

WESTERN SLOPE CONSERVATION CENTER  
2020-2021 ANNUAL NEWSLETTER & REPORT

# TATER HEAP

WEBSITE VERSION



***THE WESTERN SLOPE CONSERVATION CENTER (WSCC) AIMS TO BUILD AN ACTIVE AND AWARE COMMUNITY TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE LANDS, AIR, WATER, AND WILDLIFE OF THE LOWER GUNNISON WATERSHED.***

The WSCC's Annual Newsletter and Report are assembled by staff with pride for our accomplishments and gratitude for our members and friends. It gets its name from a humble hill in the North Fork Valley, the Tater Heap.

*In this year's edition:*

Our 2020-2021 Staff Team

Report from our New Executive Director, Tanya Henderson

Testimonials from our Board of Directors

2020 Financial Recap

Public Lands Program Update

Watershed Program Update

Paonia River Park Highlight

Some of our favorite photos and faces

# MEET THE STAFF TEAM:

Email "first name" @theconservationcenter.org to reach any of us.



**TANYA HENDERSON**

*Executive Director*



**JAKE HARTTER**

*Watershed Program Director*



**BEN KATZ**

*Public Lands Program Director*



**ALAINA GEIBIG**

*Outreach Coordinator*



**KARLEY O'CONNOR**

*Operations Coordinator*



**VIVA KELLOGG**

*Accountant*



**EMMA GREGORY**

*Conservation Fellow*

*Tater Heap Cover Photo by 2020 Photo Contest Winner, John Mitchell.  
View looking southeast from the Grand Mesa.*

# DEAR MEMBERS,

I am thrilled to find myself working on behalf of the Western Slope Conservation Center, a bit of a dream come true in a rather nightmarish year. Since starting in November, I have been deeply impressed by the staff, board, and members that I've had the pleasure of meeting. It is obvious that this community cares deeply about conservation and sustainable solutions.

A major theme of the 2019 staff retreat was resilience, without knowing how important that would be for us in 2020. Last year challenged many Americans: the coronavirus devastated economies and how we operate as a society, while environmental and social issues continued to escalate around us. I feel privileged to join the WSCC team and be working for what I care about at my core - a sustainable future for us all.

2020 forced many of us to do a values inventory and evaluate the causes that we truly wish to prioritize. It is an honor that so many have chosen to support the WSCC's mission.

With your help, our Public Lands Program created a broad community of support to Keep the North Fork Fruitful. We backed the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Employment Act (CORE), participated in the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) rulemakings, and filed suit against the Bureau of Land Management's Uncompahgre Resource Management Plan (RMP). We work to make sure the voice of Western Slope communities is heard.

Our Watershed Program continues to build working partnerships to protect wildlife habitat and support the availability of high-quality water for agriculture while connecting people to our waterways in the lower Gunnison basin. Keep reading for more detailed program updates and a special volunteer spotlight surrounding a favorite community project.

Thank you to all of you who participate in our committees and are fighting to keep public lands in public hands. Thank you to all of you who are volunteering on the ground with us and who donate to us. Thank you to all of you who are lending your voice to important conservation issues. Thank you for asking questions. Thank you for finding answers with us.

As 2021 continues, we continue to elevate Western Slope voices to create durable conservation outcomes for western Colorado.

I look forward to hearing from you as we move forward together,

Tanya Henderson  
Tanya@theconservationcenter.org  
Executive Director



## TALLY IT UP 2020

Total New Donors:  
**58**

Total Members:  
**526**

Monthly Donors:  
**45**

Social Media Followers:  
**2,600+**

Social Media Followers Gained:  
**700+**

Raffle Tickets Sold:  
**750**



# 2020-21 BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

We asked the board to answer the following questions. Here are their testimonials.

What drew you to serve on the WSCC board? / Why are you serving on the WSCC board?

What was WSCC's greatest accomplishment in 2020?

What WSCC work are you most excited about in 2021?

What is the most meaningful work done by WSCC?

## **Scott Braden, Interim Executive Director** **July-November**

The most meaningful work is grassroots organizing and meaningful relationships in the communities WSCC serves. Bigger groups can help with policy and legal aspects, but those things don't succeed without buy-in and participation from local people.

## **Ralph D'Alessandro, Treasurer**

For WSCC to simply be able to function in so many areas, including recruiting a new Executive director and having an Interim Director step in so capably in the COVID environment, while maintaining financial support from its members and via grants to be able to sustain a strong financial situation and finish the year in the black, based on its pre-COVID budget was amazing.

