

Mountain Town News

October 19, 2016

<http://mountaintownnews.net>

Critters big & small will be able to I-90 at Snoqualmie Pass

Profusion of wildlife overpasses

by Allen Best

SNOQUALMIE, Wash. — It's been a big year for wildlife overpasses in the West. Two were completed in Colorado; one is taking shape in Washington state and another in Nevada. More are being planned in British Columbia and possibly in Utah and Wyoming, too.

Near Snoqualmie Pass, about an hour east of Seattle, construction crews recently stacked 39 bars of concrete and rebar, each weighing 40,000 pounds, across the

westbound lanes of Interstate 80. With similar bars on the other side, the arch for what will become a forested bridge is now in place.

When all is done in 2018, wildlife funneled into the crossing by fences along I-90 will find a 66-foot-wide crossing topped

with soils, trees, and other native plants. Ten-foot walls on either side of the bridge will keep out the glare of passing headlights from cars, the Seattle Times notes.

This is part of a bigger project that will ultimately yield 27 places in a 15-mile stretch for wildlife to move to the opposite side of the highway. The work is intended to promote biodiversity and prevent motorists from killing wildlife or being killed in such collisions. It may also help some species tolerate the changing climate.

Some species, particularly large



One arch over I-90 east of Seattle has been completed. Work is expected to wrap up in 2018. Photo/WSDOT

predators and migratory mammals, prefer overpasses, said Charles Raines, director of the I-90 Wildlife Bridges Coalition. "Elk like open. They don't like stuff above their head," he told the Times.



The wildlife overpass under construction in the Cascade Mountains is described by one expert as the most ambitious in its goals in North America and maybe the world.

Raines said as temperatures rise with the changing climate, some species will need the bridges to migrate.

The Times notes that a more permeable highway may allow wolves to expand their range south of the Interstate. Last spring, about 10 miles away, a wolf was found dead on I-90.

Tony Clevenger of the Western Transportation Institute calls the Snoqualmie project “by far the most ecologically comprehensive mitigation project I’m aware of in North America and likely the world.”

A resident of Canmore, Alberta, near the east entrance to Banff National Park, Clevenger helped design the wildlife overpasses and underpasses of the TransCanada Highway between Banff and Lake Louise. A study of wildlife that uses the crossing there found that grizzly bears, wolves, moose, and deer nearly always chose overpasses to cross the TransCanada Highway. Cougars, however, are more comfortable with the wildlife underpasses.

Many wildlife crossings are driven by the goal of keeping large animals off the highways and, ultimately, hoofs off hoods. In other words, the motive is improved highway safety. But crossings in Banff and elsewhere are also created to allow many other creatures free movement.

The crossing being built at Snoqualmie tries to allow movement by many species, some big but even fish. “They had to consider a lot of creatures, from flying squirrels to pikas to bull trout to the big critters, deer and elk,” says Rob Ament, program manger for road ecology at the Western Transportation Institute in Bozeman, Mont.

Wildlife overpasses are being installed at many places, says Ament, because of accumulated evidence about their effectiveness. Efforts to change driver behavior, such as flashing lights and signs, have proved far less successful. The acceptance has been occurring over the last decade.

“At first it’s experimental, and as you monitor the experiments to see how well they work, you have the evidence,” he says. Then, more were built in different situations. Banff National park is very different than in a working landscape, where you have auxiliary roads. It’s also very different than on Highway 93 in Arizona, near Hoover Dam, where overpasses are being built for desert bighorn sheep.

Too, he thinks there’s growing acceptance of the need for wildlife overpasses for habitat connectivity.

“We are talking about ecological integrity and not just avoiding collisions with large ungulates,” he says.

