my life," Hannah Epstyn said.

Mike Epstyn, Hannah's father, took Hannah skiing as soon as she could walk. She's been hooked ever since.

"Her first time on skis, I think she was 18 months," Mike Epstyn said. "The weather was terrible. I just took her up the magic carpet of Mount Rose, put her skis on, and let her go. And I was running backward kind of slow, and [she] just loved it."

As her parents would later come to find out, Hannah was a natural athlete, but still a little rough around the edges.

"All my college girlfriends had babies around the same time, and so we said, 'Let's go to

Reno local Hannah Epstyn takes the freeride world by storm.

this princess dance thing,'" Jessie Epstyn said. "I have this picture of all the little girls as princesses, all excited in their princess dresses, and Hannah, like, sitting off by herself. Like, 'This is not for me.' She's always known who she was."

Keeping up with Hannah's skills proved to be no easy feat. With such quick progression, Jessie and Mike quickly realized that skiing was more than just an outlet for their daughter.

"She passed me up so young, it's hard for me to even remember when it happened," Jessie Epstyn said. "She's always been fearless, very strong physically, and so coachable."

Contrary to the progression of more than a few talented young skiers in the Reno-Tahoe area, however, competing was not the original plan for Hannah.

"Competition wasn't even really on our radar," Jessie Epstyn said. "Then we learned about this under-12 competition Homewood Resort does, and she won."

Not only did Hannah dominate her bracket of the competition, but she also tied in points for first place in the boys' category. From then on, it became normal to see Hannah in the winner's circle.

"It's pretty standard to see her on the podium. It's weird if she's not top three," Jessie Epstyn said.

From there, it was all downhill. Literally.

Competition freeride skiing is a little different from what's typically seen on big stages like the Olympics and the X Games, where half-pipes, big air, and park skiing dominate the playing field. Freeride skiing involves athletes navigating a chosen area of terrain, called lines, and creating their own sets of tricks and jumps that are evaluated by a panel of judges.

"And then, gosh, I mean, we just kept skiing and progressing," Mike Epstyn said. "She started just like standing out, like doing, going bigger, or, you know, just going just as big or bigger than the boys, and really, just jumping into stuff.

Her rapid advancement didn't stop at her skill level either. Hannah received her first set of sponsors and multiple offers at 13, which is not at all common. Skiing, in its own right, is an incredibly expensive sport. Many mid-level setups reach the thousand-dollar mark well before an athlete sets their poles on the snow. This makes sponsorship attractive for athletes at any level, who also have to deal with the cost of registration and travel.

"It was crazy," Mike Epstyn said. After reaching out to some representatives he knew, Mike was shocked that companies were willing to partner with her at such a young age. "K2 came right out of the gate and were like 'Yo, we want Hannah,'"

K2 is an industry giant when it comes to ski manufacturing and is also known for being a front-runner for all kinds of technological innovation, on and off the snow.

"We sat down, and the K2 rep was like 'All right, she'll be a sponsored rider under me.' Mike Epstyn said. "She was maybe 13 or 14. She was very young, and getting a 13-year-old sponsored is unheard of."

Though negotiations with K2 seemed to be going well, Hannah ended up signing a contract with Nordica Skis and Helly Hansen, who currently supply her with most of her riding gear for her season.

Since that first contract, Hannah has stacked up quite an impressive list of support, totaling seven sponsors that range from international manufacturers to local Tahoe businesses, and she handles all of them herself. Independent negotiation and communication with her representatives is just one of the ways Hannah has been able to set herself apart from teens her age.

"She's always been an old soul, but I think she's grown. She's not like other 16-year-olds, you know?" Mike Epstyn said. "She still wants to go have fun with her friends and do all that, but when she's on the hill, she's working."

Balancing the demands of high-level skiing with the normal life of a teenager is no easy feat, but for Hannah, it's become second nature. Her days are meticulously structured around training, recovery, and schoolwork, with little room for downtime. Even abroad, Hannah takes her school with her. This most recent run at Whistler was no exception.

Hannah and her parents decided to move her to Truckee High School after one year at Reno High presented difficulties with her school schedule. After many talks with her teachers, Mike had gotten frustrated.

“It’s crazy for me to think that no high school in Reno would say, ‘Oh yeah, we can help make it so that you can go skiing.’ So we let her try out Truckee,” Mike Epstyn said. “It’s tough for her, I don’t think she was meant to live in Reno. I think she was meant to live up in Truckee and be one of the kids with a ski contract and be able to take time off. Because where she is in school now, the teachers know. We say, ‘We’ll be gone from Tuesday this week to next week, how do we stay caught up?’ And that’s that.”

Now, her school days involve hour-long commutes or extended stays at a family condo in Truckee. And when it’s not school, it’s ski, study, sleep, repeat. Hannah splits her training time between on-slope work and taking mock jumps at skatepark Woodward Tahoe, where she is also sponsored.

A typical weekend training day consists of early-morning warm-ups, followed by back-to-back runs down the mountain, testing different lines, dialing in tricks, and refining techniques, though this is heavily dependent on weather conditions.

