



CRIPPLE CREEK

*REPAIRS FOR THE BIRDS, BUT DON'T
TELL THE COWS. BY KRIS MILLGATE*

Unimpressed.

That's what I'm thinking as I take wide, sweeping curves two-lane style like I'm the only truck on this back road. Wait. I am the only truck on this back road. Traffic doesn't have a reason to use this route. It goes nowhere in no hurry. The blacktop, a long lace of licorice stringing through honey-colored crops, is empty of all but me. It's pleasant enough, but film worthy? Doubtful. This is sagebrush country. Razed, grazed, eroded, and emaciated. Surely it's empty.

But it isn't.

As I roll passed the classic chocolate-brown and banana-yellow U.S. Forest Service sign wooden but whitewashed with bird poop, I see a nest. It's road right of the entrance to Curlew National Grassland. The nest's host is a dead juniper naked of evergreen but bearing rough bark

sturdy enough to hold young. Three chicks, their heads the fuzzy texture of dandelions ready for seed dispersal, are in the nest.

I've heard raptors prey on this place like it's the hot spot other birds of the non-prey variety don't know about. Confirmation comes with an adult hawk hanging over my truck as I park on the shoulder and get out.

The hawk talons a tree limb near the nest and screams at me. I get it. I scream at strangers when they sidle up on my kids too. Message received. Don't take another step closer. The adult switches from the "stay away" warning for me to a "stay down" screech for the chicks.

I lens the scene from afar for photo and video then go on my way. The nest is a surprising find in this dry place, but I have more barren, boring desert to find.



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But I don't.

Sagebrush dominates the landscape as expected, but it doesn't have the stage solo. Purples and pinks of post-Easter pastel cover soft, stepped slopes. I'm here in May and winter's moisture hasn't totally abandoned the basin yet. The vibrance is shocking among the nothingness of wide open.

The Curlew is one of 20 national grasslands managed by the U.S. Forest Service. It's the only such grassland in Idaho, just a few dozen miles north of the Utah border.

I'm seeing the Curlew for the first time. I mean really seeing it. My job as an outdoor journalist requires more than a drive-by glance for scenery sake. I must learn this place and make it matter. Somehow.

Contact helps with connection. I need to touch something other than

my cameras while I'm here. I choose grass. Curlew's grass is knee-high. Its welcoming wave in the wind makes me want to run my fingers through its light green blades so I do.

More birds. Bigger birds. Greater sandhill cranes. Four of them lift as I roam where anglers doze in summer and hunters wander in fall. Upland harvest offerings in the Curlew valley include sharp tail grouse. In 2017, 380 hunters took 740 sharpies. About twice that many birds were harvested in 2001. More acreage rolling from conservation to crop could be why.

I walk the thin divide between man-made growth and Mother Nature's way. My hand stretching wide, fingertips kissing licks of grass on my right, grain on my left. Overhead, the prehistoric ruckus of cranes guides me. I follow the flight



pattern expecting to find water.

But there isn't any.

Curlew's creeks are crippled. Severely. Decades of erosion cutting banks 20 feet deep. More decades of cow leave the water vault empty of meander and full of muck. The Curlew is a working landscape. Scratch that. An overworking landscape. Its timecard ripped. No more punches. Passed overtime and labored into a dustbowl grave. Like the old graves Aaron Hill keeps track of. He's the area's local historian. His teeth are missing, but his memory has bite. He knows the homesteaders plight. The struggle started with sage.

"Sagebrush isn't worth having," Hill says. "It's a waste."

Homesteaders demolished acres of sagebrush with any implement they could invent in the early 1900s. They chopped it, piled it, and burned it.

They had to. Survival is a no-time-to-mess-around motivator.

But forcing flaccid ground into fertility proved futile and many moved on. The few landowners left have no interest in seeing sagebrush spread. Cows don't eat it. Crops don't grow in it. Nothing lives around it.

But it does.

Sage grouse need sagebrush. They need it year round and through all stages of life. If the brush goes away, the bird goes away. So does the hunt. Many units in Idaho are reduced from a 3-bird bag limit to one. In the Curlew, a sage grouse hunt doesn't happen at all. It closed in 2014. The sage grouse population dwindles as the short, desert canopy disappears with development in some places, wildfire in others.

I know there's a sage grouse lek nearby because I see tags. They're



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reflective kind the Forest Service snaps on barbwire fences. Fences consciously strung to keep cows in place, but more often than not keeping wildlife out of place.