## **Juli Slivka, Secretary**

WSCC brings the North Fork communities together to pursue locally-driven approaches to public land and watershed management. WSCC's collaborative approach is key to implementing conservation plans that serve our whole community.

## **Karen Ortiz**

In 2021, I am excited to see how current initiatives and programs develop, the lawsuit unfolds, and the Keep the North Fork Fruitful campaign and our regional voice grow under Tanya Henderson's leadership.

## **Tracy McCurdy**

What drew me to serve on the board was community. This remains my reason for continuing to serve on the board: a way for me to serve my community and be part of it more deeply due to that involvement.

## **Allison Elliott**

I joined the board because I wanted to be with other people who cared about the natural world in the way I do and who find meaning and enjoyment working on the behalf of wild places

## **Zach Krapfl**

I am most excited to possibly expand into other areas in 2021 - like water conservation efforts with Paonia and Hotchkiss, Delta County.

## **Jay Simon**

I'm excited for a bunch in 2021! Further development of the North Fork Watershed Stakeholder's Group, wetlands habitat mitigation, and continued improvements to the River Park. The WSCC continues to provide a voice and resources for the protection of our natural resources, as well as an avenue for the general public to gain valuable knowledge of our region and a means to get involved!

## **Michael Burkley, \*New Board Member\***

In 2021 I am most excited to delegate Mike's Hikes to a team of volunteers and putting together a new and more exciting schedule of hikes. Our subcommittee has so many exciting and new ideas - with an emphasis to promote to our members and the entire community of this free benefit that WSCC provides.

## **Alex Carr - Johnson, \*New Board Member\***

WSCC has spent a decade in a non-stop fight against oil and gas development in the North Fork Valley - while at the same time building support for permanent protections from oil and gas. Both our RMP lawsuit with Wilderness Workshop and The Wilderness Society and the Keep the North Fork Fruitful campaign are very important milestones in what will ultimately be our successful fight for permanently protecting the North Fork. Staff, board, and volunteer commitment to the short-term tactics and the long-term vision in the face of so much adversity has been powerful to witness.