This also includes working through hypothetical competition runs. Freeride competitions aren't like your typical ski races—there's no set course, no prescribed jumps, and no guaranteed way to win. Athletes are given a face to ski, and from the moment they drop, it is up to them to choose a line that showcases their style and technical ability.

For Hannah, a successful run has become a balance of aggression and control. Erica Backhus, one of two coaches who work with the Palisades Tahoe Freeride Team that Hannah is on, has seen firsthand how her style of competing has changed. When they first met, Hannah was ready to throw consistently bigger tricks than most her age, making her especially competitive.

"When I first started, there was all this buzz around her. 'This girl, Hannah, she just came here from Mount Rose, she's really good, she's 12 years old, and she's doing, like, 720s.' And I was intimidated by her. Like 'How am I gonna deal with this tiny child? She's already better than me,' " Backhus said.

Though a judged sport, it can be incredibly damaging for young skiers to rely solely on the opinions and expectations of the judges, especially those like Hannah who are used to consistently doing well. Throughout her two most recent seasons, she's started to prioritize her enjoyment of the sport much more.

Success for Hannah comes in the form of personal progress, Backhus notes. "Hannah is really good about vocalizing her frustration. I think that the older she's gotten, the less competition results have mattered to her. It's more about pushing herself."

Now that she's spent a few years in the world of freeride, Hannah has begun to feel a little bit more pressure than she's used to at the top of the mountain, and her positive attitude doesn't make the nerves she started to feel any less real.

She's started to work more with her coaches to manage those nerves.

"We focus in a couple of people before she drops," Backhus said. Have her close her eyes and visualize her landing all of her features, and then she'll be in the start gate. And the announcer says, '3-2-1, drop.' And there she goes, pretty much over like that."

Backhus snaps her fingers. Most runs that Hannah's age group takes are less than a minute long. "I think that she also has this really interesting way of kind of processing fear, and she can push herself, but also knows her limits, which is rare," Backhus said.

"Hannah's good at tuning out the pressure," Jessie Epstyn said. "She just locks in. It's pretty amazing to watch."

However, even in a sport where progression means constantly pushing limits, the line between improvement and injury is razor-thin. And sometimes, even the strongest athletes take a fall.

Last season, Hannah learned that lesson the hard way. A miscalculated landing on a training run in the early 2023-24 season resulted in a fractured ankle—her first major injury. Her fracture and corresponding surgery were going to put her out for six to 12weeks, putting a boot on the whole season.

"It put me in a dark place," Hannah Epstyn said. "It was bad, especially at first, I think. Not being able to compete was weird. My whole life is skiing."

Her on-the-go lifestyle was brought to a screeching halt. Though the injury was far from career-ending, she was forced to grapple with the scary reality that when choosing an extreme sport, injury is bound to happen. But, true to her nature, Hannah bounced


SILVER BELT
SugarBowl

back incredibly well. At her six-week check-up, she was cleared to begin skiing again, with competition soon to follow.

Despite her packed schedule this season, Hannah makes time to step away from the sport. Whether it's camping trips with her mom or simply hanging out with friends, she values the moments that remind her there's more to life than competition.

"She's got such a strong work ethic, but she also knows how to have fun," Jessie Epstyn said. "I think that's what keeps her balanced."

As for the future? College is on the horizon, but Hannah isn't in a rush to decide. Some of her peers are eyeing professional careers, while others are considering collegiate ski programs. Hannah, ever independent, is weighing all her options.

"I love skiing, and I always will," she said. "But I also want to keep growing as a person. Whatever comes next, I just want to make sure I'm doing it for the right reasons."

Her progression, both physically and mentally, paid off in a big way in her most recent competition in Whistler, where she landed her first cork 720 in competition—one of the biggest milestones of her freeride career. A "cork seven" (or cork 720) is a trick that involves two full 360-degree rotations (720 degrees total) with an off-axis, or "corked" style, where the skier/rider rotates in a way that they appear to be tilted or "corked" during the spin.

Hannah has long since been putting in the work for this trick.

"She's been practicing 'cork sevs' during training for a couple of years now," Backhus said. "She started doing them at Mount Hood in the summer two years ago and then has been working up with them. Then, when they were in Whistler, her other coach was like, 'Hey, this is a really good lip for a cork seven. You should try it and do it.'"

Though the terrain of the mountain was on her side, the weather was not.

"I remember the visibility was so bad at the top

because the clouds were in and out all day." Hannah Epstyn said. "And then I knew that I was gonna do the clerk seven, like, all day. And I did not have a very good hot part of my run, because I was like, stressed about the seven. ... I kind of got lost. Then I hit my feature before the cork. I was like, "Okay, like, is when we're gonna do it, yeah?" And then I did it, and I was like, I landed it, and I was so happy. It was an insane feeling coming down."

It wasn't just that she landed any trick.

"I was the first female to do a cork seven in a freeride competition," Hannah Epstyn said.