In Colorado, two overpasses were completed this year across Highway 9 between Silverthorne and Kremmling. The \$40 million project will yield five wildlife underpasses, two wildlife overpasses, and a widening of the highway’s shoulder to eight feet, reports the Sky-Hi News. The work there was motivated to end the frequent collisions with deer and motorists

In British Columbia, Parks Canada has announced plans for one wildlife overpass and three wildlife underpasses along the TransCanada Highway in Yoho National Park, reports the Calgary Herald.

In Utah, about a mile of wildlife fence is being installed along I-80 near Park City. A spokesman for the Utah Department of Transportation tells the Park Record that the agency will soon hire a contractor to begin designing a wildlife overpass.

Nevada is investing significantly in creating structures to allow wildlife, including wild horses, safe movement both over and under highways. It already has a crossing of I-80 near Wendover, and two more are now under construction at Pequop Pass, primarily to allow mule deer to move across the



Nevada completed a wildlife overpass of I-80 at Silver Zone Pass in 2014. Photo/Nevada DOT

highway without posing a risk. Several more exist on the north-south Highway 93.

In Wyoming, Teton County has allocated \$100,000 to study the feasibility of wildlife overpasses and underpasses in Jackson Hole. The money will go to the Western Transportation Institute to develop a plan, reports Planet Jackson Hole.

In these and other cases, high fences along the highways are needed to funnel the wildlife into the overpasses and underpasses. That is also being started in Utah along I-80.

Herbicide-free in parks of Durango?

DURANGO, Colo. – What about this idea of eliminating herbicides from parks? In Durango, the city agreed to manage eight parks without resorting to chemicals to keep unwanted plants, like dandelions, at bay.

But Cathy Metz, who directs the city’s parks and recreation department, recently told the city council that it’s not working. That’s particularly true in parks with sports fields, which get intense use.

She would like to see the organic-only parks reduced from eight down to two. This goes against the recommendation of a group called Organics Park Durango, which would

like to see the number of herbicide and pesticide-free parks increased by another five.

While the council has not decided which way to go, Councilor Sweetie Marbury argued that fields with bare spots pose a safety problem. "It's not safe for those kids to run on," she said. Metz told the Durango Herald that broad-leafed plants pose a problem because they collect water and thus are not ideal for sports.

Can anybody put this ski area in the black?

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, Colo. – Steamboat Springs has two ski areas, the older and smaller one being Howelsen Hill. It's located a few blocks from downtown. There's not that much vertical or variety, although it is known far and wide among ski jumpers. It's in no small way responsible for the prodigious crop of Olympians that has emerged from Steamboat over the years.

But in terms of making money, Howelsen has struggled. Last year, the city subsidized it at a cost of \$625,546.

Could a third party do better? That's what the city is seeking for the 2017-2018 season. "We're seeking somebody who has that proven experience, whether or not they operate a ski area right now, or have operated one in the past," said Craig Robinson, the manager of the city's department of parks and open space.

Among the ideas mentioned by Steamboat Today is Intrawest, the operator of the newer and bigger ski area in Steamboat.

Stick built or modular for affordable housing?

CRESTED BUTTE, Colo. – Crested Butte is turning to modular units in an effort to deliver the affordable housing that seems to be in such short supply there as well as in

virtually every other ski town in North America.

Town planner Michael Yerman says modular units can be delivered at a cost of \$200 to \$210 per square foot, compared to \$250 to \$260 per square foot for stick-built units, according to the Crested Butte News.

Town officials hope for a state grant under a "Space to Create" project. A certain number of units would have to be rented to so-called "creatives." Think of artists, writers, and dancers. But Yerman says the state's definition of creative is pretty broad.

Sucking oxygen when working out in thin air

BRECKENRIDGE, Colo. – When the Atlanta Falcons visited mile-high Denver recently to thump the Super Bowl champion Broncos, players were sucking on bottles of a product called Boost Oxygen.

"This is an emerging product, not because oxygen is new for athletes, but because it has never been this portable before," said Brian Hoek, a spokesman for the company. He said the 22-ounce canisters contain 97 percent oxygen, providing 135 to 150 breaths. As the canisters cost \$15, that works out to be 10 to 11 cents a breath of oxygen.