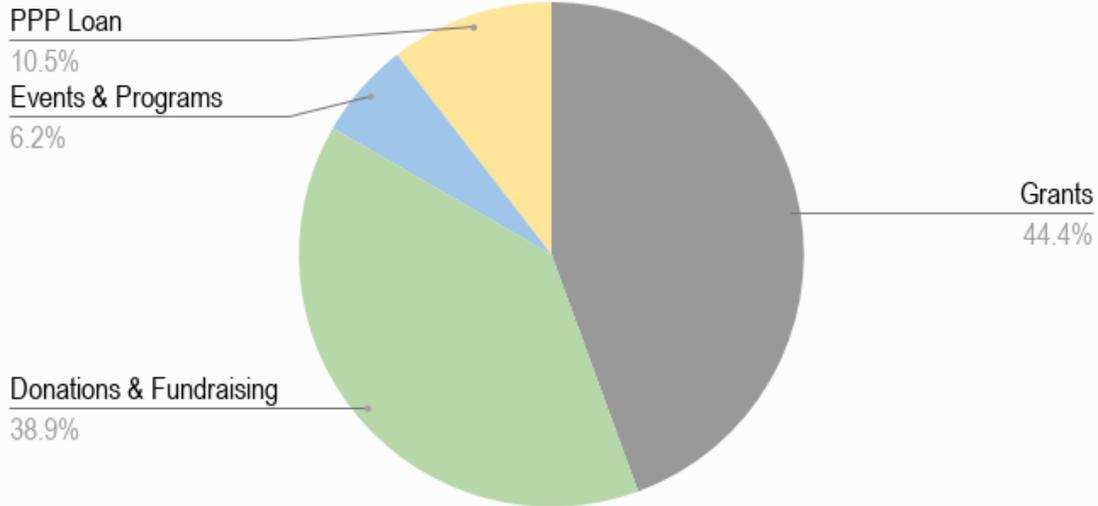


# 2020 FINANCIAL RECAP

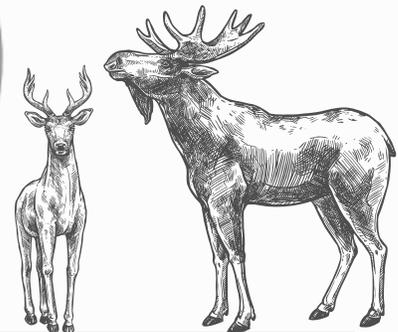
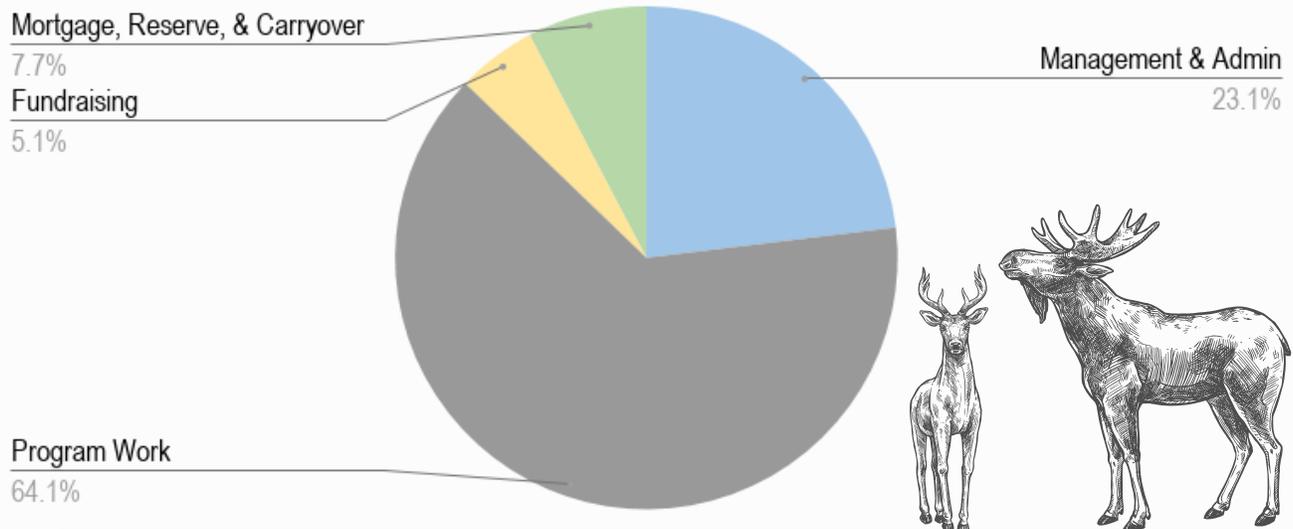
We are overwhelmed by the support received from our community in 2020.

Local businesses, committee members, stakeholders, partners, grantors, and far-ranging supporters who have a special place in their hearts for the Western Slope, our conservation allies, and you make WSCC's work possible.

## INCOMES:



## EXPENSES:



## OUR LANDS, AIR, WATER, AND WILDLIFE THANK YOU.

*Special thanks to our 2020 major grantors & project funders:*

The Wilderness Society  
 Western Conservation Foundation  
 Patagonia  
 Resource Legacy Fund  
 National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance  
 Conservation Lands Foundation

West Elk Community Fund  
 Colorado Water Conservation Board  
 Telluray Foundation  
 Wolcott Family Foundation  
 Roundup Riders of the Rockies  
 High Country Conservation Advocates

Fund for Wild Nature  
 Gates Family Foundation  
 Welfelt Fabrication  
 ERO Resources  
 North Delta Ditch Company  
 Fruitland Irrigation Company

# PUBLIC LANDS PROGRESS



## 2020 PLAY BY PLAY

- 4** Virtual Community meetings hosted
- 7** Mike's Hikes hosted
- 10** Acres of sage grouse habitat restored
- 56** Newspaper features & mentions
- 200+** Participants at virtual meetings
- 1,500** Feet of USFS trails improved

## BETTER THAN WE FOUND IT

*Working together to improve our trails.*

Continuing our long-term stewardship efforts with the United State Forest Service (USFS) Paonia Ranger District, we teamed up to repair trails and host a Wilderness Education series. Due to COVID-19, we weren't able to host a volunteer trail day, so WSCC staff joined the Forest Service crew to complete over 1,500 feet of clearing on the Curecanti Creek trail, improving the trail for horseback travel and hiking. We designed a trailhead kiosk and three signs for installment at heavily used Forest Service trailheads to educate the public on Wilderness and Leave No Trace principles. WSCC also hosted three Leave No Trace "Pit Stops," educating over 300 recreationists.

## FIGHTING FOR PROTECTIONS

*Making progressive policy changes at the state level.*

In 2020, WSCC members advocated for our community during the COGCC oil & gas rulemakings, which finalized several new regulations supporting their updated mission to protect the health, safety, and welfare of Coloradans and the environment. The monumental rule change will protect the lower Gunnison watershed's big game habitat and migration corridors which are critical to our local economy.