Though she didn't place first that day, it didn't stop the entire competition pool from being upended in celebration.

"It was absolutely insane. The cool thing about this is nobody talked about who won," Mike Epstyn said. "All they could talk about was Hannah's cork seven. People were like 'This has never happened before.'"

For Hannah, it wasn't just about the trick itself, but what it represented: years of training, setbacks and persistence finally coming together in a single moment.

Since her historic performance, Hannah's hot streak has only continued. She dominated Sugar Bowl's annual Silverbelt competition, taking first place with a flawlessly executed double backflip. Her monumental season culminated with a win at the 2025 Kirkwood IFSA Junior Freeride Championship, earning her first place overall in IFSA Freeride's U19 women's ski division. It led to her biggest milestone yet: qualifying for her first world championship in Austria. It will be the farthest she's ever traveled to ski, a testament to her unforgettable rise this year.

"She's put in the work," Backhus said. "That's why she's where she is today."

Story by Cherie Franklin
Photos Courtesy of : Hannah Epstyn, Chris Segal, Marcus Morgan, and IFSA Freeride
Layout by Cherie Franklin

Fresh AIR in Great Basin:
where creativity and conservation meet

If a tree stands in a forest and nobody is around, does it sing? It does if composer Marko Bajzer has anything to do with it.

Bajzer was the 2023 artist-in-residence (AIR) at Great Basin National Park, where he attached electrodes to Bristlecone Pine trees to track electrical changes throughout the day as the trees photosynthesized. He used this data as part of an ongoing project to compose a symphonic suite with moments representing different national parks, all made possible through the immersion offered by AIR programs.

Great Basin is nearing two decades of its AIR program, which allows artists of all varieties the chance to apply to live for several weeks in the park and produce art inspired by the landscape. These artists are provided camping equipment or living quarters during their residency, giving them the freedom to move through the park following their creativity. For Bajzer, the environment of the park played a strong role in his composing.

"Music and nature have been very intertwined to me," Bajzer said. "A lot of my most meaningful, cathartic and emotional experiences of my life were listening to pieces of music in their geographic terrains."

Inspired by his time at Great Basin, Bajzer wrote the movement "Sacrifice of Prometheus," which the Reno Philharmonic premiered in March. This programmatic piece portrays the calls of the ghost of Prometheus; a Bristlecone Pine tree that, upon its felling in 1962, was thought to be the oldest known living thing at almost 5,000-years-old. The death of Prometheus showed the world that these trees were older than anyone knew, but Bajzer points out that Prometheus can never be brought back to life. His observations about nature's sacrifice for humanity's gain pushed Bajzer to explore one of the deepest questions from his residency: Do humans have to destroy nature in order to preserve it?

"At the climax of this piece, the spirit of Prometheus asks, 'What have you done to me?'" Bajzer said. "How many more times are we going to be asked this question? The decisions that we make echo for centuries to come, so it is really critical that we make the right decisions."

Here, Bajzer echoes another goal of AIR programs – conservation. Artists have played an integral role in the conservation of America's natural beauty since Yellowstone became the first national park in 1872 and the National Park Service (NPS) was established in 1916. It was painters like Thomas Moran and John William Casilear whose work was presented to Congress, inspiring efforts to create and conserve public land. It was writers like John Muir and Ralph Waldo Emerson who presented the broader world with the beauty of the American landscape.

"There are artists' fingerprints all over the stories of many national parks," Bajzer said.

Without the arduous work of artists, who knows how many of America's 63 national parks would exist today: "The more you can reframe things in different ways — through literature, through visual arts, through music — the more you can connect with the concept of conservation and the idea of the parks," Bajzer said.

Meghan Catherine Dragon was the winter 2025 artist-in-residence, and she is working to convey the meaning of national parks not through song, but through her paintings that are centered on line work and patterns. She lived with park rangers in Baker, Nevada, a mere five miles from the park, and spent much of her time time walking along frozen paths and observing the winter environment.

"One thing I noticed quite a bit when I was hiking around were the animal tracks in the snow," Dragon said. "So I created this map of the park filled with all the winter plants I observed and the tracks on all the trails I hiked."

Along with her map, Dragon spent time depicting the Northern Saw-whet Owl, an inhabitant of the Great Basin region, and Townsend's Big-eared Bat, which lives in the Lehman Caves in the park. Her inspiration came from the minute details in the park, the textures and patterns contained in the landscape, which she attempts to portray through her paintings.

"I want my work to inspire people to get outside and to look a little closer at some of the things they normally just walk by," Dragon said. "Art can help open people's eyes to new things. It can inspire people's own creativity. And it can highlight the beauty of the natural world and show why we want to keep it, preserve it and protect it."

A primary goal of the AIR program is not only to benefit the artists, but also the public. Artists are asked to donate a piece of work they produced during their time at the park, and they also provide public programs related to their art. During her residency, Dragon hosted three of these events. The Great Basin National Park Foundation (GBNPF), a nonprofit organization that works with the NPS, is deeply involved in the AIR program and assists both the artists and the park during the residency.

