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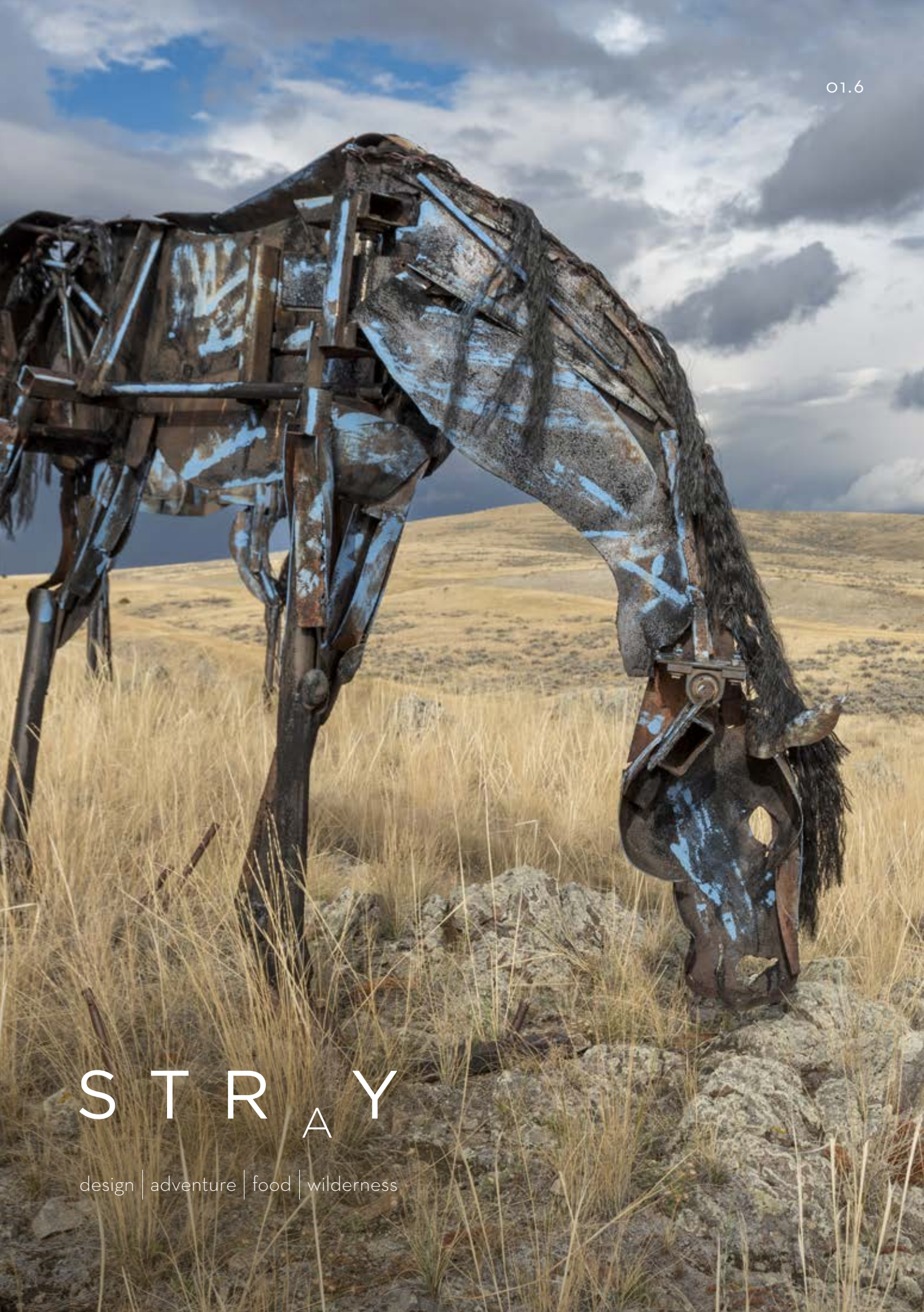


STRAY

design | adventure | food | wilderness

The crags and spires of the northwest mountains, the windswept prairies out east, the braided streams that wend through forest and plain, and always, everywhere, that big, blue sky. In his road trip chronicle *Travels with Charley,* John Steinbeck wrote that "Montana seems to me what a small boy would think Texas is like from hearing Texans," an observation that's both apt and delightful, unless you happen to be from Texas.

The people who make their home here, too, have something of the untamed about them. You have to be a little wild to subject yourself to life in a place where large mammals outnumber people and winters can dip a few dozen degrees below zero. Those who have landed in Montana from somewhere else, including several of the people featured in this issue of *Stray*, talk about a restlessness that eased up ever-so-slightly when they made their way to this state. A lock somewhere inside springs open—*yes, this is the place*—and they finally feel settled, at least until ambition or curiosity send them off on a new kind of journey.

That Montana wildness is what keeps so many coming back to the green o. There's a particular joy in witnessing nature in all her harshness and grandeur, then ending those days of adventure with nights spent in comfort—the contrast between wildness and luxury heightens the experience of both.

That's why in this issue of *Stray*, we're celebrating all things wild and free. The pages ahead will introduce you to bold entrepreneurs turning to nature for the next beauty and grooming breakthroughs, guides and outfitters bringing an indigenous lens to backcountry adventure, and an artist whose gift to his Montana home has become a roadside icon. You'll meet folks like Jackie Keckses, Paws Up's own equestrian manager, and Denise Bowden, who's breaking down barriers as the first female rider in the annual Chincoteague Pony Swim. And you'll see Montana through the eyes of people who love it, like Missoula poet Chris La Tray, whose work makes even fleeting moments in nature feel like brushes with the divine.

We hope these stories will give you a dose of that exhilarating wildness—at least until your travels carry you back to the green o.

