

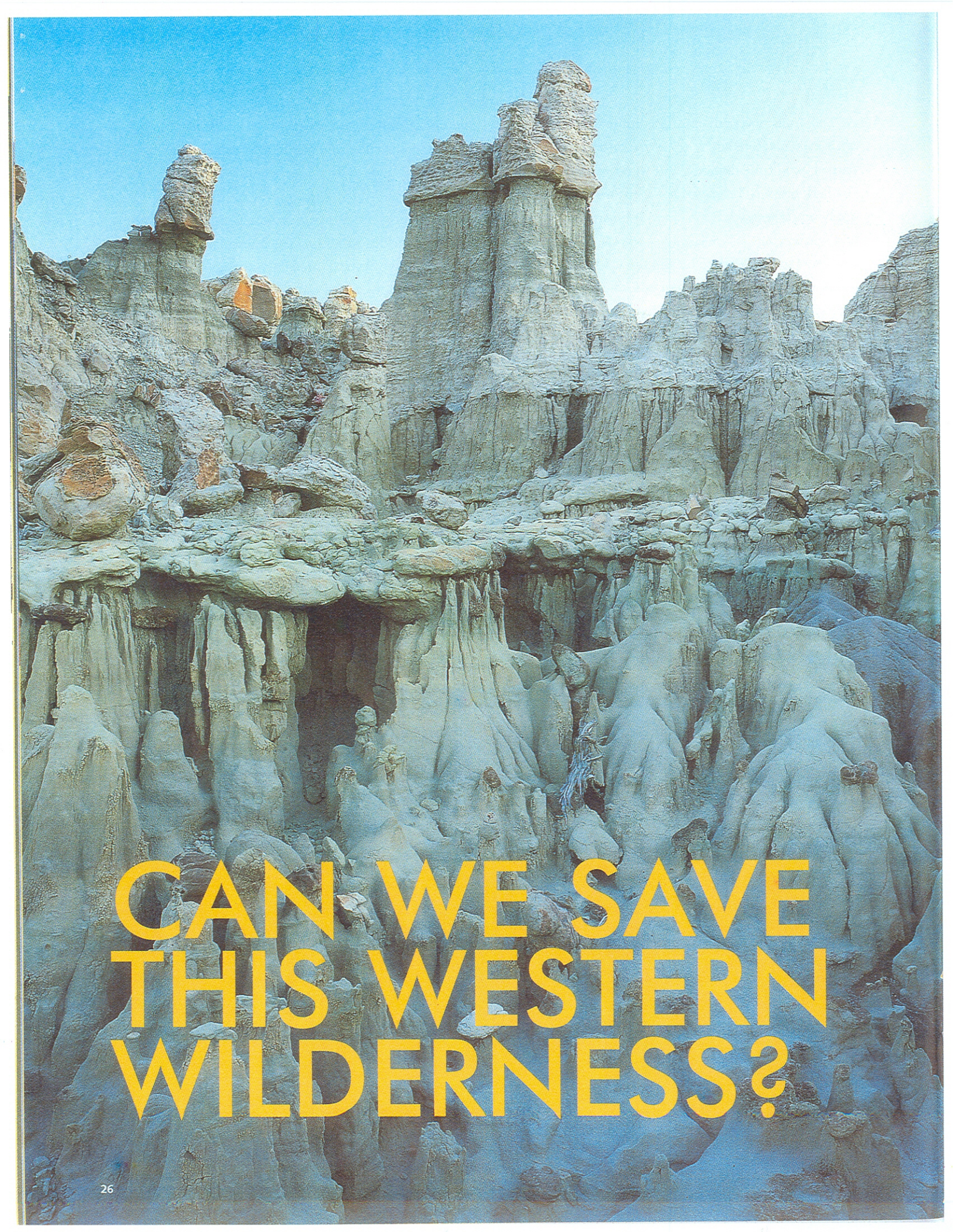


The Wilderness Society 2006-2007

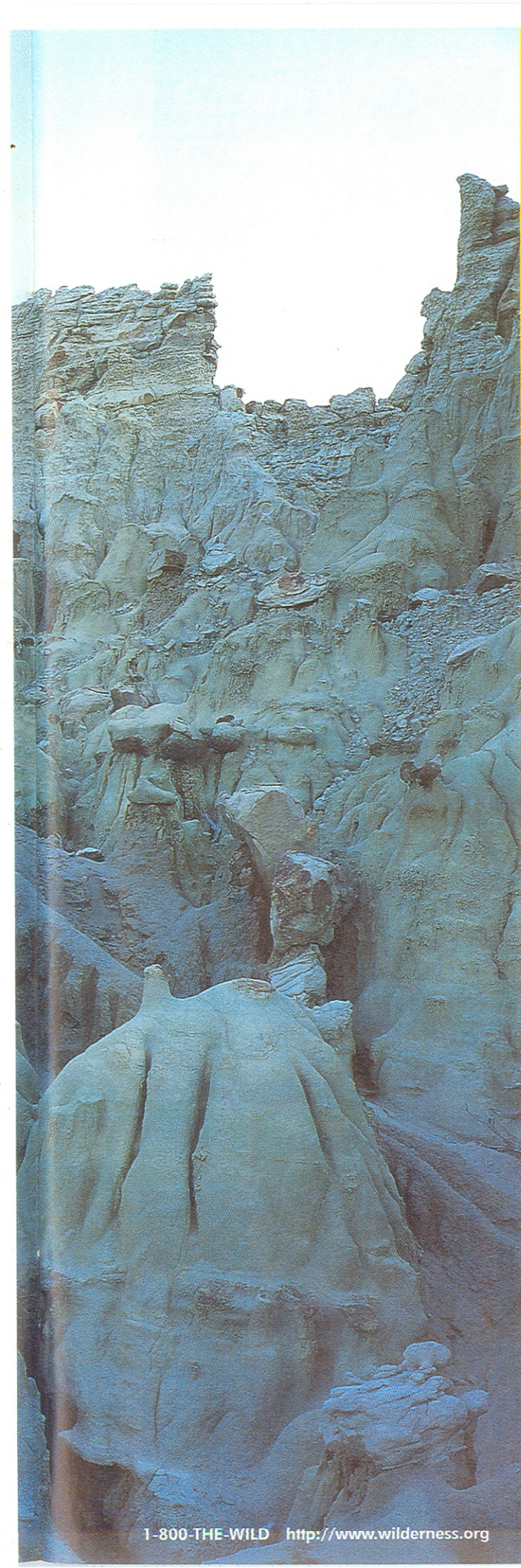
Wilderness

**DISABLED VETS BUOYED BY WILDERNESS
LONG-HAUL BIRDS
WESTERN WILDERNESS IN TROUBLE
MAKING THE MOST OF MAINE'S WOODS**

Attachment 9



**CAN WE SAVE
THIS WESTERN
WILDERNESS?**



By Allen Best

Wyoming's Adobe Town is not really a town, but a giant museum of geological curiosities located in one of the most remote areas of the United States. It got its name from geologist Clarence King, who in his 1869 report remarked on the spectacle of the many pillars, domes, and buttresses. To King, and many visitors since, they resembled the ruins of a fortified city.

But this unusual urban landscape is, in a sense, under siege. The oil and gas industry is marching on Adobe Town and many other western areas that have remarkable wilderness qualities. Located between Rock Springs and Dinosaur National Monument, Adobe Town measures 26 miles by 19 miles. It is still possible to traverse this tract on horse without once encountering a road or a drilling rig, which is increasingly rare even in Wyoming, our least populated state. Now, however, the bulldozers and drilling rigs are moving into Adobe Town.

This has the blessing of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, an Interior Department agency that oversees more of the American people's land than any other agency: 271 million western acres, or one-eighth the land mass of the United States.

Oil and gas are not the only threats to wilderness-quality BLM lands. Proliferating off-road vehicles are creating roads and paths in arid landscapes that could take centuries to heal. But even where wilderness tracts have been designated, such as in California's Mojave Desert, the wild attributes are threatened by lack of enforcement of ORV rules. Despite the solid

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Utah's Desolation Canyon deserves to become a wilderness area, but the Bush administration is interested in leasing it for drilling.

professionalism of many of its employees, the BLM remains underfunded and, some say, misdirected. This lack of proper management continues even as Nevada, Arizona, and Colorado, the nation's fastest growing states during the 1990s, are flooded by new residents, many of them drawn by the proximity of these federal lands.

"The BLM does not have adequate funding to manage its resources," says Ann Morgan, who once headed the BLM state offices in Colorado and Nevada. In terms of dollars per square mile, the BLM has far less money than other federal land agencies, adds Morgan, who now directs the Public Lands Campaign for The Wilderness Society. With more than a dozen staff members working full-time on BLM issues, and a number of others part-time, The Society leads the national effort to improve management of these 271 million acres.