"I love Wallace Dagner's quote where he said our national parks are 'America's greatest idea," GBNPF's executive director Aviva O'Neil said. "The idea that these places belong to all of us is so unique in the world and is something that we should be proud of and that we should maintain."

O'Neil assuages some of the fear over the future of the AIR program at Great Basin. While national parks, including Great Basin NP, are currently threatened with large reductions to staff under President Donald Trump's administration, the role of the GBNPF in the program does provide some stability. In 2020, they helped modernize the program and took over the brunt of the organizational work to remove some strain from the already understaffed park, but challenges presented by a force reduction of up to 30 percent are still dire.

"We hope our residency program is going to be resilient because we lift so much of the load off the NPS," O'Neil said. "It is known that NPS staffing levels have been stagnant for a couple

decades while visitation has increased, so we are worried further cuts will mean parks won't have the staffing to complete their mission. Parks in that situation will have to worry about basic operations, so extraneous programs like AIRs are very much at risk in many national parks."

Dragon was in the midst of her residency when many national park employees got the news of their layoffs. Suddenly a community which had embraced her for weeks was thrown into turmoil.

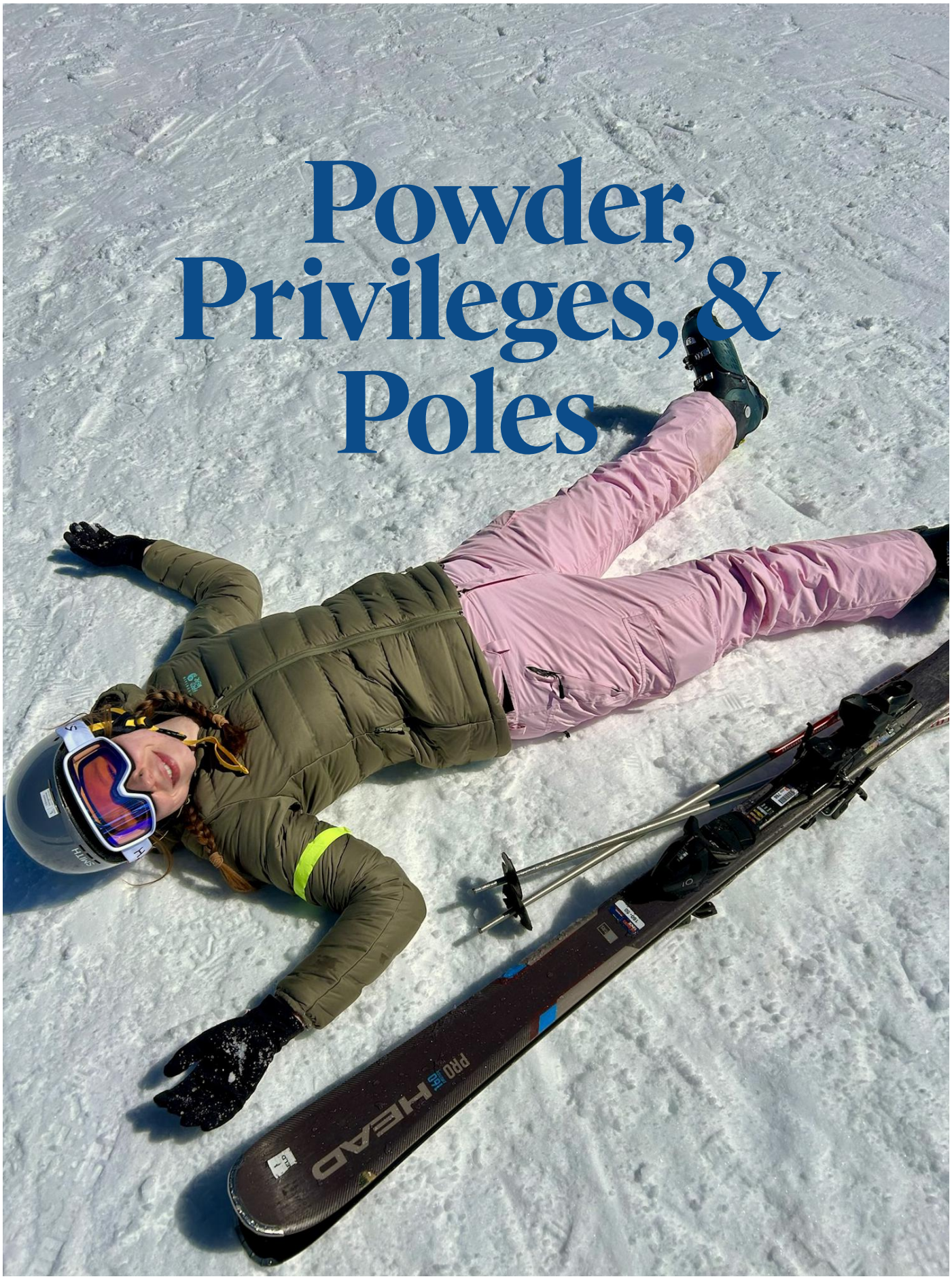
"When I first arrived at Great Basin I was really expected to connect to nature, and I absolutely did, but I was really surprised by how much of an impact the people had," Dragon said. "It was such a difficult time and yet the park rangers were so supportive to me and helpful. It was really heartbreaking to see people who do so much to protect these places lose their jobs. This is their passion, this is their dream, they have so much knowledge to share and there's so much power in education."

