

Wyoming – Deer People placement report

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It's 8 p.m. Mountain Time, 3 a.m. UK time. I'm standing outside the Red Lion Hotel in Cheyenne, Wyoming. I've been travelling for about 15 hours, give or take. I began travelling from East Sutherland, Scotland yesterday. I got on a flight from Inverness to Heathrow and spent the night in a hotel just off the M40. I then got a flight from Heathrow to Denver.

Standing outside the Red Lion Hotel, it isn't long before I bump into American culture. A large white Toyota Tacoma turns into the hotel car park and out jumps Jess Johnson. Jess is the government affairs director for Wyoming Wildlife Federation (WWF). The organisation was founded in 1937 and is the oldest and largest hunters' advocacy and conservation organisation in the state of Wyoming. WWF's mission is to support hunters, anglers and conservationists through policy, education, advocacy and habitat projects. It's Jess's role within WWF to give direction to the policies and future objectives at local, state and federal government levels. Establishing positive relationships with all stakeholders and interested parties is a key part of WWF's work, and it becomes clear over the upcoming four weeks how committed Jess is to this task.

We load the luggage into the back of the pickup and drive 15 minutes into the centre of Cheyenne. The route takes us over the Union Pacific Railway and past the Wyoming State Capitol building to Central and 27th Avenue. We grab the luggage and head into the house. I'm met by Craig Benjamin, who's polite and courteous but clearly distracted by the pinnacle of American football, the Super Bowl. Craig is the executive director of WWF and a Seattle Seahawks fan; his role is to give strategic direction and oversee the day-to-day operations of WWF as well as keeping the board of directors up to date with relevant concerns and issues.

I'm also introduced to Colton Schick, who is the civic engagement fellow at WWF for the 2025–26 year. His enthusiasm for all things outdoors is infectious. Colton is a keen hunter, angler and trap shooter, as well as being an avid member of his local Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter, an initiative that seeks to provide agricultural education programs to secondary-school-aged children. Colton, at 18 years old, is in the early stages of his career, but from our initial meeting it's clear that he has a bright future ahead of him. There are also representatives from partner conservation organisations, including Alex Aguirre of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Auna Kauffman with Wyoming Outdoor Council and Jessica Crowder representing The Nature Conservancy.

Monday, 9 February, is the opening of the Wyoming State Legislature. Wyoming has a part-time citizen legislature, which is composed of two chambers: the House of Representatives (lower house) and the Senate (upper house). The political body is comprised of 62 representatives (56 Republicans, 6 Democrats) and 31 senators (29 Republicans, 2 Democrats). This year is a four-week legislative budget session; this happens in alternate years, with odd years being eight-week general legislative sessions. Within the next four weeks, proposed legislation will be brought forward by concerned parties to be introduced, debated, possibly amended, killed or voted on. These proposed bills are brought forward to an elected representative by a wide range of interested parties: concerned citizens, charities or corporations.

A number of proposed bills being brought forward were either strongly opposed or supported by WWF. It is important to remember that there are some significant differences between Scotland and the United States with regard to hunting and models of conservation.

Public-land hunting plays a significant role in the lives of everyday people in Wyoming. Hunting and fishing have high public acceptance and there is provision of over 500,000 acres as either federal or state public land. Proposed bills of interest in this year's legislative session are transferable landowner hunting tags; Forestry Division Wildland Fire Modules (HB0036); Corner Crossing clarification (HB0019); and leashed dogs for tracking black bear (SF0027). Jess's role at the legislative session is to provide elected representatives with sound, credible advice on how and why proposed bills will either positively or negatively affect the hunters, anglers and wildlife of Wyoming.



Senator Eric Barlow speaking passionately about the important role that public lands play in the everyday lives of Wyominites.

It's clear that the main concern of the first week is transferable landowner hunting tags. It's important to know that all wildlife is effectively held in trust by the State of Wyoming for the people of Wyoming. This includes all game species, so no matter whose land the animals inhabit, they are owned and managed by the State of Wyoming. In 1949 the landowner tag system was created to recognise that ranchers provide wildlife habitat. This meant that landowners with at least 160 acres could apply for two hunting tags per species, which could be gifted to family members but not sold. The proposed bill would allow for the sale of these landowner tags, and the concern is that this could create a private market that the ordinary hunter would not be able to afford.