BLM lands remain strikingly under-represented in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Only 7.3 million acres (less than three percent) of BLM land have been designated as wilderness, compared with 34.9 million acres for the Forest Service and 43.7 million acres for the National Park Service. BLM areas rarely feature the alpine lakes and snow-covered peaks that are commonly associated with designated wilderness. But their wilderness attributes, including greater solitude, are very real. The Wilderness Society's Dave Alberswerth believes that the BLM lands can add variety to the National Wilderness Preservation

System. "There is," he says, "a great deal of diversity in habitat and landscapes in the BLM lands: everything from the red-rock canyon country of Utah to the vast tundra and taiga forests in Alaska, to the smaller areas rich in archaeological artifacts."

But will those lands retain their wildness attributes long enough for Congress to act? In Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico, for instance, the BLM is leasing land for drilling "like there is no tomorrow," says Suzanne Jones, The Society's Four Corners regional director. Many of these leases cover places, including Adobe Town, with only marginal potential—at least using conventional drilling technology. But the price of natural gas has spurted in recent years, and technology is rapidly changing, allowing new techniques for drillers to extract gas and oil that had previously defied removal. Already, two wells have been approved for the broader area around Adobe Town that the BLM calls the Desolation Flats. Even in Wyoming, a state whose economy benefits enormously from energy extraction, the onslaught here and elsewhere is now raising eyebrows. In Colorado and in New Mexico, the local reaction—and that of statewide elected officials—has been equally strong.

With its thousand-foot cliffs whittled into pillar and window rocks and arches, Adobe Town has a national park-quality landscape, according to Erik Molvar, the executive director and wildlife biologist for the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.

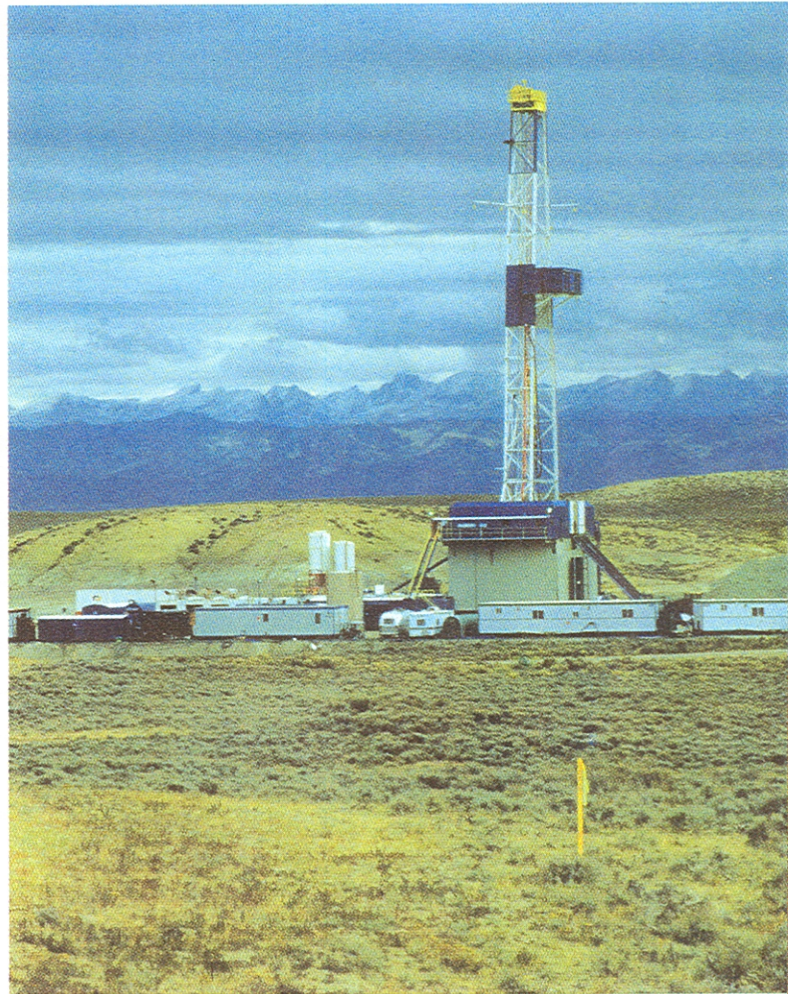
The Jonah Gas Field on BLM lands near Pinedale, Wyoming, already has about 500 wells, and the BLM now has authorized another 3,100 wells, to be drilled at a rate of 250 a year. This will further degrade the air over the Upper Green River Valley and threaten wildlife.