But do you really need supplemental oxygen if you're in shape?

Patrick Sweeney seems to alternate his time between sea level and Summit County. He also biked at 17,500 feet in Nepal on his way to the base camp of Mt. Everest. He told the Summit Daily News that he almost always struggles the first day or two when he gets to Summit County, where the elevation is about 9,000 feet. That's the threshold when your body is almost always in an anaerobic state.

Mountain Town News is published weekly by Allen Best. Subscriptions: \$15/year Contact info: 303.463.8630 or allen.best@comcast.net

“Boost is just a training tool for me at altitude,” he said. “So when I’m in Breck, I’ll often do bike or rowing machine intervals. It’s tough to get the same intensity I get at sea level, so I supplement the oxygen before and after each interval. It’s like going down to sea level for the speed training and staying at altitude for the endurance.

He says that three or four hits from the Boost Oxygen canisters are enough to return his body to an aerobic state.



Ranch Creek, a tributary of the Fraser

Making amends for a dewatered river

FRASER, Colo. – The Fraser River flows past the base of the Winter Park ski area and continues on to join the Colorado River about 20 miles downstream. But the river is much less than it once was. Beginning in 1936, Denver began diverting water through a tunnel underneath the Continental Divide, leaving a much smaller and more shallow river to flow in the same river bed.

This shallowness creates a problem for fish in the Fraser. Even at 8,500 feet in elevation, summer heat can make life uncomfortable or worse for fish. Trout cannot tolerate temperatures above 70 degrees.

But a collaborative effort called Learning by Doing is embarking on a pilot river restoration project. The goal is to improve the 0.9-mile reach of the river near Fraser to reflect the realities of the reduced flows. Plays and riffles will be engineered into the river segment.

The nearly \$200,000 in funding for the restoration work comes from a variety of sources, including Denver Water. Work is expected to occur next summer, reports Kirk Klancke, president of the Colorado River Headwaters Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

Science or emotion in national park decisions?

BANFF, Alberta – Which should rule, the heart or the head? That perplexing dichotomy is evident in a disagreement between 12 of Canada’s largest environmental groups and the Canadian federal government over how the national parks should be operated.

The groups say Parks Canada has become too focused on increasing visitation and tourism instead of protecting the ecological integrity of the national parks. Parks Canada, they say, cannot keep up with the increasing visitation of the last few years.

Several specific proposals are being debated, explains the Rocky Mountain Outlook. One of them is the plan to build a 107-kilometre paved bike trail from Jasper to the Columbia Icefield. The hope is to improve cyclists’ safety.

But even though the bike path would run parallel to the existing highway, environmental groups fear the trail will damage caribou and grizzly habitat.

Also in dispute are plans for the Lake Louise ski area, which is located in Banff

National Park. The revised plan would allow the resort to expand its capacity from 6,000 skiers and snowboarders today to 11,500 in the future. This would include more ski lifts and trails, plus a new lodge, and an expanded parking lot.

The Association for Mountain Parks Protection & Enjoyment supports these and other expanded uses. "Often, the claims coming from these groups are emotional, and they are not based on scientific evidence" said Casey Peirce, executive director of the pro-tourism organization.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with being emotional," shot back Alison Ronson, executive director of a chapter of Canada Parks and Wilderness Society. "These are supposed to be Canada's most protected areas, safeguarding nature and wildlife for current and future generations. We should all care about that."

Parks Canada notes that 97 percent of Jasper National Park and 96 percent of Banff National Park have been declared wilderness, with strong limits on development and use.

Demographic trends of concern in Whistler

WHISTLER, B.C. – Taking a snapshot of Whistler for the year 2013, Vital Signs found a 107 percent increase in the number of Canadian immigrants moving to Whistler. It also found a 19 percent increase in the number of people aged 65 and over.