Another bill being brought forward is corner crossing clarification. Access to private land is strictly prohibited without authorisation. This checkerboard, where public and private land corners meet can lead to some difficulty for public-land hunters who, while trying to access public land, may have to cross the corner of two adjoining private land squares. The bill being proposed seeks to clarify a 2022 court case where four hunters used a step ladder to corner cross. The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld that the action does not constitute either civil, criminal or hunting trespass.

An area of particular interest to me was Wyoming's approach to wildfire. I sat in on a Joint Appropriations Committee meeting. Wyoming Forest Service had forwarded a bill that sought funding for a Wildland Fire Module (WFM). The role of the WFM is to manage complex wildfire incidents and promote prescribed burning as a natural ecological process. They provide specialised expertise in prescribed fires, long-term monitoring, strategic ignitions and suppression to improve land resilience. State Forester Kelly Norris' testimony in the Joint Appropriations Committee was compelling; she clearly explained that Wyoming State Forest Service takes a proactive approach to tackling wildfire through prescribed burning and hazardous fuel mitigation. For the financial years from 2026 to 2028, \$2,572,000 is secured for staff and the vehicles and equipment needed to support the module. The State of Wyoming recognises that there is more value in funds spent on wildfire mitigation rather than wildfire control and, as such, funding is provided for a second module, totalling \$5,144,000.

The busiest day of the first week is undoubtedly 'Camo at the Capitol,' an initiative that seeks to educate hunters, anglers and trappers on how legislation works. The 'classroom' portion of the day takes place at Laramie County Community College and attendees are split into two groups. 'Camo Basics' is catered towards people attending the event for the first time. It gives a basic introduction to the political process of drafting, introducing, discussing and amending a proposed bill. 'Camo Advanced' goes a little deeper into the process and is suitable for people who have attended the event before or for people who are familiar with the process but do not have a hunting, fishing or trapping background. 'Camo Advanced' covers topics such as how to track a bill, vote mapping and communicating with your elected representatives.

The group then moves to the State Capitol building in Cheyenne where the group tours the building, visiting the public gallery of the House and Senate sides. Members from both chambers use parliamentary privilege to introduce the group to the floor of elected representatives. The group is warmly received; this is in part due to the rural nature of Wyoming, as most of the legislators come from rural constituencies, there is also the presence of a sportsmen's caucus within the respective chambers. The group then heads down to one of the committee rooms within the Hershler State Capitol Extension building. The committee is discussing Corner Crossing clarification; there is an incredible amount of public testimony added to the forum from all sides of what is a very complex debate.

The following week begins with monitoring all of the proposed legislation that is significant to hunting, fishing and conservation. It's refreshing to see the cooperation between different groups as differences are set aside on issues that concern everyone in the state. This comes into sharp focus as on the 13 February Joint Resolution 009, titled "Keeping Public Lands Protected and Decisions Local," is introduced by Senator Eric Barlow. The resolution requests Congress recognise the protection of Wyoming's freedom of access to public lands; to allow responsible development of resources, recreation, agriculture, hunting, fishing, trapping and conservation under multiple-use frameworks; to protect local participation in land management decisions; and to keep public lands available to the people of Wyoming. The resolution quickly unites the two chambers. Although initially sponsored by Senator Barlow, it has 38 co-sponsors from both Republicans and Democrats. The joint resolution comes as a response to recent proposals and public discussions which raised concerns about broad, quota-driven or large-scale sales of federal public lands as a policy or revenue mechanism without sufficient local input or consultation. Although not strictly a legislative bill, the joint resolution acts as a statement that brings together the people of Wyoming.

Week three involves monitoring the remaining bills that are of interest, following them as they go through the appropriate committee, then across the floor to the opposing chamber. This crossing of the floor, from Senate to House or vice versa, is to ensure that one chamber does not have complete control of upcoming legislation. There's a little less pressure on the current bills and so attention turns to the interim legislature session, which takes place through the summer.