"Its sheer variety and complexity rival Bryce Canyon and Badlands and many other national parks," he says. "In any other place, it would be a national park. But in Wyoming, it's up for oil and gas development." While some might argue that energy extraction can be mitigated, Molvar responds that even a century is insufficient for restoration in such places as Adobe Town, which gets only 5.5 inches of precipitation per year. At Teapot Dome, an oil field in Wyoming that was the center of a national scandal in the 1920s, time has healed very little. "It's still as brutally ugly and damaged as it ever was," says Molvar.

Throughout the Rockies, the situation is similar. Colorado's Piceance Basin, sometimes called "the Saudi Arabia of America," is "really, really coming on line in a big way," says Steve Smith, the assistant regional director in the Four Corners States for The Wilderness Society. "We need the wilderness, because there will be no new version of it, and you need to err very much on the side of preserving these wildernesses, while figuring out how to get the energy out," he says. Perhaps the biggest threat in the Piceance is potential large-scale drilling into deposits of oil shale.

The Bush administration's political appointees have pushed relentlessly to expand oil and gas drilling. In 2005 BLM issued more than 7,000 public lands drilling permits, setting a record. "It's out of control," Alberswerth maintains. "The industry can't even keep up. Only a third of public land leases in the Rockies are in production." Conservationists received a boost in August when a federal district court judge ruled that 16 leases on wilderness-quality lands in southern Utah violated federal law because they were based on outdated environmental information.

In 2003, the Interior Department settled a lawsuit brought by Utah and then declared the outcome a national policy: The BLM cannot, through its normal planning



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process, create new wilderness study areas. (Such areas—WSAs—are considered potential additions to the Wilderness System and are to be managed as if they were wilderness areas until Congress can decide their fate.) The Wilderness Society and many other groups are challenging the legal foundation for that policy in the courts. But while wrangling continues, the policy remains, exposing tens of millions of acres to exploitation.

Another powerful threat to wilderness-quality lands is poorly managed off-road vehicle use. Melyssa Watson, deputy director of the Wilderness Support Center, a program of The Wilderness Society, points to Broad Canyon near Las Cruces, N.M., as somewhat typical. It has Indian rock art, called petroglyphs, but also serves as an important wildlife corridor. And it is being overrun by off-road vehicles, which create ruts, chew up vegetation, and bring in invasive species in their tire treads. Almost every state has such problems. "There are suitable places to enjoy ORVs," says Watson, "but they do not belong in places that could become wilderness areas." The concern is especially acute in the wilderness study areas near the many



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This fall Congress may pass legislation adding significant BLM areas on California's north coast to the Wilderness System.

fast-growing cities in the West, where the explosion in motorized and mechanized use is most pronounced. In the wilderness areas of California's Mojave Desert, an increasingly popular getaway, there is only one BLM field ranger for every 500 square miles. The Wilderness Society's Geary Hund tells of repeated incursions there by off-road vehicles, leaving hillsides, washes, and other landscapes scarred. ORV use is also polluting the air.

Another threat was born way back in 1866. Congress passed RS 2477 to facilitate settlement of the West by granting rights-of-way across public lands. Although this statute was repealed in 1976, the highway rights-of-way constructed before then were grandfathered. "While there may be legitimate RS 2477 highway claims, several western states, counties, and private interests have laid claim to cow paths, dirt bike tracks, and wash bottoms that do not resemble a road. Turning them into roads could harm streams, wildlife habitat, and scenery," says Kristen Brengel, The Wilderness Society's expert on this issue. "Utah's Kane County, for example, is maintaining that cow paths, two-tracks carved out by off-road vehicle use, and even dry washes are 'highways.' Unfortunately, some states and counties claim RS 2477 highways to encourage more—and possibly damaging—off-road

vehicle use and thus try to prevent wilderness designation. It's a pretty wicked tool if you want to throw a grenade into the management of an area."

It should be no surprise that Alaska has more potential BLM wilderness than any other state. The agency administers almost 20 percent of all land in Alaska, but not a single acre has been made part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, and the agency is far behind the schedule that Congress established for identifying the resource values at stake and determining the future management of these lands. "The situation went from bad to worse in 2003 when the Bush administration directed the BLM to stop its reviews of wilderness," says Eleanor Huffines, the Wilderness Society's Alaska regional director. She calls the Colville River, which flows 350 miles through the North Slope, a "wildlife Mecca" and "a premier example of the type of place that belongs in the Wilderness System. And yet there are proposals to turn much of the river corridor over to the oil and gas industry. Our goal is to make sure there is balance in the use of BLM lands, which now there obviously is not.