Lila Harron Battis
Editor

the green o

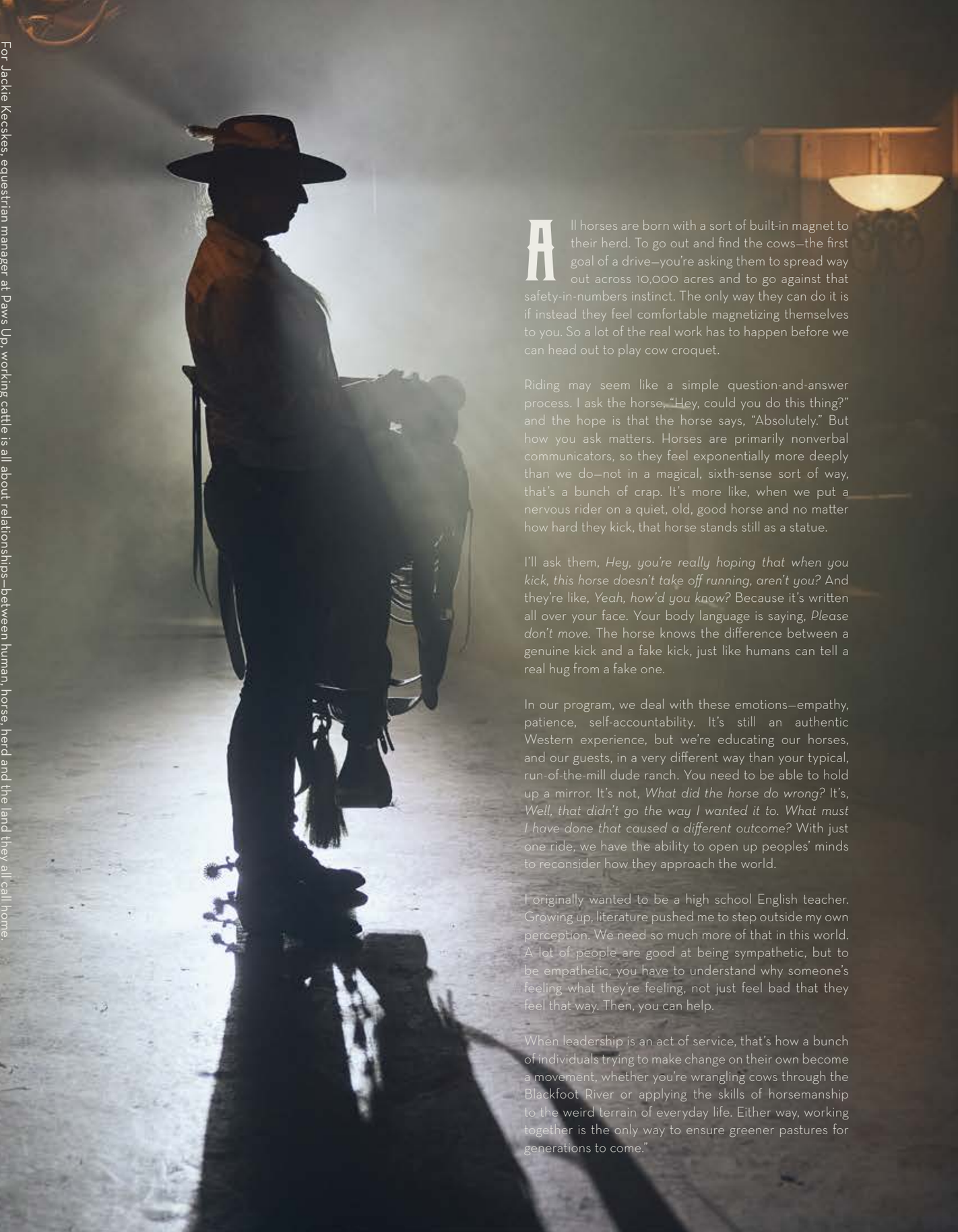
Photo credit: from top: Stuart Thurkill (2), Dan Goldberg

Photo credits: Dan Goldberg and Stuart Thurlkill

FOLLOW HER LEAD

For Jackie Kecskes, equestrian manager at Paws Up, working cattle is all about relationships—between human, horse, herd and the land they all call home.

—As told to Richelle Szypulski



All horses are born with a sort of built-in magnet to their herd. To go out and find the cows—the first goal of a drive—you're asking them to spread way out across 10,000 acres and to go against that safety-in-numbers instinct. The only way they can do it is if instead they feel comfortable magnetizing themselves to you. So a lot of the real work has to happen before we can head out to play cow croquet.

Riding may seem like a simple question-and-answer process. I ask the horse, "Hey, could you do this thing?" and the hope is that the horse says, "Absolutely." But how you ask matters. Horses are primarily nonverbal communicators, so they feel exponentially more deeply than we do—not in a magical, sixth-sense sort of way, that's a bunch of crap. It's more like, when we put a nervous rider on a quiet, old, good horse and no matter how hard they kick, that horse stands still as a statue.

I'll ask them, *Hey, you're really hoping that when you kick, this horse doesn't take off running, aren't you?* And they're like, *Yeah, how'd you know?* Because it's written all over your face. Your body language is saying, *Please don't move.* The horse knows the difference between a genuine kick and a fake kick, just like humans can tell a real hug from a fake one.

In our program, we deal with these emotions—empathy, patience, self-accountability. It's still an authentic Western experience, but we're educating our horses, and our guests, in a very different way than your typical, run-of-the-mill dude ranch. You need to be able to hold up a mirror. It's not, *What did the horse do wrong?* It's, *Well, that didn't go the way I wanted it to. What must I have done that caused a different outcome?* With just one ride, we have the ability to open up peoples' minds to reconsider how they approach the world.

I originally wanted to be a high school English teacher. Growing up, literature pushed me to step outside my own perception. We need so much more of that in this world. A lot of people are good at being sympathetic, but to be empathetic, you have to understand why someone's feeling what they're feeling, not just feel bad that they feel that way. Then, you can help.