Bajzer, who has participated in four AIR programs with plans for more in the future, understands the purpose of national parks better than most. From music made of bubbling hot springs in California's Lassen Volcanic National Park to melodies taken from the water of Minnesota's Voyageurs National Park, he is dedicated to telling the stories of these parks to any who will listen.

"The idea that nature is something to be conserved and enjoyed versus an adversary to be conquered started in America," Bajzer said. "The idea that this land should be accessible, that our nation's treasures should be accessible to all of the public and not just the upper class is an American ideal. We owe it to ourselves and our future to preserve it."

Story by Taylor Moore
Photos by Taylor Moore & Meghan Dragon
Layout by Mariel Day

Powder, Privileges, & Poles



It wasn't until I was putting on ski boots in the Palisades Tahoe Ski Resort changing room that I really felt watched. Not looked at, not glanced over, not viewed– watched. A blonde woman, presumably the mother of the three children running around, watched carefully as my roommates and I clunkily put on our gear. Her lip filler looked fresh, her balayage carefully colored, and her judgemental, lash-extensioned eyes batted at us sneakily.

Palisades Tahoe Ski Resort is one of the most expensive in the greater Tahoe area,boasting a $1300 season pass. It's combined with The Village at Palisades Tahoe, an outdoor dining and shopping center. Their cheapest pass, which allows users to ski at a variety of resorts in California and Nevada, is a whopping $459 for a mere 4 days of the season.

However, to me, it was free. My roommate had been gifted three all-inclusive free day passes. We didn't have to worry about lift tickets, lessons, or gear; everything was covered.

To all other expert skiers in the area, it was obvious my friends and I had never skied before. The staff at the resort were incredibly helpful and kind, but this was where things ended. From clumsily putting gear on to getting beers at the cheapest bar The Village had, we seemed to be the talk of the town. Everywhere I stomped, looks of curiosity and concern followed.

This is because, of course, the tax brackets involved. Skiing in the United States is one of the most expensive sports in this country and one of the hardest to break into. Rollerbladers and ice skaters might find it familiar (all three activities use similar muscle groups to move), but this is where the similarities stop. It won't cost more than ten dollars to rent a pair of

rollerblades, but it will cost upwards of $150 to rent skis and poles. It's less embarrassing to fall down in rollerblades than it is on skis.

Outside of the U.S., things are a bit different. One thing I immediately noticed at the resort was the surprising amount of employees with non-North American accents. Eastern European accents floated in and out of my ears, at first surprising me. Then it occurred to me thwwwat other places had snow, too.

Skiing first developed in Eastern Europe as a way to travel, not as a creative way to say "I'm rich." European migrants spread this fascinating concept to snowy areas in the U.S., like Colorado and New York, in the late 1800s. From there, it ebbed and flowed in popularity, finally settling in permanently post-WW2. Old mining towns were no longer prosperous, so many owners transformed them into ski resorts. By the mid-1980s, there were around 700 ski resorts across the U.S.; now, there are around 500.

Because skiing began as a form of transportation in Europe, it wasn't meant to generate profit. This changed when the icy sport was brought to the U.S., as most ski resorts today make their profit from selling passes (the aforementioned $1300 ones).

To make matters worse (if you're poor), the North American ski industry is mostly dominated by two competitors- Vail and Alterra. Together, they own somewhere around 55 resorts, which doesn't seem like much. However, the resorts are the best of the best– I didn't know it at the time, but Palisades Tahoe is a world-class ski resort and one of the most expensive in the country, not just Tahoe. On top of that, they have locations in Mammoth Lakes (California), Steamboat (Colorado), and Mont-Tremblanc (Québec).

The vastness of these two companies makes it difficult for smaller resorts to break out and make a name for themselves. It also makes it harder for people to learn to ski. As someone who didn't grow up around snow, it was challenging enough to ski, physically.

As someone who would never have had the money to learn anyway, it was challenging to be there, mentally.

Our instructor, a skateboarder from the Bay Area, was around our age. He was cool, but perhaps a bit too cool to truly stress the importance of safety when skiing. He did shots with us (Fireball), and only after did I consider the possible ramifications of that from a safety aspect. After that, the only thing on my mind, besides not falling over, was the sheer amount of privilege one must have to drink on the job when instructing a thousand-dollar sport.