"Many wilderness activists believe that the key to protecting wilderness is organizing from the grassroots level



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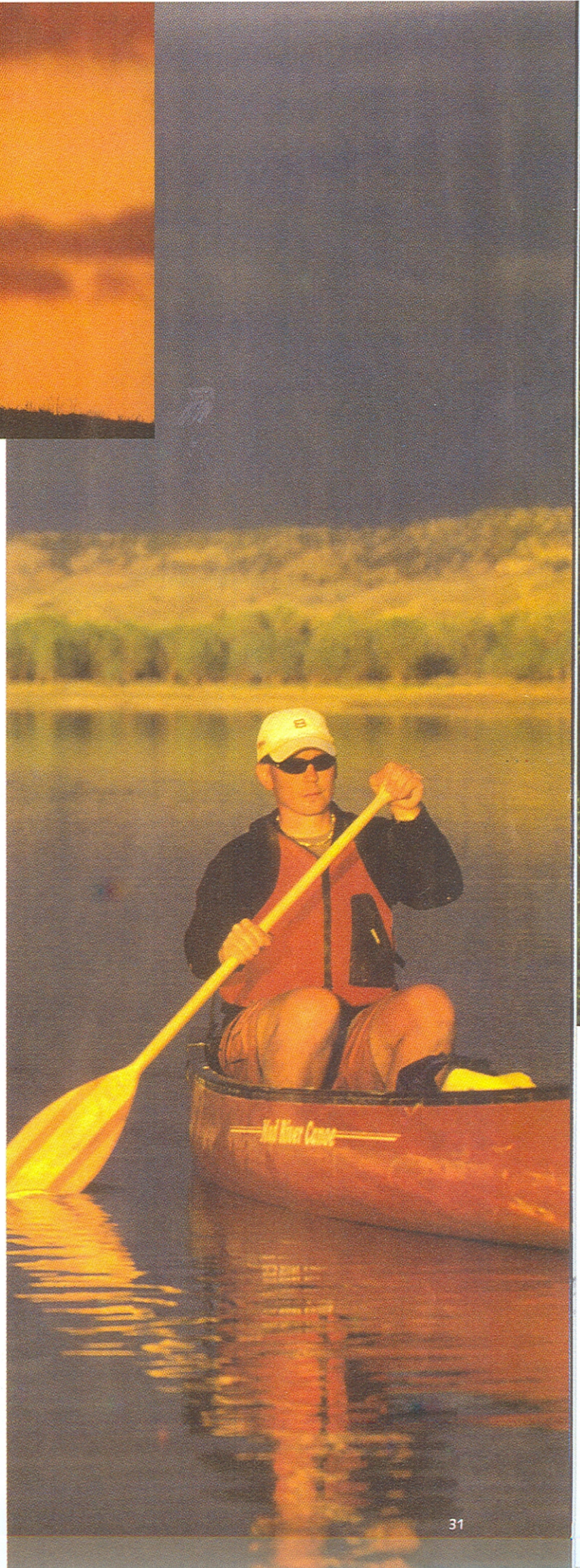
Elk and a multitude of other species depend on the lands overseen by the BLM.

Some of the finest recreation opportunities in the West are at BLM locations such as the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. This area is part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which includes the best preserved BLM lands.

upward. Bart Koehler, director of the Wilderness Support Center, believes that emphasis is paying dividends, despite the poor conservation record of this Congress and the Bush administration. "We are starting to see the sun rise," he says. "More than two million BLM acres have been added to the System since 2000."

Over the years, the BLM has received low grades for conservation. As part of an effort to give the agency more of a conservation mission, former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt invented the National Landscape Conservation System in 2000. It contains BLM's wilderness, national monuments, WSAs, and other undeveloped places. The NLCS totals 26 million acres, ten percent of the BLM lands. "This was a momentous step forward," says Morgan. "It has energized those in the agency who are committed to a more balanced approach. What we need now is to have that approach embraced at the top of the BLM—and soon. With every passing day there is more pressure to drill here and drive an ATV there."

Allen Best of Colorado has written for Forest Magazine and High Country News, among others.



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