*Continuing to amplify community voices until they are heard.*

WSCC, along with the Wilderness Society and Wilderness Workshop, filed a lawsuit against the BLM, now pending in federal court. It challenges the Trump administration's Uncompahgre RMP in order to protect the livelihood of the small-scale farming and ranching community in the North Fork Valley. The lawsuit is the culmination of a decade of community organizing against oil and gas development in the valley - while at the same time building support for permanent protections for our public lands.

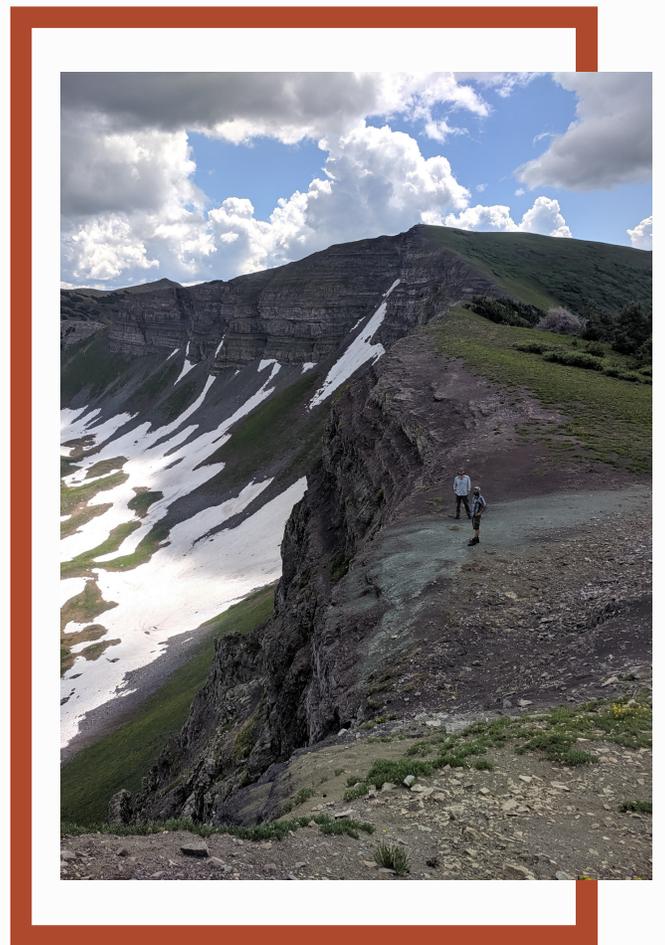


## KEEP THE NORTH FORK FRUITFUL

*Forging a path forward.*

The Keep the North Fork Fruitful campaign is building a broad coalition of stakeholders to permanently protect the North Fork watershed. Rather than remain in a state of defense, this campaign creates a proactive vision for our valley and communities, protecting everything that makes the North Fork Valley special - our vibrant local economy, agricultural heritage, clean air and water, rural character of place, and abundant opportunities for outdoor recreation. The campaign is building a broad drumbeat of support for protections by connecting community members with opportunities to advocate for our public lands and engage with local elected officials.

In the campaign's first year, we lobbied for many local and statewide protections, including significant setbacks and limitations from oil and gas development in wildlife habitats and corridors, 200,000-acres of mineral withdrawal under the CORE Act in our watershed, and over 100,000 acres of recommended Wilderness and Special Management Areas in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) Forest Plan.



Keep  
THE  
NORTH  
FORK  
Fruitful

*Help us Keep the North Fork Fruitful today.*

So far, more than 100 individuals have signed our petition asking elected officials to protect the valley, and 22 businesses, farms, ranches, and other stakeholders have signed on as partners. Please visit our website at [KeeptheNorthFork.org](http://KeeptheNorthFork.org) to learn more about the campaign, sign our petition, and get more involved.