Not all hope is lost. Upon arriving home, my roommates and I started searching for more affordable options because, as stupid expensive as it is, skiing is really fun. We landed on Donner Ski Ranch, a very small resort operated by an older couple located on Donner Summit. Their cheapest days for a lift ticket up and down the mountain are Wednesdays, which come out to about $70. For reference, one trip up the ski lift at Palisades Tahoe was $175. I took it four times.

Skiing was a personal battle just as much it was an inner-thigh one. To be in an environment and observed the way I was felt so foreign. The only thing more foreign was that I was the one on the skis, not 50 miles away at home making fun of the rich.

Once home, I realized my lips, cheeks, and nose were incredibly sunburned. My lips were so sunburned, in fact, that I looked a little bit like I had lip filler. It was only at home that I finally realized the rich skiers around me weren't the only judgmental ones.

Story and Photos by Madison Kitch
Layout by Mariel Day


HARD WEAR

The Vintage 4x

Every fall in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in the El Dorado National Forest, you hear chainsaws, roaring engines and a lot of friendly banter. This is the annual Vintage 4x4 Expedition, where west coast 4x4 enthusiasts unite to face the intricate muddy roads on the Mormon Emigrant trail.

This is my second Vintage 4x4 expedition. At first, a couple of my auto shop buddies and I took our project Jeep DJ-5 mail truck up to put it through the wringer after working on it during school. As time passed, I was hungry for more wheeling and playing in the mud as well as catching up with the people that I met the year prior. Luckily, I was able to make the trek back to Somerset, California for round two.

Ryan Shelley is my auto shop teacher where I went to high school in Martinez, California. He's also the host of the Vintage 4x4 Exhibition. Every President's Day weekend, he takes time off from teaching and heads East to his cabin in the foothills of the Sierra to host his event.

Cleared foliage and muddy roads scatter his property for the sole purpose of hosting old 4x4s –a lot of old 4x4s. This Expedition saw upwards of 30-plus Jeeps, Dodges and trucks in attendance, the usual amount for the last couple of years. The main event of the Expedition has everyone going up the trail together to get to the top of the mountain to play in the snow.

It isn't a smooth drive through the park, though; you have to drive through mud bogs, maneuver through fallen trees and traverse deep ruts that can throw you out of your seat if you're not holding on. While I didn't have my own vintage 4x4 to drive, I was in the back of my friend's 1953 Jeep Willy's Wagon. It was one of the "nicer" vehicles on the trail because of a working heater, but with '50s-'60s utilitarian technology, that's best you'll get.

-x4 Expedition

While breakdowns are a given at this event, morale is high. And although this Expedition is focused on taking your pre-1975 4x4 on the trail, Ryan Shelley says that it's about more than four-wheeling fun.

"It comes down to the stories and the characters," Shelley said. "I think there's a difference between building a vehicle for a car show or an ego and building a vehicle because it's a historically significant thing."

This highlights the attitude towards other enthusiasts in the car community and more specifically, the niche 4x4 crowd. This event displays some unusual cars, from bright pink postal Jeeps to rare cab-over Jeeps called "forward controls". You meet an interesting and knowledgeable group of folks at this niche event. A lot of them are super interesting and fun to talk to, you always seem to learn something new. Some old schoolers have advice to help with your vehicle or intriguing stories like working on steam trains or crazy adventures they took with their jeep. But this shows the willingness the attendees have to get out of the garage and use these vintage vehicles for what they were built to do, to get you to your destination over unforgiving terrain weather sunshine, rain, or snow.

It's really a spectacle seeing these old cars that some people think should belong in a junkyard, museum, or even at a"Sunday Cars and Coffee," an event where enthusiast get together with their cars to chat and get coffee. But these classics don't stay in a parking lot, they get axle-deep in mud and have questionable yet useful repairs done to keep them chugging along. What's an adventure without setbacks and a little bit of treachery?

"Usually, you go home sore, broken and hurt," Shelley said, a little bit tongue-in-cheek.

It's not the kind of weekend that most would think of as a vacation. President's Day weekend in the El Dorado forest means that

Photos feature an overview of the 4x4 expedition. See the following page for photos of Gavin Wells and Shane Robinson with a teal 1953 Jeep Willy's Wagon. Also pictured is Ryan Shelley before the driver's brief. Shelley has several vintage 4x4's in his collection, but for this expedition he drove his 1940's Jeep CJ2A.

Story and photos by Max Szidon
Layout by Taylor Moore

one year it could be sunny, and the next cold and rainy, which was the case this year. But through this event, you can see people build confidence in their skill set to fix problems on the fly and gain good tips from other drivers on the trail.

"You still have that high from the trip, and you're thinking about all the skills you learned and all the situations, and you're constantly growing," Shelley said

When a car breaks down on the trail, Shelley says that in an instant you'd have 12 people under your car helping you diagnose and fix the problem. Some of the people are electricians, some are welders, some are loggers, and some are businessmen. A wide variety of people attend this event, and everyone helps each other up the hill.

With people breaking down and the leading group of trucks clearing fallen trees to clear the trail ahead, this makes for a great time to stop, chat with other drivers, and make some trailside PB&J's. While these stops were frequent and, at times, tedious, it was satisfying to help other drivers get their vehicles back on the trail.