A lek is an open area where grouse meet to mate. Grouse fly low, about sagebrush height. If they fly into unseen fence, they break wings, legs, sometimes necks. One thousand tags make a mile of fence seen.

“That’s a fair amount of work, and money, to put in to this particular species,” says Chris Colt, U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist. “Is it worth it? Absolutely.”

I clearly see tagged fence, but I don’t know if the birds do. That’s the last thing on their mind when they’re looking for a date. I’ve documented many mornings lekside. Breath and batteries cold. Hills rolling hues from frosted blue to melted orange.

Lens pointed out a camo-canvased bird blind recording the wild’s way of making babies.

With sage grouse, think sensual. That sliding sound, like legs wrapping in satin sheets, is a male sage grouse inflating its air bags. Putting out the vibe for female feathers. And that pop of a champagne cork, like something served while wrapped in satin? That’s the deflate of a passed-over male refilling air bags for another advance.

No doubt, watching grouse get lucky is worth losing sleep over. If they don’t score, it’s all of us who lose with an Endangered Species listing. Ranching in Idaho. Drilling in Wyoming. Recreation across the West. Losing an indicator species like sage grouse is a done deal.

But it isn’t.

At least not at Deep Creek. It’s



one of the few places within the Curlew providing hydration for grouse and for grazers. You can't see the crippled waterway from afar, the earth's fissure so deep it's hidden until you're standing over it.

You can hear it though. Barely. It's pathetic trickle just enough mumbly to make you wonder what it used to sound like. It babbled like life and that life is coming back. I hear it in the construction-zone, back-up beep of man trying to right his abusive relationship with Mother Nature.

"We don't want to ruin our land. We want to take care of it," says Renelle Skidmore, rancher. "We want to take good care of it because if we didn't, we wouldn't be able to have a living."

The dozer positions, the source of the beep. Tara Hicks, construction worker turned river queen, is at the controls. With a firm yet careful

crush of bank, she's reconnecting flood plain, rearranging willows, and recurving straights we once thought were the most efficient shape for water delivery.

"Thirty years ago, or more than that, they were straightening the rivers," says Hicks, Rockin' T Construction vice president. "I can't dig a straight line so I do pretty well in a river system. I like the sinuosity for sure."

Louis Wasniewski, in waders and hardhat, is in the creek directing Tara's earth shattering approach. He's officially a hydrologist, but I call him water wizard Wasniewski. He's the guy ranchers relying on Curlew public lands for cattle grazing call crazy. He doesn't care as long as they keep their cows out of the creeks.

"We did this to the landscape. We impacted," says Wasniewski, U.S. Forest Service hydrologist.



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People, Places, & Equipment

DRIVEN (Page 18)

Dušan Smetana hunted partridge west of Aberdeen, Scotland, on the River Dee and stayed at Kincardine Castle (kincardinecastle.com). He made travel arrangements through Cabela's Signature Outdoors (cabelas.com/soa). See more of Dušan's fine work at dusan.photoshelter.com.

BAJA RACES (Page 38)

Brian Grossenbacher hunted pheasant with Arturo V. Malo's Baja Hunting (bajahunting.com), which is near Mexicali, Mexico, and only 120 miles from San Diego. Malo offers a variety of upland birds as well deer and other hunts. More of Brian's great photography can be seen at grossenbacherphoto.com.

GOD'S COUNTRY (Page 58)

Russell Graves hunted white-winged doves in the agricultural fields outside Hondo, Texas. The season opens in early September each year, and attracts hunters from around the state and beyond. He found lodging through Paloma Pachanga (venaturaexcursions.com/paloma-pachanga). See more for Russell's hunting, angling, and Texas images at russellgraves.com.

GORDON ALLEN

An artist from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Gordon has been contributing to *Gray's* for years. His line art is scattered throughout this issue. You can see more of Gordon's work at www.gordonallenart.com.

"We're raising cows and raising grain and everything else. We're hard on the landscape."

Louis is okay with having his sanity questioned as he salvages junipers for new banks and piles rock for future riverbed. The cowboys can have their cattle. Louis wants the creeks. And he's getting them while also benefitting everything downstream. Cows, cranes, grain, grouse. So on. He knows letting water run will keep the Curlew, and all its resource demands, alive. He's relentless in his pursuit of righting our wrongs and I'm relentless in finding what matters.

And there it is.