# WATERSHED STEWARDSHIP HIGHLIGHTS



## SAMPLE THIS:

*Did you know, WSCC holds one of the longest running water quality data sets in the state? Second only to the Roaring Fork Conservancy located just over McClure pass, WSCC River Watch program is 19 years old. This year, our water team moved into a new lab space at the CSU Organic Agriculture Research Station (CSU-OARS) on Rogers Mesa and developed new COVID protocols so that our sampling program could continue.*

## BUILDING A FUTURE

*Creating opportunities for water access on the North Fork of the Gunnison River.*

Nearly 10-years in the making, the Delta County Fairgrounds in Hotchkiss is home to a new river access and boat ramp! Utilizing funds through the Great Outdoors Colorado Inspire Initiative, we collaborated with our partners at The Nature Connection, Delta County, and the Town of Hotchkiss to complete the first phase of the project. The fairgrounds site represents the second formal public river access point on the North Fork of the Gunnison. WSCC worked closely with the Delta County Commissioners, ERO Resources, Odisea Engineering, and Crane and Associates to help design a 2-ramp access point which was completed in April 2020.

Special thanks to Ira Houseweart Metalworks and the WSCC Boat Ramp Subcommittee for helping install important river safety signage at the boat ramp. More improvements are planned for the future, including a new shade structure scheduled to be completed in the spring of 2021.



## RESTORATION PROJECTS

*Partnering with ditch companies for conservation.*

We love habitat restoration work because we see tangible and real habitat improvements once we complete our projects! Over the summer, we revisited our 2019 restoration sites and found them bolstering with native wildlife. Since planting 800-trees and shrubs on John Welfelt's property under the supervision of the North Delta Ditch company, the site has become a vibrant habitat full of wildlife and native flora. Looking at previous projects we have seen incredible habitat improvement along with strengthened community relationships that are prioritizing conservation work.



In 2020, we expanded our restoration program to include projects with three new ditch companies. We hope to continue this amazing work into the future by laying the groundwork for many other partnerships in the year to come. One of these partnerships is with the Fruitland Irrigation Company. WSCC helped identify a suitable habitat site at the Gould reservoir and implemented habitat replacement plans. We installed nine-Zeedyk structures and transplanted 14-shrubs to reduce erosion and meet habitat replacement goals at the reservoir. Projects will continue at the Gould reservoir in the spring of 2021.



## CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

*Expanding restoration partnerships in 2021.*

Looking ahead to next summer, we have secured funding through the Telluray Foundation and Great Outdoors Colorado to expand the existing Paonia River Park trail across the river on the high school property. We are preparing for six weeks of work with youth trail building crews to complete this project. The River Park has been such an important asset to our community. We are excited to extend this project with an additional mile of trails to support better connectivity between the town, the Gunnison River, and the high school.

# PAONIA RIVER PARK REVERIE

The Paonia River Park has been the WSCC's crown jewel since its rebirth from an in-stream gravel mine in 2013. The brainchild of North Fork River Improvement Association, WSCC's predecessor, the River Park is the product of continual community partnership and stewardship. Ongoing efforts from several Americorps VISTAs, trail crews, and community volunteer trail days create the park that many enjoy today.

We asked the new volunteer coordinator of our River Park Working Group to share a message about the park.



## **When the world around me goes amok --**

*or any other day for that matter -- I go to the Paonia River Park to clear my mind.*

*I cherish this place as my "welcome home" to nature as an accessible and always-changing pleasure.*

*I connect with friends under the scone of a new shade structure. I wander the gravelly trail next to riparian habitat of the North Fork of the Gunnison River.*

*I humbly recognize the Ute people who stewarded these, their ancestral lands and waters, since time immemorial. I thank those more recent advocates and owners and donors who have worked to restore this place for me to enjoy.*

*I find comfort in the labyrinth's spiritual healing.*

*I take solace in the willows that line my path. Even a funky but functional boundary fence offers me cover from the high desert sun in mid-day summer.*

*Do you share my passion for this place? Have you found a special spot for meditation or splashing or bird watching?*

*If you are up for a larger love-fest with the park, we invite you to become a member of the Friends of the Paonia River Park on Facebook, or visit our website at [westernslopeconservation.org](http://westernslopeconservation.org).*

*New and seasoned volunteers will be recruited for one-time or continuing hands-on stewardship projects to keep our River Park alive and well and available for all!*

**BY BETSY JOHNSON**



# YOU ARE THE WSCC.

*Thank you for being part of our community.*

We thank our members, partners, and friends for helping us continue to protect and enhance the lands, air, water, and wildlife of the Lower Gunnison Watershed in 2021. We look forward to living in transition with you through creative volunteer opportunities, events, watershed stewardship, public lands advocacy, and of course - the virtual world.

**SAVE THE DATE** for our online membership meeting on March 21, 2021. To learn more about the WSCC, how to get involved, or to contribute to conservation efforts on the Western Slope, visit [westernslopeconservation.org](http://westernslopeconservation.org).