One thing that stands out in this event of old 4x4s is that you don't see any new ones. You may wonder why the event excludes vehicles made after 1975.

"We ended up losing them on the trail, or they'd lose us, and it's just not a good pairing,"

"There's a difference between building a vehicle for a car show or an ego and building a vehicle because it's a historically significant thing."

Shelley said. "I don't normally take my vehicles out and do modern Jeep runs –the culture has changed over the years"

This highlights the polarization between people who enjoy older vehicles compared to newer ones. Newer Jeeps and other 4x4s can drive faster, safer, and with more comfort,

while the older cars ride rougher with much fewer features. Some have no heaters or even a roof to protect you from the elements. If a newer car breaks, it is much harder to fix on the trail, which could leave the newer car stranded.

This makes the event special by showing others that going out on the trail in an old vehicle is still possible and a good choice to go out exploring in the cuts. More so, showing others in the car community that you don't need to have a low-slung fast sports car or a new $70,000 Ford Raptor truck to have fun. Going 15 mph in a car with no doors, roof, and a folded-down windshield driving off-road proves to be a riotously fun time.

There is something about these old cars. Is it the looks? Smell? The loud whining from an unsynchronized 1st gear? Or could it be the fact that there are no features to assist you while driving. Man and machine in its rawest and most natural form. One thing is for sure: once you go, you're hooked.

The HEAT of the Moment

I want you to close your eyes and imagine red and orange flames dancing across the horizon; the sound of heavy breathing as tools swing into the hard, untouched ground; and the sound of planes, helicopters, radios and fire engines all working together towards the same goal: to calm the angry fire. Wildland firefighters work in unison to protect the land and each other. Everybody brings a different set of skills, ideas and mindsets into the intense work field. Some have been fighting fires for many seasons, while others are fighting for the first time. The summer of 2024 was my first season and one that I will never forget.

My dad never had any sons, only four daughters, but he still taught us everything he would have taught a son, so we wouldn't have to depend on anyone but ourselves. I grew up wanting to be just like my dad, everything he taught me I forced myself to be fascinated with even when I wasn't. I learned the basics of life, hard work and leadership by watching him. My dad has run a volunteer fire department my entire life, so naturally, when I turned 18, I followed in the footsteps he laid out for me and became a wildland firefighter.

I became certified as a basic wildland firefighter before graduating my senior year of high school, and just two days after graduation, I started at Elko County Fire Protection District as an all-risk firefighter. It was difficult at times to be trained at a station that my dad had such a heavy influence on. The second I walked through the station's door, I felt like there was this expectation put on me to be more than my absolute best, and I always tried to live up to that. Days at the station consisted of washing trucks, doing training, bonding as a crew and waiting for that intense moment of a call to come in.

The day I was sent on my first fire assignment was during my first week at the station, and I had a head cold. I went home that night, took some Nyquil and went to sleep when a phone call suddenly awakened me. This was it, the moment I was so excited for but terrified at the same time. I drove to the station with a sense of adrenaline I had never felt before, and then I was there, at the fire.

We ended up letting the fire burn for the night and settled down to make camp. My mind was racing with adrenaline as I tried to sleep, and I remember spending a lot of the night staring at the stars and listening to the

sound of the winds blowing through the sagebrush. Staring at the stars quickly became my favorite way to sleep, nothing but a sleeping bag, an old sweatshirt used as a pillow and the clothes on my back: just me and the stars.

I spent all three months of summer running from fire to fire, hiking mountains, hauling hoses and digging fire lines. My hands and feet were torn with blisters in every spot imaginable, my nose sunburnt and my arms tan. Wildland firefighting was the most I had ever challenged myself. I had to make myself eat better, sleep better and stay mentally sharp constantly because I never knew what was around the corner. At one point there were a slower two weeks so we let our guard down and had a little more fun than usual, we made up games like bucketball, got violently competitive playing hacky sack and grilled burgers outside for lunch but we should have known better than to sit in the comfortable silence because in a flash I was suddenly gone for 14 days with no warning.

We were at a memorial service at the airport when the pages went off. I remember hearing the words “wildland fire, edge of Elko and White Pine County, sending Patrol 21, Water Tender 21.”

My heart skipped a beat like it always did as we ran to Patrol 21 and prepared to leave. We stopped in a town 30 minutes outside of Elko to fuel up and grab something to eat because you eat when you can. I remember buying a Gatorade, a bag of unseasoned almonds and two lighters. Those were some of the things I survived on for three days while being in White Pine, miles from civilization. The sun was starting to set when we finally reached the starting point of the fire; it was already at 10,000 acres and burning quickly. There were fire trucks from other agencies everywhere, helicopters dropping buckets of water and planes dropping retardant. You could feel the adrenaline in the air from every person out there. The incident commander of the fire had the water tender start setting up pumpkins (huge swimming pool-like containers for the helicopters to pick up water) and that was the last we saw of our friends in the Tender for

almost 24 hours. Our truck went up the left side of the fire and started doing a technique called leapfrogging, which means each truck takes about half an acre and starts digging fire lines to contain the fire and then leaps in front of the next truck when the assigned area is done.