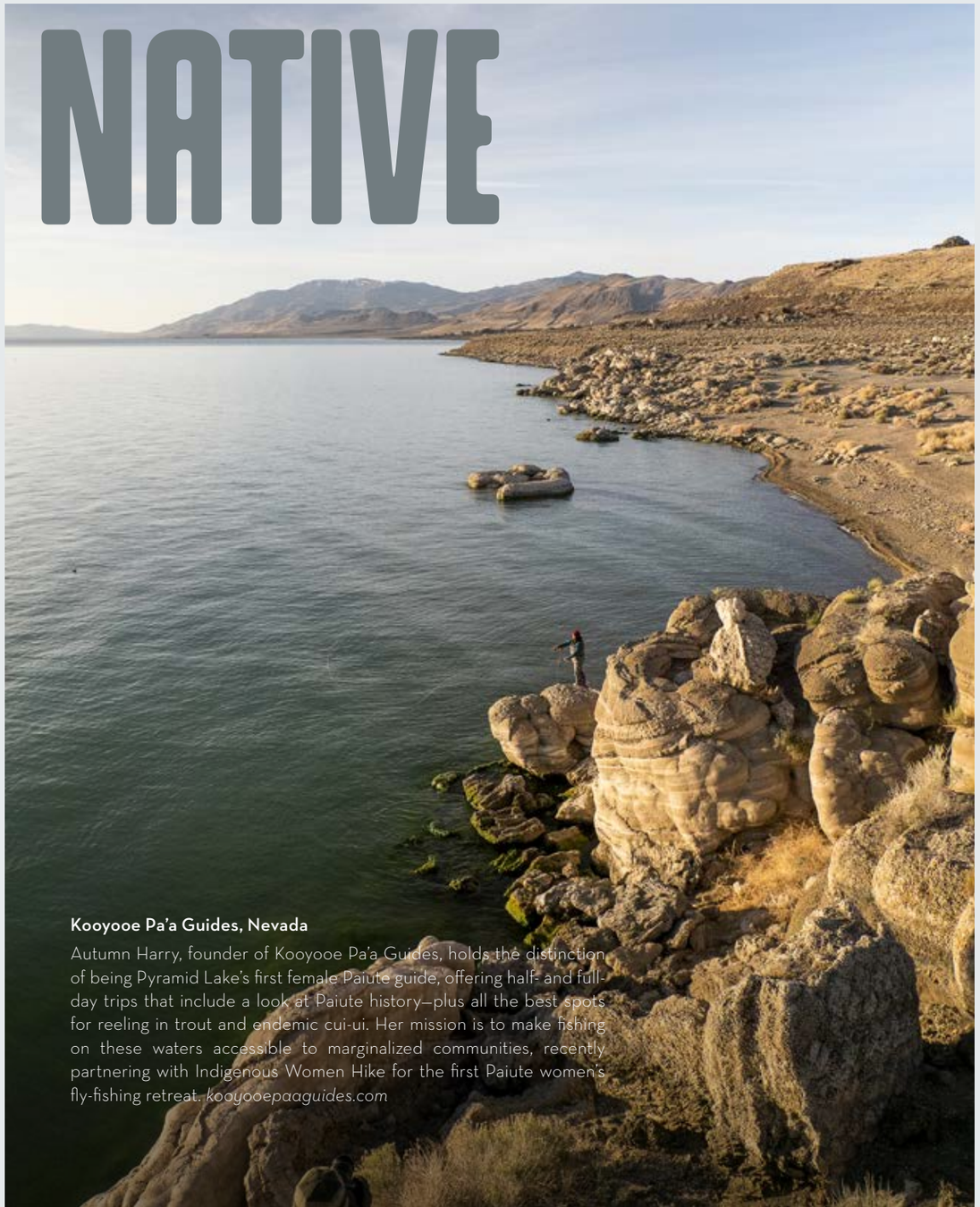
When leadership is an act of service, that's how a bunch of individuals trying to make change on their own become a movement, whether you're wrangling cows through the Blackfoot River or applying the skills of horsemanship to the weird terrain of everyday life. Either way, working together is the only way to ensure greener pastures for generations to come."

Indigenous-led backcountry adventures let travelers experience nature through a new lens.

By Chadner Navarro

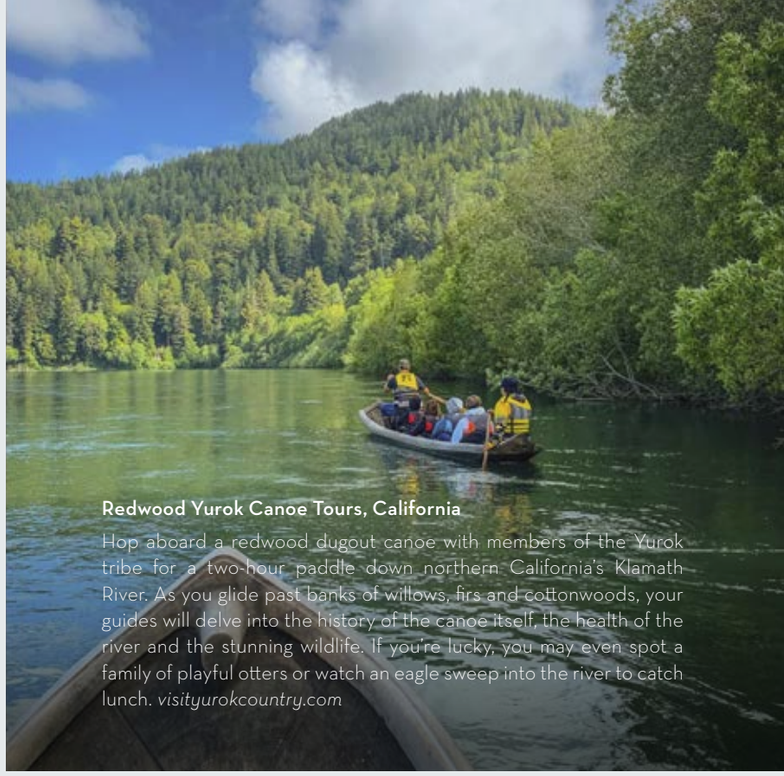
The natural spaces we explore across the world often hold cultural and spiritual significance to local indigenous populations—and now, Native communities in the U.S. and Canada are creating thoughtful outdoor excursions that celebrate those traditions and histories. Below, five tour operators who are leading the way through some of North America's most beautiful wild places.

ON NATIVE LANDS



Kooyooe Pa'a Guides, Nevada

Autumn Harry, founder of Kooyooe Pa'a Guides, holds the distinction of being Pyramid Lake's first female Paiute guide, offering half- and full-day trips that include a look at Paiute history—plus all the best spots for reeling in trout and endemic cui-ui. Her mission is to make fishing on these waters accessible to marginalized communities, recently partnering with Indigenous Women Hike for the first Paiute women's fly-fishing retreat. *kooyooepaaguides.com*



Redwood Yurok Canoe Tours, California

Hop aboard a redwood dugout canoe with members of the Yurok tribe for a two-hour paddle down northern California's Klamath River. As you glide past banks of willows, firs and cottonwoods, your guides will delve into the history of the canoe itself, the health of the river and the stunning wildlife. If you're lucky, you may even spot a family of playful otters or watch an eagle sweep into the river to catch lunch. *visityurokcountry.com*

Hołdzilei Hiking Strong, Arizona

Founded by Crystal Cree and Bryan Roessel, outdoor-loving friends who grew up on Navajo Nation, Hołdzilei showcases the splendor of this protected pocket of northeastern Arizona while providing job opportunities to the Diné people who serve as guides. Day hikes and multiday excursions—including a backpacking trip through the pine-forested Chuska Mountains that can only be done with a Navajo guide—offer a glimpse at the relationship between the land and the Navajo people who consider themselves its stewards. *hikingstrong.biz*