Conversation, both at state and federal level, turns to the management of Free-Roaming Horses and Burros (FRHaB). While Wyoming Game and Fish manage game, big-game and trophy-hunting species, the management of free-roaming horses and burros on federal land lies with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM currently has a non-lethal management strategy to control the population of FRHaB through helicopter gathers, bait trapping and fertility control. The BLM's goal is to balance herd numbers within the rangeland, but recent proposals for zero-herd management areas have caused controversy. This proposal would see the removal of all FRHaB from specific herd management areas totalling around 2 million acres — a total of over 3,000 FRHaB from south-western Wyoming.



My first hike in Lander with Jenny and Sid at the foot of Table Mountain. Perilous walking in big sky country.

Towards the end of week three I'm invited to Lander by Jess's parents, Jenny and Sid. I quickly pack a bag and we jump into Sid's pickup and begin heading further west. Lander is along the I-80 until we reach Rawlins, where we have lunch at a small diner. We then head northwest along the US-287. There is sagebrush as far as the eye can see, briefly interrupted by small, medium or large herds of pronghorn antelope — or "speed goats" as the locals call them, Sid informs me. This is the first of little bits of information that gives greater context to the history and culture of Wyoming. As we head over the hill into Laramie I begin to see a different kind of Wyoming, something different from the arid high plains of Cheyenne and its surrounding area. In the far distance I begin to see the mountains. "That's Elk Mountain; we ranched over on the far end of it when Jessi was young," Sid says. Sid is a wealth of knowledge and turns the four-hour trip into a deep dive of western culture and history, along with a few hunting and fishing stories. He points out historical landmarks along the Oregon Trail such as Split Rock and Ice Slough and takes unscheduled stops to look out over the landscape. "We've got to get you there, Jessi said so. I've got to get you into that book store." We drive by what appears to be a small holding, with the sign 'Old Books and Fresh Eggs'; it's been and gone in the blink of an eye, but I'm assured that it's Wyoming's version of Leaky's bookshop.

We arrive in Lander in the early afternoon and meet Jess's mum, Jenny. It becomes clear that Jess's drive comes from her mum. "Ok, if you get settled in, I'll pick you up in a couple of hours and we'll go for a hike." I'm staying at Jess's partner Ryan's house while he's visiting Cheyenne for the weekend. I spend the next few days hiking in and around Lander. I explore the Popo Agie River and Sinks Canyon, and Jenny and Sid take me on drives to see the local area, one of which is to Atlantic City. Atlantic City is a historic gold-mining town that is now virtually a ghost town; it has a population of 57 and is only accessed by gravel roads. We stop at the Mercantile Bar for refreshments. As I enter it becomes clear that the bar has had its heyday. I'm warmly greeted by the barman who doesn't expect to see anyone out of the tourist season and we each order a drink. It's some time before I stop staring at the walls. They're adorned with taxidermy of small and big game from North America and trinkets of the Old West. I walk around with my drink in hand as Sid and the barman talk about meetups after long days ranching in the '80s and '90s. They speak about people that I'm unfamiliar with. We finish our drinks and head back out onto South Pass and back to Lander.



Out hiking in Lander. Looking south towards Fairfield hill, Fossil Hill and Indian Ridge in the far distance.

I'm invited to stay in Lander a little longer and, as there's no rush for me to be back at the Capital in Cheyenne, I stay on for a few more days. This means that I can venture out a little further, so Sid takes me on a drive to visit Dubois, the Cowboy Cafe, and the largest slice of pie I've ever encountered! Dubois sits at the convergence of two mountain ranges: the Wind River Range, which runs southeast to northwest, and the Absaroka Range, which runs east to west and then turns north towards Montana. Dubois is famed for the bighorn sheep that migrate down from the mountains and overwinter in the area. It's a small tourist town with a population of around 900 people. Along with Togwotee Pass, it's considered to be the gateway to the Tetons and Yellowstone National Park. Sid and I have lunch in the Cowboy Cafe and after eating our sandwiches Sid suggests we get a slice of pie with a small scoop of ice cream. It isn't long before I see a waitress carrying what can only be described as a gargantuan slice of pecan pie with a softball-sized scoop of ice cream atop it. The pie has been placed on the smallest plate the cafe has, and both Sid and I fight hard not just to eat the pie but to keep it on the plate along with the rapidly melting ice cream.