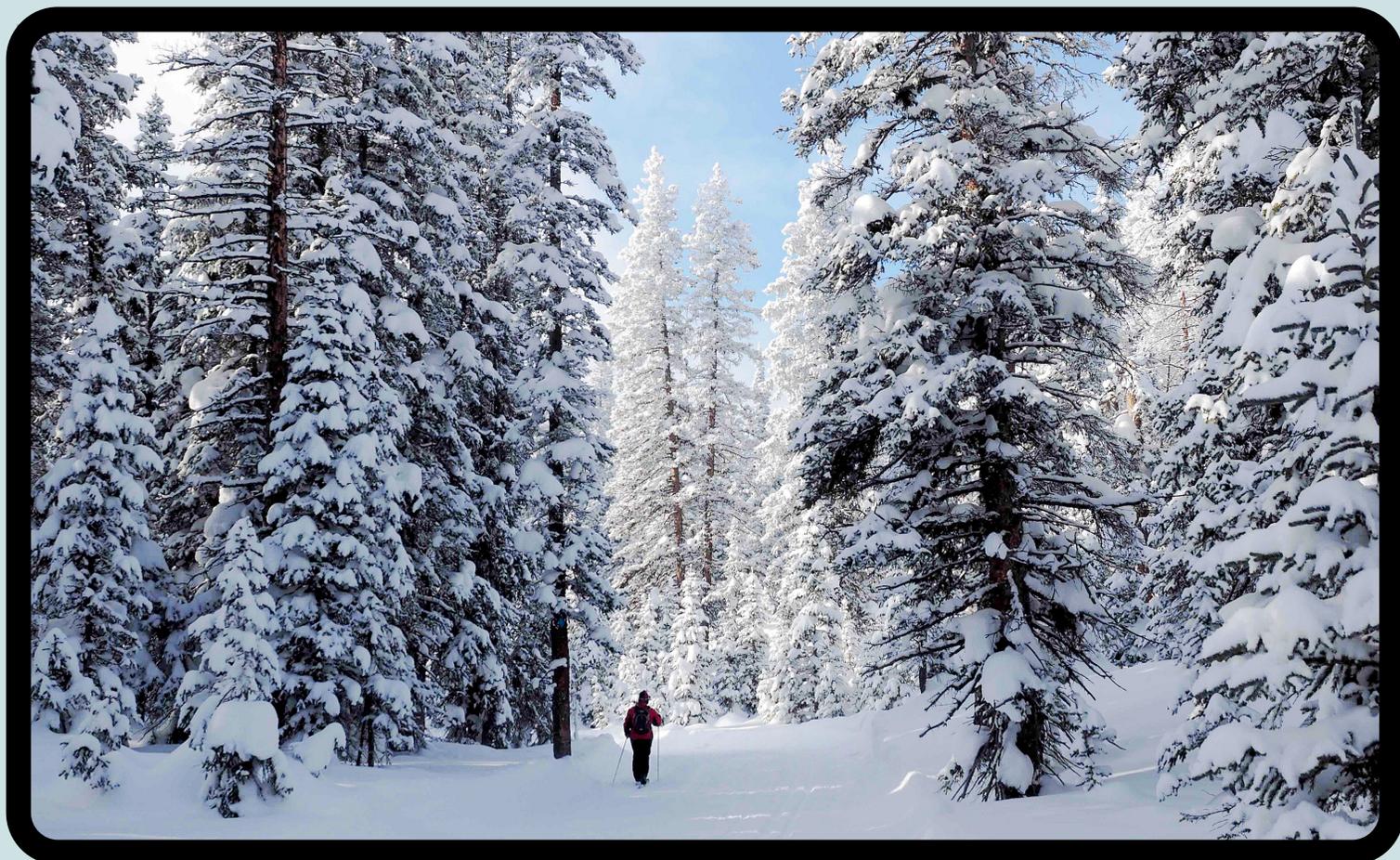


204 Poplar Avenue  
PO Box 1612  
Paonia, CO 81428  
Tel (970) 527-5307  
westernslopeconservation.org  
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# WEBSITE VERSION

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT: DONATE, JOIN A COMMITTEE, ATTEND AN EVENT.  
WESTERNSLOPECONSERVATION.ORG



*Special thanks to High Country Printing & Graphics in Paonia, CO.*

YOUR LANDS, AIR, WATER, & WILDLIFE.  
YOUR TATER HEAP ANNUAL NEWSLETTER & REPORT.

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