Zuc'min Guiding, Alberta

Founded by Tim Patterson, a member of Nlaka'pamux Nation of British Columbia, this western-Canada travel outfit offers hiking, backpacking, snowshoeing and camping around Banff, Glacier and Kootenay national parks. Zuc'min also offers more educational excursions, like a four-day trek following historic trading trails or the Cultural Knowledge of Plants Hiking Series, which highlights indigenous teachings about foraging and harvesting wild flora. *zucminguiding.com*

Blackfeet Tours, Montana

Founded and led by Alger Swingley, these day tours through the rugged Badger-Two Medicine area, sacred to the Blackfeet Tribe, feature storytelling about its rich Native history. Choose between a six-hour hike or horseback tour, with snowcapped peaks piercing the sky in the distance. As you explore, Swingley will share tales about the region's geography, Blackfeet creation stories and details about local plants and wildlife—and the critical need to protect them. *blackfeettours.com.*

Photo credits: this page: Modoc Stories (2).
Opposite: courtesy of Redwood Yurok Canoe Tours

AN **ARTIST'S** GIFT

On the 10-year anniversary of Bleu Horses, a quintessential roadside Montana site, sculptor Jim Dolan recalls how the work fulfilled a lifelong desire to give back to his adopted home state.

By Erika Owen

"The horse, to me, always represents freedom. They've got a mind of their own," Jim Dolan tells me over a phone call from his studio in Bozeman. "I usually go up there at least once a month to walk through, straighten out manes, and talk to the horses. They all have a name—I call them all Blue." The Montana-based metal sculptor is discussing his most famous work, Bleu Horses, a team of 39 life-size steel sculptures he installed north of Three Forks, Montana, right off Highway 287. "I don't have a sign out there, because when you put something up that says 'Art by Jim Dolan,' they say 'Oh, it's a sculpture,'" he says. "By not having it, you catch them for that second-and-a-half thinking, 'Wow, they're real horses.'"

The work is an act of gratitude from the artist to the state that welcomed him as a young student. After visiting Yellowstone at the age of 11, Dolan, who grew up in California, fell in love with the area. He made the move after high school, enrolling at Montana State University. "Out-of-state tuition was $180 a quarter—a terrible amount of money back then," Dolan says. "I washed dishes in the dormitories, and at 70 cents an hour, that $180 ended up being several hundred hours of work." After approaching the school to discuss his fees, he was given the news that set him on a lifelong path. "I told them I was paying tuition by washing dishes, and they said 'We'll make you an in-state student.' At that moment, I always thought, one day I would make something that's just for the people of Montana."

Dolan fulfilled that wish in 2013, when the horses found their permanent home on the hillside. But just a few months later, three of the herd went missing—to an immediate uproar from the community. "The paper comes out, and the two TV stations come out," he recalls. "I had trucking firms telling me that they were looking—all of the truckers had pictures of the horses in their cabs." The animals turned up the next day, and when Dolan retrieved the sculptures in his truck, multiple people called the police, unaware that the art was back in the hands of the artist himself. "One person followed me all the way in to make sure I was Jim Dolan," he said. "That is the moment when the people of Montana took possession of the work—all of the sudden they were their horses, not just an art exhibit."

Photo credit: Jim Dolan

NOT EVERY SCENIC WOODLAND STREAM COMES NATURE-MADE.

Enter brothers Case and Peter Brown of Clearwater Restoration, who have dreamed up some of the West's most picturesque—and sustainable—riverine landscapes.

By Lila Harron Battis

A River Runs Through It

It all started with water. "Growing up in Western New York, our grandmother would take us traipsing down to a stream," says Peter Brown. "We'd pick up salamanders and mosses, bring them back and build terrariums, create these little worlds. It must have been influential for us, because it's a bigger scale now, but that's exactly what we're doing."

Peter and his brother Case are the duo behind Clearwater Restoration, a Wyoming- and Montana-based construction and consulting company specializing in aquatic landscapes. Picture a water environment, and they can build it—be it restoring a woodland stream to carving out a backyard trout pond that looks like it's always been there. Their success is thanks to the brothers' complementary skill sets: Case is an aquatic construction pro, while Peter has a doctorate in fisheries biology. "There are a lot of companies in our field, but not many have a Ph.D. biologist and a lifelong equipment operator walking around together every day," says Case. "It's a good blend of the science behind things, and the installation approach of how to make it all work and look good."

Photo credit: clockwise from top: Will Graham Photography (2), Courtesy of Clearwater Restoration

SUSTAINABILITY IS AT THE CORE OF THE BROWNS' ETHOS.

Case founded Clearwater a decade ago, after moving from Bozeman to Jackson. With ten years of experience in stream restoration and pond construction, he quickly built a successful operation, but contacts kept pulling him back to Montana, and uprooting his team—plus the equipment for each project—wasn't feasible. Enter Peter, who, after wrapping up a Ph.D. at Montana State, was looking for a career beyond research. In 2015, they teamed up, with Peter overseeing Montana projects, applying his knowledge of aquatic ecosystems and learning the rest on the job.

Sustainability is at the core of the Browns' ethos. That means going overboard to ensure each miniature ecosystem will be largely self-regulating and durable for years to come. A backyard pond that wastes water or demands constant attention is out of the question. "If you don't have to do anything to a project, that's the best outcome," says Peter. "If you need to add chemicals to keep down algae, or go back to dredge out sediment, that's not sustainable."

Visit one of Clearwater's projects and you're apt to think it's merely a scenic vignette, so picturesque that of course someone wanted to settle here. That signature wild look is informed by a storytelling approach. "I always tell my guys to think of why—why would the stream turn here? Maybe it's because it's bouncing against a little rock outcropping—so then you've got to put the outcropping there. We make it all look like it's resulting from something," says Case. His brother agrees. "That's where we excel—just getting turned loose to make something that looks like it's been there for 10,000 years."

Big Sky Moments

For Chicago-based photographer Dan Goldberg, regular trips to Montana feel as fundamental as breathing. “For some people it’s going to the ocean, for me it’s going to Montana,” he says. “It’s something I need for my soul.” Here, he shares a few images that capture his time in the woods and wilds.

Clockwise from top: Elk on a Paws Up hillside at daybreak; a misty morning by the Blackfoot River; the Morning Jingle at Paws Up.