The setting sun blurred the surroundings when mixed with the heavy smoke. I had never been affected by the smoke like that, it made my eyes well with tears, my nose run and my lungs burn as I hiked up the hills, but I never felt tired. Around midnight, we headed down the mountain to make camp for the night. Sometimes, the only thing you can let a fire do is burn and come back in the morning. I ate a couple of handfuls of almonds that night, took my boots off and settled into my sleeping bag, looking at the never-ending stars above me.

"Nothing but a sleeping bag, an old sweatshirt used as a pillow and the clothes on my back: just me and the stars."

When the sun rose, I brushed my teeth with a bottle of water, packed my bag, ate some more almonds and went off to work. We spent the day finding hot spots in our assigned area, placing the back of our hands on the burnt dirt looking for warmth, then we would take out our tools and dig until we found the source of the heat. The heat could be caused by hot dirt, hot rocks, burned sagebrush or tree roots still on fire, so we would suppress the activity so it would not reignite the fire. I accidentally burned the back of my fingers in the search, which left me with painful white blisters for the rest of the week.

On the second night of the fire, our crew was exhausted but we were going to eat real dinner that night, which helped keep our spirits high. Oftentimes, on big fires, inmate

crews are brought in to help distribute supplies and make meals. In the span of a day, they had transformed a flat piece of land into a camp to rest and enjoy the company of the crews around us.

We all took guesses on what we wanted dinner to be from steak, burgers, fajitas and burritos. The fajitas were the winner, which I was definitely thankful for. While most of the third day was the same, my unit was suddenly pulled away near the end of the afternoon. We got no directions except to drive into a small rural town called Ely, Nev. and meet at the local BLM office. We were all covered in dirt and ash, exhausted from the day and desperately calling hotels to try and find somewhere to sleep that night.

For the first time that entire summer, I had started to feel homesick, and worry had replaced my usual adrenaline. This was the longest I had been on assignment; my sister Karlie was supposed to be in town visiting, my sister Kady was having her gender reveal and I had to cancel the first plans I had made all summer to see my friends. I just knew I wasn't going to be home for a long time.

We ended up being put on a task force with other crews from different counties and states. Our task force ended up not doing very much, but sitting in parks waiting for something to do. Finally, on the third or fourth day, we were dispatched to a fire in Panaca, Nev., about 120 miles from where we were. This would be the fire that twisted my entire summer.

I got a phone call from my mom after a couple of days saying my grandfather had died. I had already missed so much that week while I was gone, and now I had to try and process the grief of my grandpa dying while needing to stay focused and sharp. I had to keep reminding myself that i got to see my family soon and I could grieve later.

My last few days on the task force drew longer and longer and my last couple of weeks felt strange. After everything that had just happened and the terrifying fact that I was leaving my life behind and going to college, I was a mess. I struggled to stay upbeat about the things happening, and I struggled to stay focused on my job and life. Those weeks flew by in a fast but kind of slow way, and before I knew it, I was on my last fire of the summer. My first couple of days at the fire department were spent on a fire, and my last two were spent the same way.

Those three months working for the fire department changed who I was very positively. I found something I truly loved being a part of and made a lot of money doing so. It really was the perfect way to start a new chapter of my life, and I miss it every day. There is no real way for me to wrap up the story of my time fighting fires because it's not something that ends. Every season and every summer, I will go back to doing what I love, firefighting.

Story and Photos by Kassie Allen
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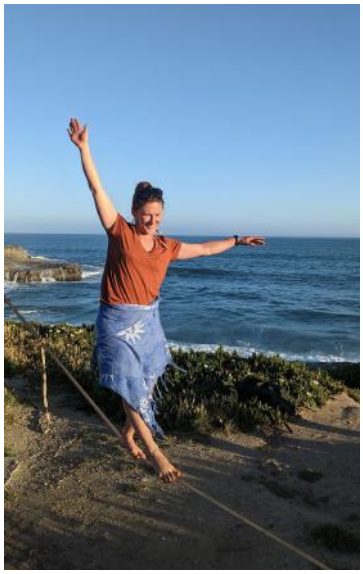
RAMBLERS



Kat Fulwider is a recent graduate of the Reynolds School of Journalism with the emphasis in broadcast journalism & documentary and holds a minor in anthropology. She is a photographer, documentary film maker, environment and science student reporter with KUNR, artist, and all all around adventure seeker. In her life outside of school she is a professional auntie, ski patroller, climbing guide, and liaison of radical, fun and silly times outdoors!

EDITOR/FOUNDER

Stumpy is a footless and footloose Canada goose that resides at Manzanita Lake on the UNR Campus. He embodies the lifestyle of “no feet, no ducks, no problems” and is our beloved mascot.

STUMPY


ramble on