After leaving the cafe we head to East Fork Road; it runs beside Spear Creek and turns up to Pole Creek where the winter barrier is still in place. It's unusual to be able to drive this far up the groomed gravel road at this time of year, but the mild winter hasn't produced the snow it usually does and the road is open. We're trying to spot elk while in Lander but I haven't had much luck; today is no different, but I do see around 130 mule deer in various herds. I thought that with the presence of large carnivores they would be scarcer or flightier, but they continue feeding as we watch them from the vehicle.

Once back in Lander I speak with Ryan Kindermann who has returned from Cheyenne. Ryan is a wildlife biologist who specialises in large carnivore work. Ryan has worked with all of the large carnivores present in Wyoming, and cut his teeth working on the Wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone National Park. I raise the subject of lynx reintroductions in the UK and ask what could be expected. "The cat species are very adaptable; they'll do things that no one's expecting, especially as it's been such a long time since you guys have had them." Ryan's answers are extremely considered; he's a deep thinker and as I wait for an answer I can see him mentally working through a lifetime of hands-on fieldwork. "They're a little different in behaviour, but I've seen mountain lions turn over porcupines and kill them without getting injured. That female went on to teach all of her kittens how to do that." Ryan walks me through the benefits of large carnivores but also stresses the need for clear communication and meaningful consultation with all who are involved or could be affected by any future reintroduction.

On the last morning in Lander, Jenny, Ryan and I head to Bunker Road, a dirt track that allows access to public land. As we walk along the road we see mule deer, pronghorn antelope and a single herd of 140 – 160 elk. I feel incredibly lucky to have spent time in Lander and the surrounding area; it adds context to the role of WWF and other eNGOs in a country where people are so connected to public land through recreational use and natural-resource management.



Ceremonial Bill Signing: Governor Mark Gordon joined by a small selection of the people who worked towards making Senate Joint resolution SJ009 a success.

I return to Cheyenne a few days before the ceremonial signing of a small selection of this year's successful legislative bills. There's a different feeling around the Capitol and the people in it, similar to the end of the stag season. The urgency seems to have left the building and the lobbyists aren't focused on laptops or checking their smartphones with the same frequency as before. The following days pass by without event until Friday and the ceremonial bill signing. SJ009 has been included by Governor Mark Gordon; it shows how important public lands are to the State of Wyoming and its people. SJ009 is one of about 30 bills that will be signed today and as I arrive at the State Capitol with Jess and Colton there are roughly 100 people milling around waiting for their bill to be signed in front of local, state and national media.

As we are waiting in the lobby I begin to see a few familiar faces from the previous four weeks and it isn't long before we are asked to enter the Governor's office. As I walk in, I begin to understand the amount of effort that it's taken to get SJ009 to this point: from its introduction by Senator Eric Barlow, to being dispersed to interested parties by NGOs, people travelling to the State Capitol to give public testimony, and securing the votes in both chambers to get the joint resolution in front of Governor Mark Gordon today. The signing takes place and we leave the Governor's office and head back to the accommodation to celebrate with some of the other people who have also contributed to the success of SJ009.

My sincere thanks go to everyone behind the scene at the ADMG Deer People Fund for giving me the opportunity of a once-in-a-lifetime experience. My thanks also go to Jess Johnson for making the trip such an incredible experience, along with all of the people I met whilst staying in Wyoming, I experienced such warm hospitality while in Cheyenne and Lander. This trip wouldn't have been possible without the help and continued support of my employer, James Urquhart, thank you. Lastly, I would like to thank my incredible wife, Lucy, for holding the fort whilst I was away.