Clockwise from top: A geothermal pool in Yellowstone; a bird's-eye view of the Blackfoot River shot from a hot air balloon; a hooked bull trout in the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

Into the Wild

Beauty and grooming entrepreneurs are looking to the earth for inspiration, using foraged wild ingredients to create products that are natural, sustainable, and close to the land.

By Rona Berg

At sunrise — every Friday morning, when a rosy pink light begins to fill the sky over Bridger-Teton National Forest outside Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Kendra Kolb Butler straps on her foraging basket and heads out into the wild. If she's lucky—which she usually is—the trek across her land, backing up to 1.4 million acres of national parkland, will yield a hand-picked harvest of chokecherries, huckleberries, juneberries and wild stinging nettles.

Photo credit: courtesy of Alpyn Beauty

Butler is the founder of Alpyn Beauty, a skincare line incorporating wildcrafted, foraged local plants. (The brand is named after "Alpenglow," the reddish glow of the mountains in the early morning hours.) When Butler moved to Jackson from New York in 2015, she left behind a career in marketing and product development for luxury beauty brands. Butler opened two beauty apothecaries in Jackson, but soon realized that the brands she loved were not performing in the high-altitude climate.

Sitting in her backyard one day staring at the Grand Tetons, the landscape before her studded with vibrantly colored plants with healthy stems and leaves, she found herself wondering: *How could these plants survive and maintain their hydration and vitality in this harsh climate?* And then the epiphany: *What if these hardy plants were paired with the clinical ingredients in skincare?* Working with a team of local naturalists, Butler began to harvest arnica, borage, calendula, sage and chamomile. As she moved deeper into the forest, the botanical repertoire shifted. Butler soon learned that every plant has a different nutrient-dense part, be it leaves or flowers or stems, and you only take what you need. "Wildcrafting is completely sustainable," Butler says. "The plants continue to grow."

Alpyn is among a new generation of beauty brands turning to nature for ingredient inspiration. With foraged foods now a mainstay on fine dining menus and interest in vintage fashion ever on the rise, consumers are on the hunt for locally and sustainably sourced products in every sphere. There's a certain allure to living off the land, and for eco-conscious shoppers, wildcrafted beauty products are a natural extension of that lifestyle.

Meanwhile,

under the unforgiving Sonoran Desert sun, a team from Kypris Beauty, a B Corp-certified, Arizona-based skincare line, is harvesting in the intense heat. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, this landscape is far from barren. "The desert is alive," says Kypris founder Chase Polan, "and brimming with brilliant and persistent species with a broad tolerance for temperature, various levels of hydration—drought and flood—and immense, almost preternatural, nutrient density."

Chief among those species is prickly pear, which wildcrafters gather while wearing steel toe boots, soccer shin guards, butcher's aprons and wide-brimmed hats. They use salad tongs to harvest the prickly pears and collect them in sacks; *E. coli* proliferates on the desert floor, so it's vital that the fruit never touch the ground. "Prickly pear is, in a word, prolific," says Polan. "It is a very fertile, robust plant. It just grows!" With no need for farming and plenty of utility—every part of the plant can be used—it's the picture of sustainability. Like all cacti, it's intensely water-efficient, which translates to impressive hydration power when used in skincare. "Extreme environments concentrate the benefits," Polan says, and prickly pear oil, which comes from crushed seeds, further concentrates the plant's compounds; the oil holds more than double the amount of vitamin E as argan oil.

Kypris also forages for chaparral, a medicinal plant Native Americans have used for generations to relieve pain and treat inflamed skin. "These wildcrafting practices were central to the indigenous people of Arizona," Polan says. "It reflects an intimate knowledge and respect for the land." For this new generation of wildcrafting brands, that reverence for nature is paramount. When you forage, Polan says, "you have to leave enough behind so that the plant can regenerate." That is the wildcrafter's credo: Tread lightly, and always leave something behind.

Photo credit: this page: Courtesy of Kypris. Opposite, from top: Courtesy of May Lindstrom, Courtesy of Alpyn Beauty

The Natural Look

THESE ARTISANAL SKINCARE LINES EMBRACE THE BEAUTY OF WILDCRAFTING.

May Lindstrom Skin
The founder and formulator of this small-batch skincare line, May Lindstrom, relies on sensorial ingredients like blue tansy, raw cacao, jasmine, frankincense and more. Raw and unrefined shea butter is wild-foraged in Ghana. *maylindstrom.com*

Anthea Skincare
Founder Anna Demetriades grew up in the mountains of Idaho, where her mother taught her to transform foraged plants into infusions and essential oils. Those teachings inform her skincare line, Anthea, made with native botanicals such as sage, elderberry and wild rose. *anthea.com*

Furtuna Skin
Foraged from mineral-rich volcanic soil near the base of Mount Etna in Sicily, nutrient-dense plants like Anchusa azurea (a wildflower rich in vitamins C, E and fatty acids) are at the foundation of this much-hyped line. *furtunaskin.com*

Monastery
Based on the belief that the most potent wildcrafted plants grow in intensely mineral- and nutrient-rich soil, Monastery sources organic oils and flowers from South Africa, Greece, California and Canada. *monasterymade.com*

WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM

Tribal-led efforts to relocate bison from Yellowstone National Park are restoring culture and driving tourism to Montana's reservations.

By Kelsey Ogletree

A couple hundred years ago, when venturing west to the Pacific, Meriwether Lewis was struck by the sight of bison. "This scenery, already rich, pleasing and beautiful," he wrote in his 1804 diary, "was further heightened by immense herds of buffalo, which we saw in every direction feeding on the hills and plains." Herds a few million strong snaked across the landscape, including the area that's now Yellowstone National Park. But by the late 19th century, only a few dozen were left. Recent restoration efforts have helped to bring the herds back to about 0.1 percent of their former population. Now, programs in the state of Montana are working to further restore these animals to their long-ago range—and to their pride of place within the culture and economies of local tribes.

It all started more than 20 years ago, when Montanan Robert Magnan, director of the Fort Peck Tribes Fish & Game Department and a member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, began working in collaboration with the InterTribal Buffalo Council to bring bison back to the Fort Peck Reservation in eastern Montana. "Buffalo has been part of us since the beginning, in our creation story," says Magnan. "They took care of us for thousands of years; now we feel like we need to stand up and help them."