The dynamic displayed across our public lands like a buffet spoiled well past edible hour. The uncomfortable contrast between what we did and what we do. The boundary

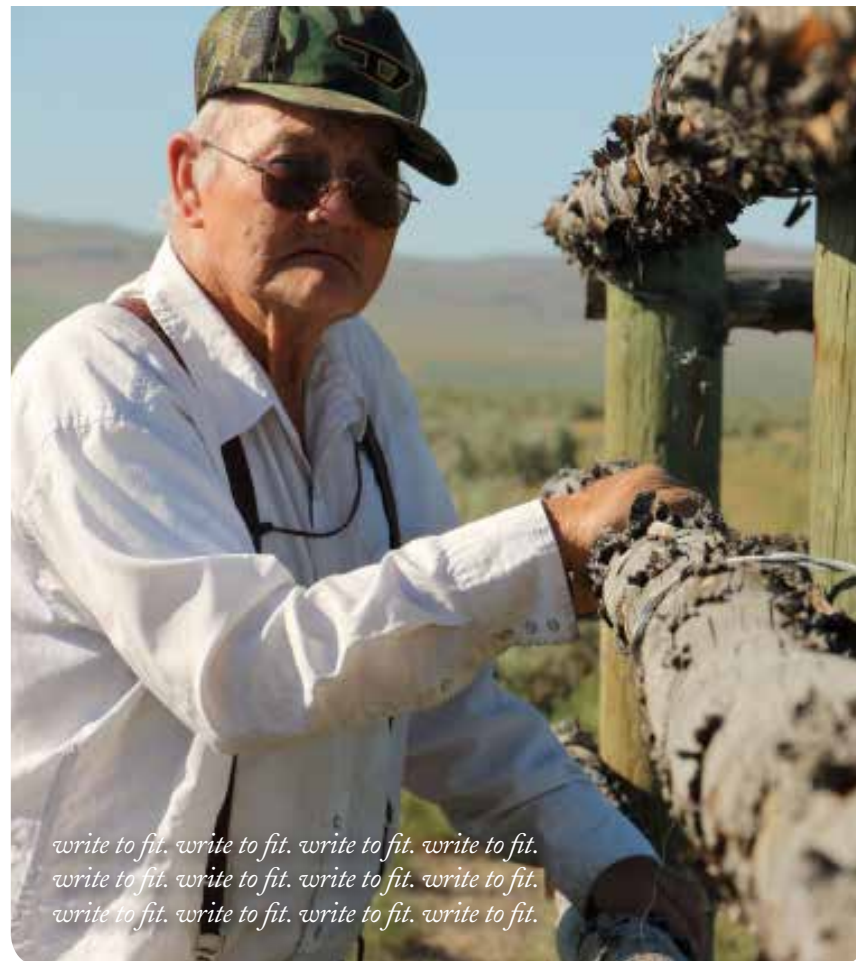
between fence and freedom.

The war we wage with the wild, on purpose or by accident, exposed as a searing rope burn across our weathered hands already oozing with blisters of expired labor.

It's painful to feel and to follow. Bandages delay the sight, but don't dull the sting. Another rub and the wound reopens.

This is the kind of serious injury that leaves a scar no amount of rehab can erase. But with scarce solace, found in only in a river's resurrection, may find the will to work again. ■

Outdoor journalist Kris Millgate is based in Idaho where she runs trail and chases trout, even catching a few when she doesn't have a camera or a kid on her back. Her first book My Place Among Men publishes in August. See more of her work at www.tightlinemedia.com.



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IF YOU GO

The Curlew National Grassland covers 47,000 acres and is part of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, which comprises 2.63 million acres. Most of the forest is part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Consider Curlew National Grassland remote with rough touches of rural in the middle of nowhere. It requires two to four hours of drive time from the nearest major airports, which are located in Idaho Falls, Boise, and Salt Lake City. The grassland's primary road is paved, and side roads are gravel or dirt. Trails aren't maintained well, but they're passable on foot, bike, or off-highway vehicle.

Public land within the grassland boundary is vast, but there's a patchwork of private land mixed in. Please refer to U.S. Forest Service maps

for identification of private parcels, which are usually old homesteads still owned by ranchers today.

The sagebrush-steppe landscape in south-central Idaho is a dry, windy environment with mild winters and baking summers. It hosts wild sharptail grouse, sage grouse, deer, elk, and a variety of raptors.

Two small campgrounds and one reservoir, designed for irrigation with recreation on the side, lure campers into the undeveloped space that sprawls between Snowville, Utah, and Rockland, Idaho. In Idaho, lodging can be found in the small towns of Pocatello, Malad, and American Falls.

Hunting is allowed in certain areas of the forest and grassland, but please consult the website (fs.usda.gov/ctnf) and consult local forest rangers for more details.

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