Both have special needs, especially those immigrants who need to learn English and those older people who will need specialized living arrangements as they age.

But there's also evidence of a widening gap between those of means and people who are just-getting-by or worse. Prices of condominiums have increased 72 percent in the last five years. The average rent for a two-bedroom unit last year was \$2,243, but only 10 percent of the locals can afford such nose-bleed rents.

There are already 6,200 beds in the community restricted to use only by residents, but Pique Newsmagazine suggests it's not nearly enough. The newspaper advocates that British Columbia should return more of the sales taxes collected in Whistler to the municipality to deal with the impacts of tourism.

Hotels in Aspen nearly full during September

ASPEN, Colo. – Hotels in Aspen were just as full during September as they are during any of the peak months of winter and summer. Stay Aspen Snowmass reported that paid occupancy for the month was 64 percent in Aspen, an increase from last year's 57 percent.

This is based on reporting by 76 percent of the total 2,091 short-term rental units in Aspen.

Average daily rates in September were \$272 per night, compared to \$253 last year for the same month.

Granby mayor goes on payroll as interim town manager

GRANBY, Colo. – Granby is paying its mayor \$8,000 per month to serve as an interim town manager as it seeks a replacement for Wally Baird, who left employment of the town in July. The next manager won't be in place until Nov. 1 at the earliest.

The town board believes Mayor Paul Chavoustie is best able to represent the town on construction of a new water treatment plan and in negotiations for property along the Colorado River called Shorefox.

The Sky-Hi News notes that at least twice before Granby has put the mayor on the payroll as the town manager. In both cases about a decade ago, the mayor/manager was Edward "Ted" Wang

Colorado valley thrives even as coal mines close

by Ed Marston

Incumbent Congressman Scott Tipton's YouTube campaign video is titled: "Gail Schwartz's War on Coal devastated Delta." At the very end, there is a distant photo of three lonely, seemingly abandoned concrete silos. They are the video's dramatic symbol of how coal mine closings have "devastated" Delta County.

There's one little problem. Those silos aren't about coal. And they aren't empty. They held sugar beets when Holly Sugar dominated the Delta area. For the past 30 years they've held grain to feed Delta County's many chickens. Sugar beets went its way; Delta County adapted.

The rest of the video is as phony as the silos. There's a shot of the old Armory near the Delta Post Office - shut long ago for nothing having to do with coal. There's a photo of the old City Market building in Delta, closed because City Market built a larger, better, brighter store years ago. Progress, not "devastation."

While funeral music plays, Tipton's video says: "Housing values in the area are falling." In Paonia and Hotchkiss, where Delta County's mining was concentrated, real estate is booming. Rentals simply can't be had; houses sell quickly, for good prices. People are coming here in part because Paonia is only the second town in Colorado to have gigabit speed broadband. Sixty ex-coal miners are helping to wire the area. Transition, not "devastation."

Yes, Delta County and its North Fork Valley have taken body blows. You don't lose 800 coal-mining jobs (300 of them because an underground fire – not a state bill - closed the Oxbow Mine) and just shrug it off. But we are doing remarkably well even though we are being kicked while we move to new economies.

One coal miner in Tipton's work of fiction tearfully describes Paonia's main street as devastated. The truth is, Grand Avenue is mostly full, and lively, day and evening. The schools took a hit, but young families are



Grand Avenue in Paonia. Photo/Town of Paonia

moving here for beauty, wildlife, clean air and water and lightning fast broadband. The school population this year is up, to everyone's surprise.

The storm cloud on Delta County's horizon is natural gas and its champion: Scott Tipton. If he gets his way and gas drilling lays waste to our backcountry, we will lose what brings people here. And what keeps us here.

Tipton personally slandered ("I approve this message") an entire rural county to attack his opponent.

Shame on you, Congressman! There must be honorable ways to run for public office.

Ed Marston lives near Paonia, Colo. He was a long-time director of Delta-Montrose Electric Association.