Photo credit: Thomas Lee Photography

In 2012, Fort Peck became the first tribal nation to gain federal authority to relocate bison to their lands from Yellowstone. Bison are not allowed to roam free in the state of Montana, so the reservation's work began with building a half-million-dollar containment and quarantine facility. The restoration, too, takes time: To prevent disease outbreaks, each bison must be quarantined within Yellowstone for 1.5 to 2.5 years, then for an additional year once relocated to the Fort Peck facility. In the program's nearly 12-year run, roughly 400 animals have been safely relocated, including a group of 112 to Fort Peck in January of this year. And the program's reach has expanded to include more than two dozen tribes across a dozen states, including Washington, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Wisconsin. In 2020, the team moved three bulls via modified shipping containers to Seattle, where they were loaded onto an airplane and flown to Anchorage, Alaska, then transferred to a truck and a ferry before arriving at their final destination in Sitkalidak Island, owned by the Alutiiq Tribe of Old Harbor.

Physical relocation is only the beginning. Ultimately, Magnan and his colleagues want to restore these animals to their position as an anchor of tribal culture, as a resource in addition to a symbol. That begins, in part, with new opportunities to drive tourism. While many reservations are still in the early stages of establishing formal tourism programs, visitors are welcome to ceremonies and pow wows held at Fort Peck during summer and fall. The city of Browning, on the Blackfeet Reservation in northwestern Montana, also hosts festivals such as North American Indian Days, held every July.

As the relocation efforts gain momentum, local tourism organizations have been instrumental in helping the tribes create visitor-friendly infrastructure. In 2021, the Yellowstone Safari Company, which leads guided tours through the park, donated two safari vehicles to Fort Peck and Fort Belknap. "It's amazing to see buffalo that we saw a few years ago [in Yellowstone] now living in their ancestral homelands, with people who are so deeply connected with them and who care for their existence," says Ash Tallmadge, manager and naturalist guide with Yellowstone Safari Company. Tallmadge and her team are eventually hoping to offer a multi-day tour experience that would take guests to Fort Peck, with the goal of helping them to better understand the American experience through a Native lens.

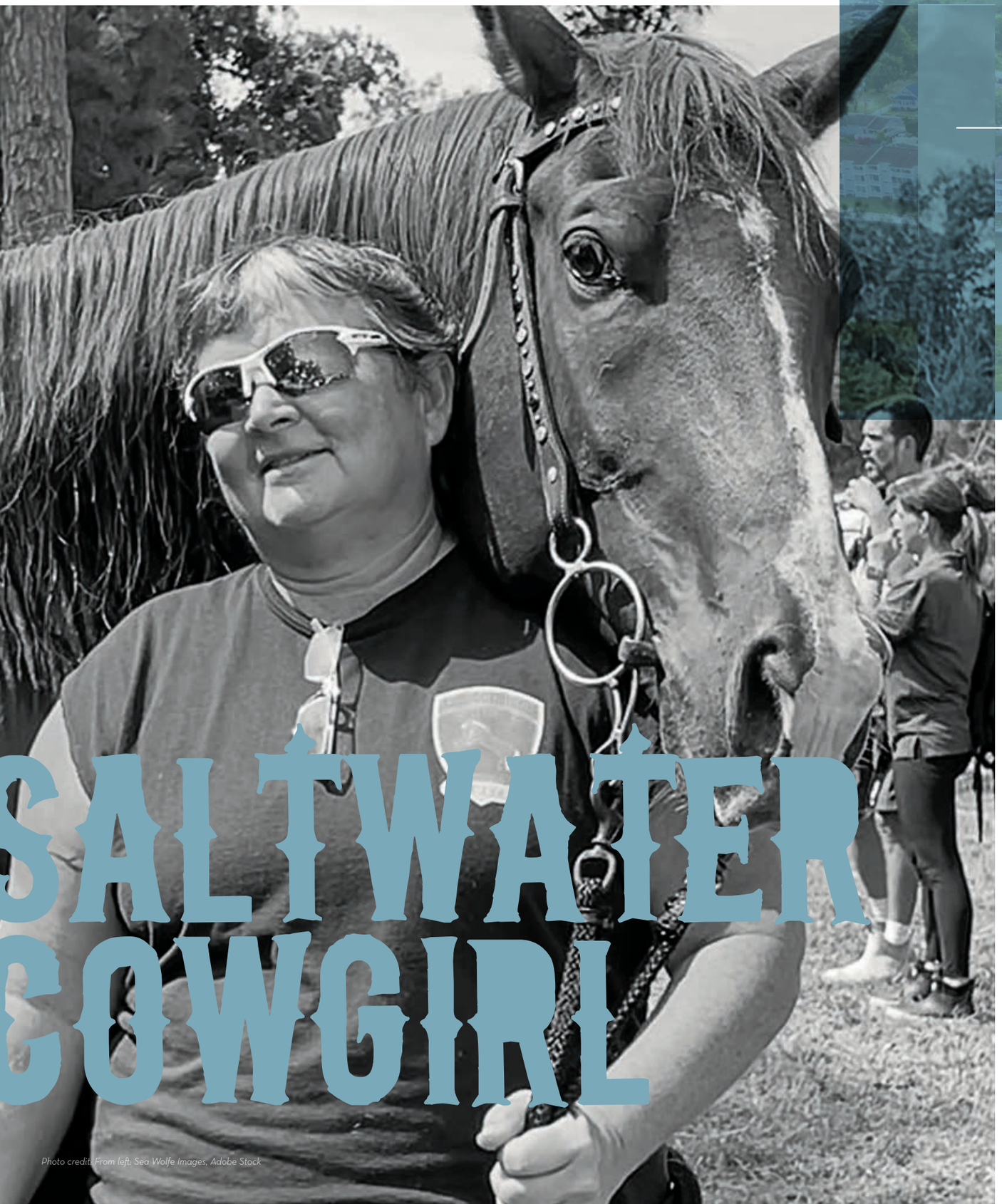
Photo credit: Thomas Lee Photography, Courtesy of Fort Peck Tribes

Ceremonies and sightseeing are only part of the equation. Fort Peck has two herds: one operates as a business ranch, which generates income with live sales and buffalo hunts, while the other serves as a cultural or conservation herd. In a ceremony, it's common for tribal members to both honor living animals and feast upon them. Magnan says the tribe employs special efforts to encourage native people to eat more buffalo, leading classes on how to cook it well—roasting and slow cooking are among the best methods, since the meat is so lean—and donating meat to tribal members who can't afford it. "Buffalo has always been part of our economy, and it can be part of it again," says Magnan.

To learn more about Fort Peck's bison restoration efforts or to attend a ceremony, visit fortpecktribes.org.

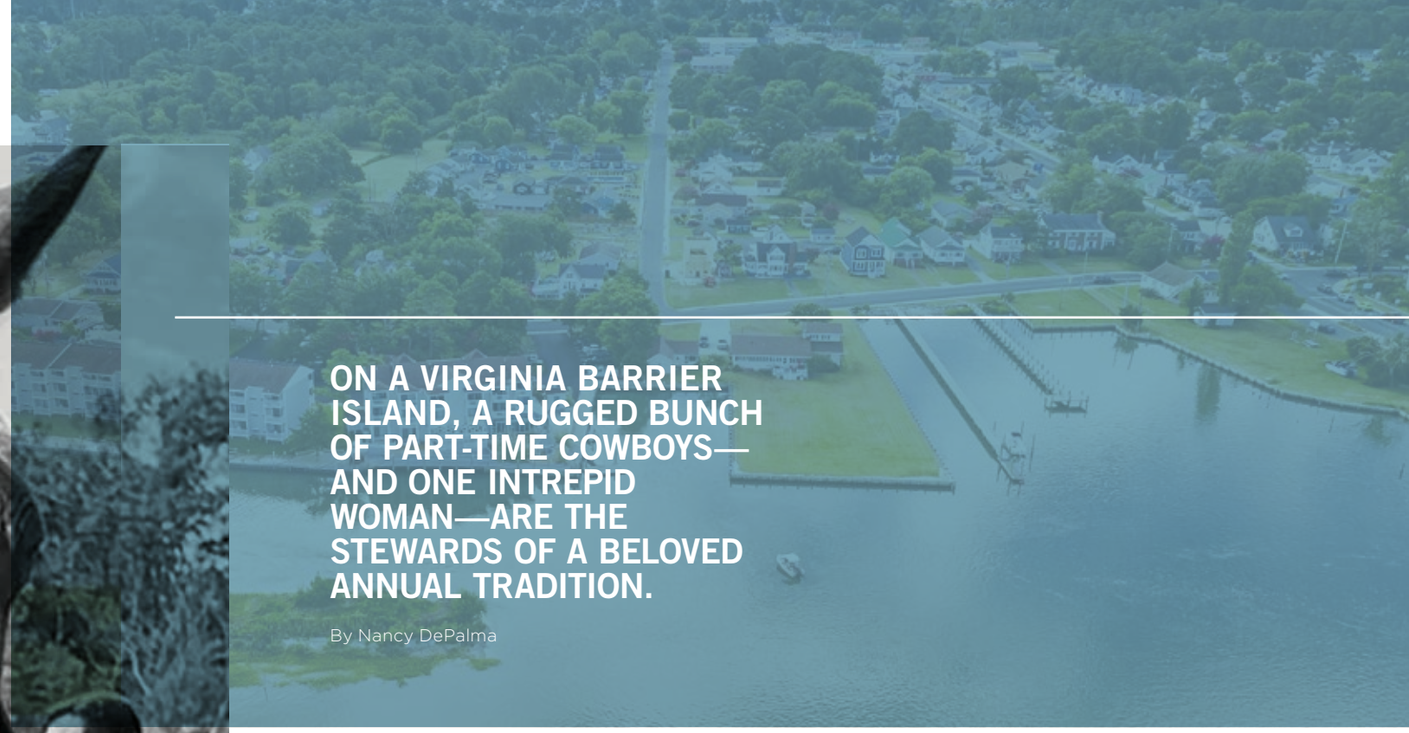
BUFFALO OR BISON?

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING, bison is the scientific name and buffalo is the common name—originally given by Lewis & Clark who mistook the animal for the African buffalo. According to Montana law, animals of a private owner are considered buffalo, while those owned by the government or tribes are called bison. In general, the terms buffalo and bison can be used interchangeably to refer to the same animal.



SALTWATER COWGIRL

Photo credits: From left: Sea Wolfe Images, Adobe Stock



ON A VIRGINIA BARRIER ISLAND, A RUGGED BUNCH OF PART-TIME COWBOYS—AND ONE INTREPID WOMAN—ARE THE STEWARDS OF A BELOVED ANNUAL TRADITION.

By Nancy DePalma

They're up before dawn, slipping into a pair of well-worn boots and pulling on a hat to shade their weather-beaten faces. A cowboy's day begins early, long before most have stumbled out of bed and are reaching for that first cup of coffee. There are horses to be rounded up, after all. Except this isn't your typical Western scene, and these aren't your typical cowboys. This is Chincoteague and these are the Saltwater Cowboys.

As for the name, cowboy fits—for the most part. This crew of 45 riders comprises longtime islanders whose family roots run deep. Almost all are volunteer firefighters or affiliated with the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company (CVFC). They're young and old, with multiple generations of the same family riding together. And, until recently, they've all been men. That is, before Denise Bowden saddled up to round up the famed Chincoteague ponies for the annual swim across from Assateague to Chincoteague.

Chincoteague is a barrier island on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Seven miles long and three miles wide, it's a place where a drive down Main Street feels like a journey back in time. For many years, Chincoteague was the largest supplier of oysters to New York, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. Tiny but mighty, Chincoteague Island stood with the Union during the Civil War, despite Virginia's secession. While the oyster industry has since faded, the Chincoteague oyster remains a prized ingredient. But bivalves aside, mention Chincoteague today and you're more likely to hear, "Isn't that where Misty is from?"

For the uninitiated, Misty is the fictional pony who stars in Marguerite Henry's beloved children's classic, *Misty of Chincoteague*. Henry visited the island in the late 1940s after hearing about the pony swim and auction and later turned her experience into a heartwarming tale of a brother and sister buying their own pony. Nearly a century ago, the pony auction began as a way to raise funds for the island's firehouse after a series of fires devastated the town. They looked close to home—and across to Assateague—to the wild ponies who've roamed the marshes for generations. Legend has it that these hardy ponies are descendants of Spanish horses shipwrecked just off the island.

The CVFC decided they'd control the wild horse population and solve their budget woes by rounding up the ponies, swimming them across the channel to Chincoteague and auctioning the foals. The event has been held the third week of July ever since, with 2023 marking the swim's 98th year. It's been a profitable enterprise: 2022's auction netted more than $450,000.

Which brings us back to the saltwater cowboys, and Bowden, who is a force to be reckoned with. A true Teaguer, she has a dogged work ethic and an even bigger heart, volunteering much of her free time. "I joined the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company in 1992 as the first female," she says. "Since then I have been the first female officer, first female president, first female firefighter, first female ambulance driver and first female carnival chairman." Since 2007, Bowden has served as public relations officer, handling a never-ending stream of media—it's estimated that upwards of 50,000 people descend on the island for Pony Penning week. In 2017, she started riding with the Saltwater Cowboys: "The guys just took me in and were willing to take a chance on me. I hung in there, proved myself and here I am today." Bowden remains the only woman rider sanctioned by the CVFC.

The Saltwater Cowboys have a big responsibility caring for the island's beloved ponies, and their hard work goes far beyond one week in July. They hold two roundups a year, in spring and fall, to corral the ponies and perform veterinary checkups. When the winter weather turns particularly brutal, the Cowboys drop hay and provide water for the ponies, who unlike other horses, have adapted to drink brackish water from the marshes.

> **THE GUYS JUST TOOK ME IN AND WERE WILLING TO TAKE A CHANCE ON ME. I HUNG IN THERE, PROVED MYSELF AND HERE I AM TODAY.**

Of course, it's the annual tradition that brings a smile to any cowboy's, or cowgirl's, face. "Riding horseback with 'my guys' has been a fantastic experience," says Bowden. "I am blessed to be able to continue to work with them."

Bowden relinquished her role as public relations officer this fall and now looks forward to this year's pony duties with renewed enthusiasm. "In the past I could really only do the Beach Walk, as I was so busy with the media," she shares. Come July, she'll be on horseback, rounding up the ponies with the others. Like a child waiting for Christmas morning, she can't wait. "It's just such a magical experience."

It's enough to make you get misty-eyed.

Photo credit: Sea Wolfe Images

THESE GAME-CHANGING CULINARY ENTREPRENEURS ARE PUTTING SUSTAINABILITY, LOCAL SOURCING AND WILD INGREDIENTS AT THE FOREFRONT.

Eating well is one of life's great pleasures. If you can do so while being a force for good, all the better. Luckily, these Montana-based entrepreneurs are making it easy. Their food-focused businesses aren't merely about selling a product, but about making positive changes in their communities, operating sustainably and giving back to meaningful causes. They're united by a purpose-driven approach—and, above all, by a deep appreciation for their Montana home and the bounty of its landscape.

CONSERVATION GRAINS

At face value, Conservation Grains is a milling operation. The four-year-old Choteau-based company has made its name on artisanal stone-ground specialty flours—think kamut, rye, durum and more—sold to home bakers and Montana businesses like Blackbird Kitchen and Wild Crumb Bakery. But as far as founder Judy Cornell is concerned, its mission is far deeper. "Conservation Grains started with the idea that farmland should share space with wildlife," she says. Cornell hopes to bring attention to her cause by teaming up with farmers who share her passion for regenerative agriculture—and by letting the product, far more flavorful than typical flour, speak for itself. Cornell's flours are bagged with the milling date and farms of origin prominently featured. "There is an education part of this—encouraging people to discover whole grain baking and whole grains, and then to think about how it's farmed." *conservationgrains.com*

Photo credits: from top: Meg Juenker, Courtesy of Judy Cornell (2)

GASTRO GNOME MEALS

Shannon Waters's resume is a who's-who of fine dining destinations—the chef turned restaurant consultant cut her teeth at Blackberry Farm, Blue Hill and Marea, among others. But a 2018 pack-rafting trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness—and an encounter with a near-inedible freeze-dried pad thai—sent her on a new path. "In that moment, it felt like the tide had shifted," she says. "I knew I had to be the person to fix it." Five years later, Gastro Gnome is thriving, with a retail space and production facility in Bozeman and a full line of dehydrated meals. For Waters, supporting fellow Montanans is central to her work. Gastro Gnome sources bison from a rancher in Bridger, basil from Waters's hairdresser's farm and hard-to-find ingredients from a local wholesale distributor. Even the brand's cardboard boxes are Bozeman-made. "When I'm weighing the cost and benefit, the benefit's always going to win for us if it means we get to support our local community." *gastrognomemeals.com*

KEY TO THE MOUNTAIN

Melissa Kagiyama didn't know the first thing about cooking when she started Key to the Mountain. But she knew good produce, so when she came across some choice strawberries, she leapt. "I said, 'I'll take as many as you have.' I came home with about a hundred pounds of Montana-grown strawberries." The resulting jam was a hit. "It blew our minds. Lucky for me, because it was so delicious it kept us in business." Five years later, her company produces over a dozen jams, sauces and relishes, all highlighting Montana produce. More recently, Key to the Mountain launched the Abundance Project, which sources excess produce from farmers and gardeners, then donates the resulting products to the local food bank. In just two years, the project has donated $17,000 of jarred goods. "There's no reason for anyone to be hungry—there is an abundance of food," says Kagiyama. "It's just figuring out how to share it." *keytothemountain.com*

LOCKHORN HARD CIDER

"It seemed like a community cider ought to give back to the community," says Anna Deal. Four years ago, the owner of Lockhorn Hard Cider was in search of more apples to supplement her cidery's own young, and not yet highly productive, trees. "There was essentially an orchard out there in Bozeman"—that is, one made up of individual trees in yards all over town—"and lots more apples than people knew what to do with," says Deal. Thus was born the Backyard Blend: In exchange for 25 pounds of fruit, customers would receive a pint of cider and get to choose from three local nonprofits to donate a percentage of sales. That first year alone, Lockhorn received 15,000 pounds of apples, much of which would have otherwise gone to rot. And those nonprofits have even joined in: "It's been fun to pick apples with flautists from the Bozeman Symphony, just all sorts of people getting together and knowing it's going to turn into something good. It's been a real community effort." *lockhornhardcider.com*

Photo credit: clockwise from top left: Rick Smith, Courtesy of Lockhorn Hard Cider (2)

the green o

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Carry the Spirit by Amanda Wilner

Breakfast at the River

Osprey perches on a cottonwood snag that
suspends, silver smooth and leafless,
out over the swirling gray-green
water of the oxbow,
head down and alert for any
shivering movement beneath.

Upstream a great blue heron
is statue-still in the shallows,
riotous growth of willows
for a backdrop, and my belly rumbles
over the recollection of
my skipped breakfast.

From a seat on a toppled,
still-barked ponderosa log
I can see the moon tacked onto
the blue sky over Lolo Peak, and my
binocs at full zoom are more a match
for viewing her rugged surface
than they are for tracking the wild
pitches and dives of the
score or so cliff swallows
hunting the river's surface for bugs,
chirping and calling to one another,
veering close at times with words,
it seems, even for me.

Everyone is hungry first thing
in the morning!

—Chris La Tray